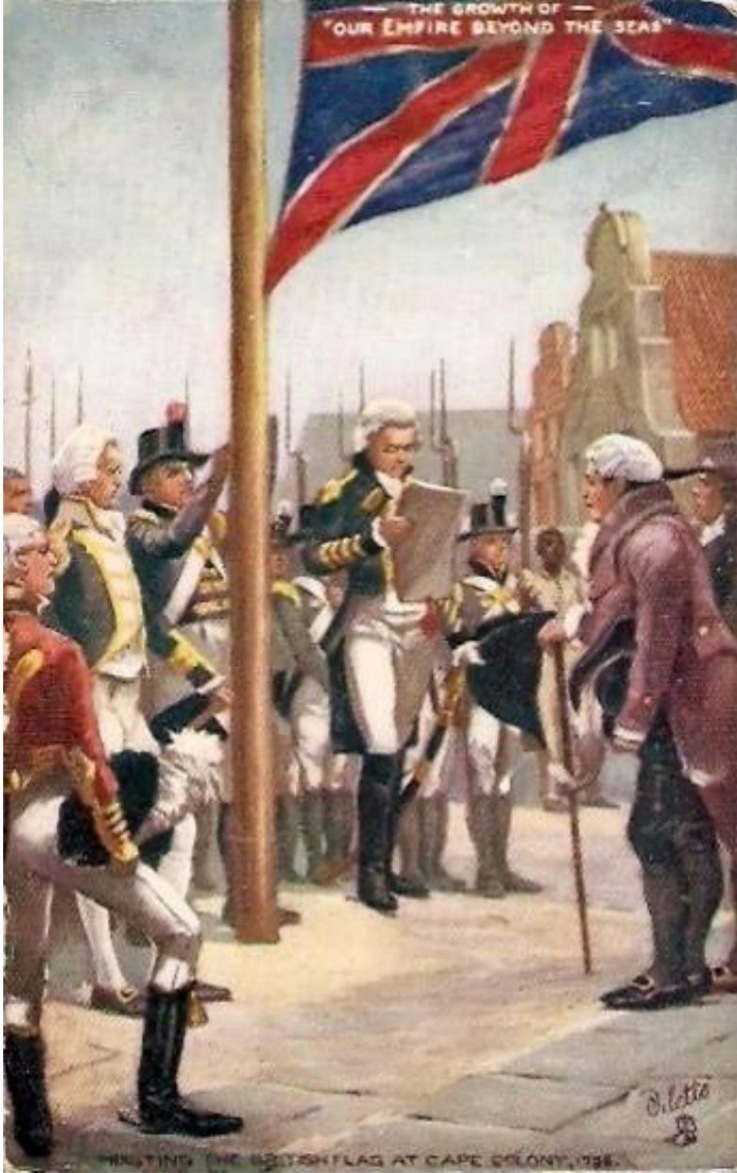


AboutThe Cape Corps, 1915-1918

Introduction

Until the abolition of apartheid *in* 1994, the South African population was divided into four sharply separated main groups - blacks, coloureds, Indians and whites.



The colored, multi-ethnic population group were descendants of e.g. laborers and servants who were consigned to South Africa as slaves. Through generations, the races were mixed and the term "colored" (*Coloured*) arose as a collective term for those who could not be categorized as actually black, Indian or white. A special subgroup of the colored population group is the coloreds from Cape Town (*Cape Coloreds 1*).

Cape Town

The back of the map gives the following summary of Cape Town's earliest colonial history:

"Cape Colony - The Cape of Good Hope was discovered in 1487 by Bartholomew Diaz.

The Dutch first colonized it in 1652, and it remained in their possession until 1795, when a British fleet

conveyed three regiments under Sir A. Clarke to the Cape and that officer took possession of the Colony and hoisted the British flag.

The British rule continued until 1802, when the Colony was restored to Holland, to be again captured by the British in 1806."

The first military units of coloreds from Cape Town were established by the Dutch East India Company as *the Corps Bastaard Hottentoten* (1781-82) and then *the Corps van Pandoeren* (1793-95).

After the English conquest of Cape Town in 1795, colored units were used under different designations, from 1820 as *Cape Corps*, and from 1827 to 1870 as *Cape Mounted Infantry*.

Cape Body

When the First World War broke out, all population groups declared their full support for the English King and the Empire.

