

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Schamberger, **INTERLUDE IN SWITZERLAND: THE STORY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN REFUGEE-SOLDIERS IN THE ALPS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR**. Maus Publishing Co.(P.O. Box 81190, Parkhurst, 2120), 2001. ISBN 0-620-26847-6.(x plus 142 pages.) Price: R150,00 (plus R30,00 postage for delivery in South Africa).

When one considers South Africa's role during the Second World War (1939-1945), emphasis is usually placed on the campaigns in which the Union Defence Forces were involved, namely the Army's role in East Africa, North Africa, Madagascar, and Italy, plus the Air Force's role in the above-mentioned and other regions, and the country's involvement in naval operations around South Africa's coasts and in the Mediterranean. All these operations have been well documented, with many books and articles having been produced over the years. Now and again the military enthusiast is taken by surprise when a book is published in which a completely new topic is addressed.

In his fascinating book *Interlude in Switzerland*, Paul Schamberger sheds light on an aspect of South Africans' experiences in the Second World War which is not so well-known. In the course of the conflict, 896 South African servicemen escaped from prisoner-of-war camps in Italy and made their way to Switzerland, that "small lifeboat in a great sea of trouble and violence" (p.1). These men can be classified as *évadés de guerre*, or simply *évadés*, i.e. ex-soldiers, airmen or sailors who are escaped prisoners of war - a status recognized in international law by most countries of the world. As "foreign military guests" of the Swiss government, the *évadés* were first of all sent to a quarantine camp, and eventually to the British *évadé* headquarters at Wil, in the canton St Gallen, situated in north-east Switzerland, where they were interrogated by British Intelligence Officers, registered, given pay-cards, and issued with a British emergency identification certificate. They were also given pocket-money (to be debited to their army accounts back home).

The South Africans that escaped to neutral Switzerland did so after the Italian armistice in early September 1943. There they remained for about a year before being repatriated in September and October 1944. They formed but a small portion of the total of 296 378 refugees of all descriptions that streamed into Switzerland in the course of the war, including 104 886 men (representing 43 nationalities) who were "foreign military persons". Once the advancing Allied Forces reached the French-Swiss border, the *évadés* had to leave Switzerland as quickly as possible.

Most South Africans travelled by ship across the Mediterranean to Egypt, from where they were flown back to the Union.

Schamberger succeeds admirably in placing the history of the *évadés* not only in the context of the Second World War, but also in the context of the provisions in international law which governed their position and status in a neutral country. **Interlude in Switzerland** is a well-researched book. Chamberger interviewed several of the *évadés*, and integrated their reminiscences with an excellent background history, including a review of what life was like in Switzerland, how they passed the time, and what problems they had to overcome. The text is spiced with anecdotes, references to their newspaper (**Marking Time**), and to the fact that 30 of the South Africans got married while in Switzerland.

There are 68 suitable photographs, seven maps, seventeen cartoons, and 28 other illustrations in a book that has been beautifully designed and printed. The source list (pp. 139-142) contains references to a great variety of archival material, books, articles, and other sources. A total of 247 notes are placed at the end of the eleven chapters. There is also an index (pp. 137-38), which should have been placed after, not before, the source list.

Paul Chamberger's **Interlude in Switzerland: the story of the South African refugee-soldiers in the Alps during the Second World War** has saved from oblivion a very interesting aspect of South Africa's participation in World War II. It is a gem of a book, and deserves to be read by a wide audience.

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