



The South African Air Force Memorial

History by Sydney Fryer

As you approach the SAAF Memorial, you cannot but stand in awe at its simplistic yet intricate beauty. The design of straight lines and complex triangles radiates a life of its own. Walking down the first set of steps from the parking area takes you into a

small world of immense significance. No real airman can ascend these steps without the feeling that he is walking on sacred ground, surrounded by the memories of heroes and akin.

The Memorial, dedicated to those that gave their lives in the service of their country, in war and in peace, was opened on September 1st 1963 by the then state President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr CR Swart.

The winning design chosen from 38 entries under the auspices of the Institute of SA Architects and jointly promoted by the SA Air Force Regimental Fund and the SA Air Force Association saw construction starting in October 1962 with completion at the end of August 1963. A total of R16,000 was spent on a specially reinforced foundation, while the construction of the Memorial itself amounted to R57,000.

The site of the Memorial commands a magnificent view of the surrounding countryside and is itself a dominant feature in the landscape. The promoters chose this site as it overlooks the buildings and runway of Swartkop, the first Air Force Station in the Republic and the cradle of the SAAF as well as the departure point during World War II for the majority of SAAF personnel going North.



The Memorial was designed to obtain a shape sculpturally symbolic of flight when viewed both from the ground and from the air. To this end the building was planned in three wings comprising the accommodation called for: a small non-denominational chapel for family services, caretakers office and a machine room for fountain pump and filter plant, with a separate folded slab roof over each.



Col Rod Douglas

These wings intersect over and enfold a central hall housing a Cenotaph, Rolls of Honour and illuminated scripts. The Cenotaph, the centrepiece of the design, is three sided to accommodate the SAAF motto, "Per Aspera Ad Astra", and the two biblical quotations used by them. It is lighted from above by means of perforations in the roof. The Memorial hall can be opened completely by folding glazed doors to permit public access for placing wreaths on the Cenotaph during the large annual Memorial services. Three triangular pools, one underneath each wing, completes the structure.

The basic element used throughout the design is that of the equilateral triangle (the form of the contemporary delta aircraft wing profile) and multiples or subdivisions thereof, all proportions being governed by 60, 30, 15 or 7 degrees angles. This triangular shape was used not only in the form of the building itself, but is echoed in the various components, paving, window lights, door panels, door handles and grille members.

As the building is situated on top of the highest natural vertical feature for some kilometers around, a single tall tapering copper lightning conductor was incorporated at the apex of the tripod.

This magnificent building was not the first official SAAF Memorial. This honour befell the SAAF Memorial that stood at the gates of Waterkloof Air Station from inauguration on May 31st 1950 to 1962.

Let's step back in time and re-visit the birth and growth of this magnificent symbol dedicated to fellow Airmen.

The decision to proceed with the establishment of a SAAF Memorial and the necessary policies in all matters relating thereto were taken by the SA Air Force Association on the one hand and the SA Air Force on the other.

We can safely say that Col Rod Douglas was the founder of the SAAF Association after moves by him in 1944 and the formal founding in 1945. He was a big man with big ideas and a big heart, a fine man to have at the helm of the Association. It was not long before he

started thinking about some form of tangible Memorial to those who gave their lives in the service of the SAAF and their country.

In 1948 Col Rod, as he was known, approached Brig Jimmy Durrant, the then Director General of the Air Force, who supported the idea. Approval was then obtained from the Chief of the General Staff, Sir Pierre van Rhyneveld and the Minister of Defence, Mr FC Erasmus. Mr Erasmus gave his approval in principle. The idea of an Air Force remembrance day was also supported.

Early ideas were for a Memorial gate plus some form of housing for a Roll of Honour in book form. The initial thought was to erect the gate at the entrance of Swartkop Air Station from which so many SAAF personnel left for the North, many never to return.

Possibly because of the geological nature of the ground at Swartkop Air Station (the danger of sink holes) the Department of Defence decided that Waterkloof Air Station and not Swartkop Air Station would become the principal and permanent air station serving the area. It was accordingly decided on the recommendation of the SAAF to switch the site for the proposed Memorial gates to the entrance of Waterkloof Air Station.

The SAAF Association undertook to bear all costs for the erection and maintenance of the Memorial. The National Executive Committee of the SAAF Association decided in April 1949 to proceed with fund-raising. The total projected budget for the erection was R3,000. The NEC recorded its requirements at a resolution taken on 7 December 1949. The Pretoria Branch of the Association was then approached to have the Memorial erected and inaugurated on May 31st 1950. A sub-committee consisting of Col HB George, Jock Reid and RF Bell (convener) was appointed. Other members who became closely involved in various capacities were Normie MacRobert, Dr John Leppan, Reg Dennett, and Dave Hastie.

Initially Architect Mr JA Hoogterp had offered to carry out the planning but had to later withdraw. Mr RF McGaw was appointed in his place.

The design for the Memorial allowed for a small cenotaph formed of a concrete shell clad externally in thin granite slabs with granite external facing and decorative gates each side.