The chairman of the colored population group's political organization - *African Political Organization* - Dr. Abdullah Abdurrahman, declared that he could field a force of 3,000 men who would defend both South Africa and the Empire with arms in hand [2](#). This force included i.a. veterans of the Matabele Wars (1893 and 1896-97) and the Boer War (1899-1902), where coloreds had served in various unarmed auxiliary capacities.

From the official side, they thanked for the offer, but at the same time declared that South African legislation only allowed the arming of the white population. At the same time, it was indicated that they did not want to involve non-Europeans in a conflict that had its starting point in Europe [3](#).

However, time worked for the coloreds' wishes, and in September 1915 it was decided to create an armed colored unit. Due to legislation, however, this unit technically did not become part of the South African army, but the English one.

Recruitment begins



Soldiers 1st Battalion, Cape Corps at the training camp Bellevue at Simonstown, October 1915 [4](#)._

On 25 October 1915, at 10:00 a.m., the recruiting office at Cape Town Town Hall opened its doors and

the volunteers flocked.

The recruits had to be between 20 and 30 years old, unmarried and without any other obligations, with an unblemished reputation and good health. Later, the age limit was changed to 18-35, and apparently married men could also be admitted.

It is estimated that a good 20% of those who applied were actually accepted.

On the first day, only 22 escaped through the eye of the needle, and they were immediately sent on to training in Simonstown. The majority of the soldiers are described as *Eurafricans* (mulattoes), i.e. a mixture of blacks and whites, although it was not only reserved for this part of the colored population to sign up.

The battalion commander was Lieutenant Colonel George Abbot Morris, who had Major Charles Norman Hoy as his second in command. In June 1917, another battalion of The Cape Corps, called the 2nd Cape Corps, was created.

Historical summary - The Cape Corps 1915 In

December 1915, a battalion of colored soldiers, with white officers, is created.

1917

A 2nd Battalion was established in 1917; the original battalion is now called the 1st Battalion.

1918

2nd Battalion disbanded.

1919

The regiment is disbanded.



Regimentsmærke - Cape Corps.
From Source 2.



*Lieutenant-Colonel George Abbott Morris,
Commander 1st Cape Corps, 1915-1919.
From Source 10.*

The lieutenant colonel was a veteran of the Boer War, where he had served with the Glen Gray Native Levies and the Queenstown Rifle Volunteers, first as a lieutenant and later promoted to captain.

From 1906 to 1909: Sub-inspector, Swaziland Police (part of the South African Constabulary). Afterwards settled in Boksburg, Transvaal.

In October 1914, he is captain of the squadron which the 2nd Mounted Rifles (Natal Carbineers) is raising for the South African campaign in German East Africa; is appointed major and squadron leader in November 1914 and participates from 12 December 1914 to 15 July 1915 partly in the suppression of a rebellion by some Boers who were opposed to South Africa entering the war on the German side, and subsequently in the campaign in German South West Africa.

Per On 5 October 1915, Morris was appointed commander of the 1st Cape Corps.

To East Africa

After completing its initial training, the battalion was sent to East Africa, reaching Mombasa in February 1916. The battalion became one of the first South African units to reach East Africa.

Captain Robert Valentine Dolbey, Royal Army Medical Corps, writes in his book *Sketches of the East African Campaign* (Project Gutenberg):

"One should not leave the subject of this army (en general omtale af de deltagende enheder) without reference to the Cape Corps - that experiment in military recruiting which many of us were at first inclined to condemn. But from the moment the Cape Boy enlisted in the ranks of the Cape Corps his status was raised, and he adopted, together with his regulation khaki uniform and helmet, a higher responsibility towards the army than did his brother who helped to run the transport.

They have been well officered, they have been a lesson to all of us in the essential matters of discipline and smartness, they have done much of the dirty work entailed by guarding lines of communication, and now, when given their longed-for chance of actual fighting on the Rufigi, they have covered themselves with distinction.

For my part, as a doctor, I found they had too much ego in their cosmos, as is commonly the fault of half bred races, and a sick Cape Corps soldier seemed always very sick indeed; yet, as the campaign progressed, we came to like and to admire these troops the more, so that their distinction won in the Rufigi fighting was welcomed very gladly by all of us."

2nd Cape Corps

The 2nd Battalion was, as mentioned, established in June 1917, with Lieutenant-Colonel JCB Clayton as commander and Major RW McCluskie as second-in-command. The battalion's strength is stated as 1,200.

The battalion was deployed on the southern front, in Nyasaland (Malawi), after quite a long journey - by rail from Cape Town, via Bulawayo and Salisbury (now Harare) in Northern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to Beira in Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique); from here it went by cargo ship to Chinde at the mouth of the Zambezi River, and from there on by river steamers, finally reaching Blantyre in southern Nyasaland (Malawi) by rail.

After a few months of further training here, the battalion is deployed on the east side of Lake Nyasa (now Lake Malawi), against the German forces who, after the withdrawal from German East Africa, were in Portuguese East Africa.

Uniforms and equipment

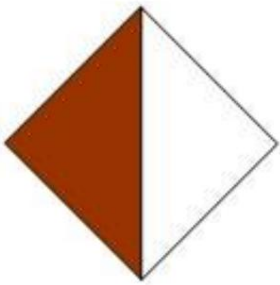


Cape Corps soldiers undergoing training in East Africa in 1917 [5](#).

As can be seen from the above and the image identified by a reproduction in Source 3, the battalions of the Cape Corps were uniformed and equipped like other South African units.

However, it appears that the soldiers are still equipped with older model rifles. However, it is likely that the rifles were exchanged for the standard armament - the Lee-Enfield Mk. 1 - before they were put into active service.

The battalion had at various times in 1916 a number of Rexer recoilless rifles, an English license-built version of the Madsen recoilless rifle. See more in my article [The Rexer Automatic Machine Gun](#).



Schematic diagram: Cape Corps helmet badge.
Own design based on information in Source 2.

Source 2 states that the regiment wore a brown and white badge (flash) on the side of the troop helmet 6).

To Palestine



*Men of the 1st Battalion, Cape Corps
(160th Brigade, 53rd Welsh Division), Palestine 1918.*
From Delville Wood Museum.

When the 2nd Battalion replaced the 1st Battalion in East Africa in 1917, the 1st Battalion, via South Africa, was sent to Palestine in the summer of 1918, where it served with General Allenby's *Egyptian Expeditionary Force*. The battalion was part of the 160th Brigade, 53rd Division.

160th Brigade/53rd Division

Chef: Brigadier-General V.L.N. Pearson

1st/7th Royal Welsh Fusiliers (English)

1st/17th Infantry (The Loyal Regiment) (indere)

1st/21st Punjabis (Indians)

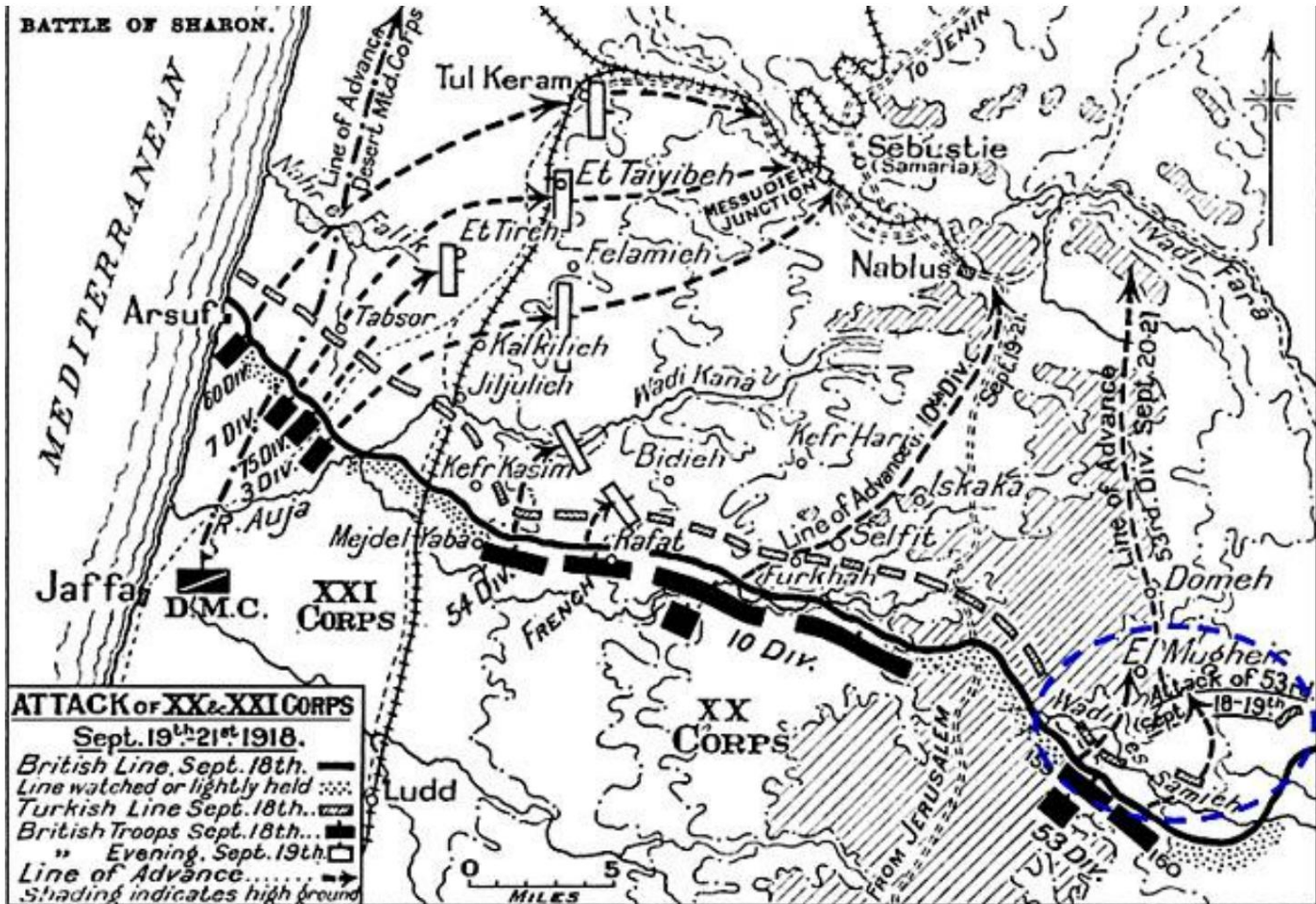
1st Cape Corps (South Africans)

A machine gun company was also created - *the Cape Corps Machine Gun Company* - which was part of the division's machine gun battalion - *53rd Battalion, Machine Gun Corps* 7).

Together with an artillery section of the 75th Division 8) as well as some sanitary units, these units formed the South African contribution to the campaign in Palestine.

Sources 3 and 4 highlight that on 19 September 1918, the 1st Cape Corps captured a ridge called Square Hill, near the road between Jerusalem and Nablus 9).

During a bayonet attack on 20 September 1918 on the Turkish positions at Kh Jibeit (at El Mugheir) it was less fortunate, however, and the battalion lost 152 men 10).



Map 1: XX. and XXI. (English) Corps attack 18.-19. September 1918.

From Source 7. 53rd Division's area of operation is indicated in blue.

53rd Division - Brief Record of Service (From Source 6)

18.9.1918 The general attack that was to smack the Turkish Armies in Palestine commenced at 22:00, when 1/17th Infantry (160th Brigade) moved north in the direction of Square Hill, followed by the rest of the brigade. Further to the left 159th Brigade captured Round Hill (overlooking Kh. Abu Felah) at 22:30.

19.9.1918 1/5th Welsh (159th Brigade) captured Kew Hill and Pt. 2401 by 00:45 and 160th Brigade took Valley View at 02:15. Strong enemy positions at Sh. El Azeir, El Mugheir, Boulder Boil, and Pt. 2352, attacked from the rear by 1/7th Royal Welsh Fusiliers were in our hands by 03:00,

and the Cape Corps seized Square Hill at 04:50. 159th Brigade captured Hindhead (4/5th Welsh), and were heavily engaged near Kh. Abu Malul, where 3/152nd Infantry, after three unsuccessful assaults, stormed the defences at dusk.

20.9.1918 Kh. Jibeit and Gallows Hill were stormed by the Cape Corps, but a fierce counter-attack by overwhelming numbers, covered by heavy shelling forced them to withdraw. 1/17th Infantry recaptured Kh. Jibeit at 12:30, and took 150 prisoners...

The map does not make it possible to identify the many localities that are assessed to lie within the blue marking on the map.



Square Hill Memorial, Kimberley.
Fra Frances Baard District Municipality
Tourism Site.

During the fighting at Square Hill, the battalion captured a 7.7 cm field gun, which has since been erected at the regiment's memorial in Kimberley.

A possible Danish angle

A possible Danish angle on the subject is found on the website *Medals given to Danes in allied war service during the First World War* (Lars Andersen), where it is mentioned that Jens Petersen from the 1st Battalion, Cape Corps, was awarded The British War Medal 1914-1918.

It is possible that Jens Petersen is a descendant of Danish emigrants, but Lars Andersen told me in April 2007 that he is waiting for papers from South African archives.

The Regimental History (Source 10) contains a list of personnel who served with 1st Cape Corps. A *Private 181 J. Petersen is mentioned here*, who was admitted to the regiment on 27 October 1915, and sent home (*Services no longer required*) on 7 June 1917. However, the specific circumstances are not disclosed.

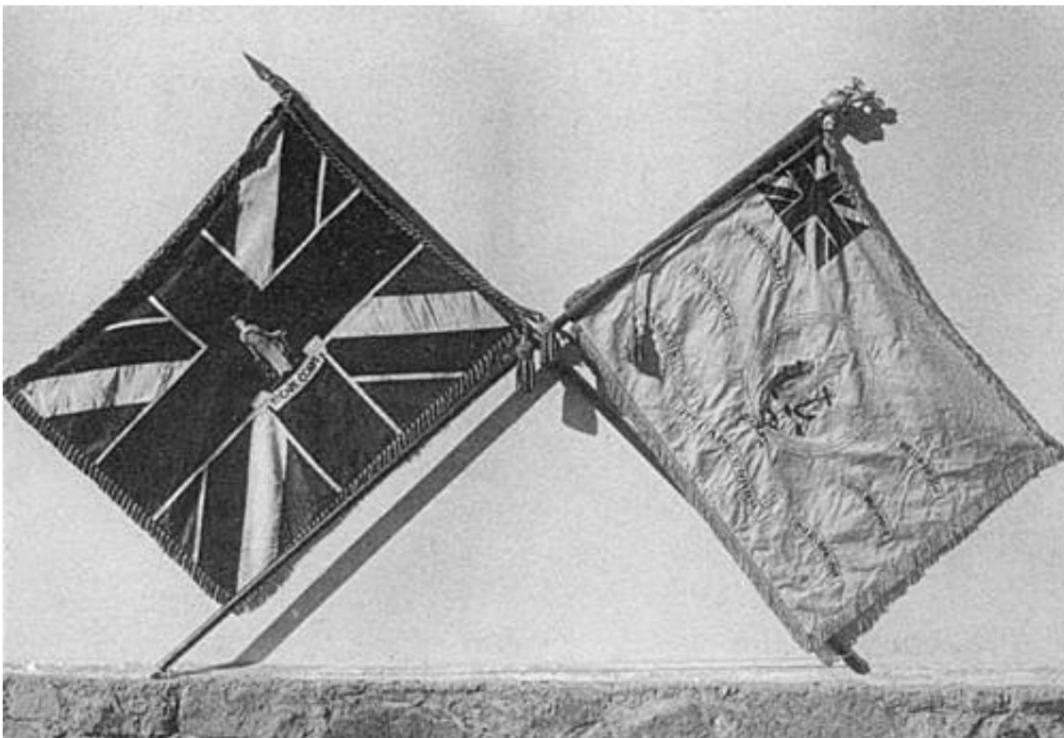
Tabs and tab bands

The 1st Cape Corps was in 1919 awarded a banner, a Union Jack with the regimental badge centrally placed. Such banners were awarded to wartime units that had served at the front. Although the banners were an official recognition of the units' efforts, they were not officially dedicated, but were to be considered royally awarded banners 11). [_____](#)

The regiment was awarded the following ribbons for its efforts during the First World War:

1st Cape Corps: Kilimanjaro, Behobeho, Nyangao og East Africa 1916-17 including Nablus og Palestine 1918.

2nd Cape Corps: East Africa 1917-18



1st Cape Corps wither.
From Source 5.

The 1st Cape Corps was also at one time given a regimental flag, with buff *flag* cloth, with a Union Jack placed in the upper left corner and a centrally placed regimental badge.

There is no information about when and by whom the regimental flag was awarded, but both the regimental flag and the "regent's" flag were displayed on 29 February 1948 at the town hall in Cape Town.

The regimental banner (right) bears the battalion's six First World War ribbons.

Closing

Since the First World War, The Cape Corps has existed in various versions and with different roles, starting with the veterans of the First World War, who retained the name as a soldiers' association in the interwar period.



3-inch mortar from *The Cape Corps*, approx. 1945¹²). _____

In 1940 the unit was restored as a supply unit (non-combatants) in 1940¹³), but was then given combatant status, which was retained until 1948, when The Cape Corps was disbanded.

In 1963, the corps was restored as a supply unit (with non-combatant status) and functioned as such until 1975, when the corps was given the status of a combat unit, which was maintained until 1991, when the corps was finally disbanded¹⁴) . _____

From 1994, members of all population groups in South Africa could be admitted to the armed forces, which is why the need for special ethnic units disappeared.

Postscript

The battalions' efforts during the First World War are documented in two rare and often quite expensive works:

- *The Story of 1st Battalion Cape Corps (1915-1919)* by Captain ID Difford, 448 pages with many illustrations, published by Hortors, Cape Town 1920. The author was Quartermaster at Battalion¹⁵). _____
- *With the 2nd Cape Corps Throu' Central Africa* af A.J.B. Desmore, 100 sider, med 12 illustrationer, Cape Town, Citadel Press 1920.

Sources

1. *History of the Great War, Military Operations East Africa, Volume I, August 1914 - September 1916* af oberstløjtnant Charles Hordern, HSMO, London 1941.
2. *The Armed Forces of South Africa* af major G. Tylden, City of Johannesburg Africana Museum, Johannesburg 1954.
3. *They Fought for King and Kaiser - South Africans in German East Africa 1916* af James Ambrose Brown, Ashanti Publishing, Johannesburg 1991, ISBN 1-874800-32-4.
4. The Amansure Medal af Johan van Zyl (South African Arms and Ammunition Collectors Association).
5. *The Unknown Force - Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers through two World Wars* af Lieutenant-General Ian Gleeson, Ashanti Publishing, Cape Town 1994, ISBN 1-874800-56-1.

6. Badges of The Native Military Corps af S.C. Foote, *Commando Magazine*, august 1968 (The Booker Collection of military badges).
7. *A Brief Record of the Advance of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, July 1917 to October 1918*, published by The Palestine News, Cairo 1919. The book's strength overview per September 1918 is also reproduced in *Order-of-Battle of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, September 1918* (James Hanafin).
8. *The Palestine Campaign* af oberst A.P. Wavell, Constable and Co. Ltd., London 1933. 9. 2nd Cape Corps (Great War Forum).
10. *The Story of 1st Battalion Cape Corps (1915-1919)* (Canadian Libraries).
11. Cape Corps (Wikipedia)

Per Finsted

To note:

- 1) The colored population today comprises approx. 4.5 million, corresponding to 10% of the population. See more about the colored South African population group in *Colored and Cape Coloreds* (Wikipedia).
- 2) See *Native Life in South Africa* by Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (World Wide SchoolTM), from Chapter XX onwards.
- 3) This was a hotly debated topic at the time, not only in South Africa. The German government, lacking large manpower resources in its colonies, went to great lengths to emphasize the disadvantage of German soldiers having to fight non-Europeans such as French colonial troops and Indian units.
- 4) Fra *A Pictorial History of Simon's Town, Miscellaneous Pictures* (Simon's Town Museum & Historical Society).
- 5) From *the World War, booklet 254-55, German East Africa's conquest* by H. Jenssen-Tusch, Johs. Lindbæk, H. Strymer and E. Gyldenkrone, Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen 1920.
- 6) Whether the badge during the First World War was divided vertically or horizontally is currently unknown, but during the Second World War it looked as shown on the principle sketch. See illustrations in *Conclusion*.
- 7) See *Units of the Machine Gun Corps (The Long, Long Trail)*, which gives 17 September 1918 as the date the machine gun company joins.
- 8) 1st South African Field Artillery Brigade: A/1st South African Battery, B/1st South African Battery (begge kanonbatterier) og C/1st South African Battery (haubitsbatteri).
- 9) Se Union spells division (Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa).
- 10) The losses are calculated with reference to the regimental history at: 51 dead, 100 wounded and 1 captured. Omtalt i *Kaplands Medal Auction Catalouge*, 25 October 2006.
- 11) Pennants assigned to *Service Battalions* are discussed in *Standards, Guidons and Colors of the Commonwealth Forces* by TJ Edwards, Gale & Polden, Aldershot 1953, page 133.
- 12) Fra *The Wonder Book of the Army*, Ward, Lock & Co., London, u.å. (ca. 1955).
- 13) The corps was reestablished at the initiative of Charles Norman Hoy, who was originally second-in-command of the 1st Cape Corps, but now held the rank of colonel.
- 14) Se *South African Army 1939-40 (Commonwealth Orders of Battle 1939-45)* og *The South African Cape Corps in defence of slavery (South African Freedom Struggles 1954-1990)*.