Sustained and high pressure planning was required to obtain all formal approvals, have the stonework prepared and the Memorial erected in time for the planned inauguration date. At some stage the order for the preparation of the stonework was placed ahead of the appointment of the main contractor.

On March 15th 1950 the Minister's approval was obtained subject to certain stipulations that were accepted by SAAF Association NEC on 20 March. The contract for the Memorial

was placed with ACH Clarke (Pty) Ltd and was dully completed on time.

The cost of the Memorial to the amount of 2,523,172 was borne by the SAAF Association, with a contribution of 148,005 by various SAAF messes and members of the SAAF.

The SAAF manufactured the two gates and carried out the casting in bronze of the large eagle to the front face on the cenotaph. Mr Wynand Smith, architect of Pretoria, carried out the sculpting of the eagle.

Below the eagle on the face of the cenotaph the Air Force motto "Per Aspera Ad Astra" was engraved in the stonework. Inscriptions on the sides were as follows: On one side "They shall mount up with wings as eagles", Isaiah 40:31, and on the other side "Vinniger as arende was hulle, sterker as leeus" 2 Samuel 1:23.



The unveiling took place in fine weather in the presence of a large crowd of several thousand people, a large presence from the SA Air Force and many dignitaries. The SAAF planned for and carried out the required arrangements in the exemplary fashion expected from them. The principal credit for the fine arrangements must

go to Col HJ (Kalfie) Martin, then Officer Commanding AFS Waterkloof. He later became Chief of the Air Force and a Patron of the SAAF Association after retirement.

On the dais were Sir Pierre van Rhyneveld, who delivered the principal address, the Director General of the SAAF, Brig Jimmy Durrant, Col Rod Douglas of the SAAF Association, the then President of the SAAF Association, Mr Bill King, Mrs OM Swales who performed the unveiling and three Defence Force Chaplains, Rev JA Gurney, Rev SA Burger and Rev WA Buckley.



Sir Pierre van Rynneveld delivering his address.

Mrs OM Swales was the mother of Capt Edwin Swales, VC, DFC, a member of the SAAF, seconded to the RAF. On February 23rd 1945, the day after his DFC was announced, a press report stated that Capt Swales lost his life keeping his crippled plane going after being hit in a raid at Pforzheim (upper Rhineland) until he had completed the task of directing the bomber force on to the target. He then got the aircraft back over friendly territory and ordered his crew to bail out. Soon after the last man was out, the aircraft crashed with Capt Swales still at the controls.

In 1953 a suggestion to move the Memorial about 150 meters to the east to accommodate planned road deviations was put forward. The SAAF Association even purchased the adjoining township to facilitate the move. The SAAF Regimental Fund also purchased two adjacent even for the purpose of extending the gardens around the Memorial. The planned move never took place.



In 1955 the problems with the proposed road deviations again surfaced. It was also found to be difficult to develop a memorial garden close up to the adjacent township. These factors gave rise to the notion to move the Memorial to Bays Hill, the location of the current SAAF Memorial.

A working committee under the chairmanship of Col GT Moll was established to consider the proposed move and submit recommendations to the SAAF Regimental Fund. During negotiations with various parties, it was clear that the State would not consider paying for the move and that the costs would have to be borne by the SAAF Regimental Fund.

The Chief of the General Staff of the Defence Force was requested to discuss with the Treasury the obtaining of the Bays Hill property for the establishment of the Memorial on that site. The ground, totalling 3,9 morgen was made available on February 8th 1956. At this time Swartkop Air Station was again regarded as the principal air station in the Pretoria area and in nearly all respects Bays Hill was regarded as an ideal site. At this time it had become evident that a reconstruction of the Waterkloof Memorial would be impractical and that a new approach would be necessary. The SAAF Association was enthusiastic about the proposed new development and, in June 1955, issued its first national newsletter announcing the proposals. The proposals included not only the memorial itself, but provision for services, parades, seating and parking, as also provision for access roads and gardening.

It was now proposed by the SAAF that their Regimental Fund would bear the cost of the Memorial and that the SAAF Association would make a limited contribution of some 2,500. It meant that the SA Air Force would have sole control of the Memorial. While the SAAF Association appreciated the gesture of the SAAF to meet the full cost it was agreed that the SAAF Association would be responsible for half of the costs and would be an equal partner in all respects for the erection and maintenance of the Memorial.

With the view to the scope of the proposed new memorial and its prominence in respect of the new site, the SAAF and SAAF Association decided to proceed with a national architectural competition for the new design, subject to the conditions advised by the Institute of SA Architects. Professor John Fassler was appointed as the assessor.

The competition was proceeded with and professor Fassler named the winner as Taylor & Taylor of Johannesburg, with McLennan & Zeffert in the second place, and HC Floyd of Cape Town in third place. HC Floyd as well as one or two other competitors designed the Memorial as an underground construction.

The design of John and Shona Taylor visualised the beautiful construction that stands on Bays Hill today. The original bronze eagle together with the original granite inscriptions and certain paving from the Waterkloof Memorial were incorporated into the new design.

Some opposition was received from the then Minister of Defence, Mr FC Erasmus, on the design, the budget as well as the possibility that the new SAAF Memorial would distract from the grandeur of the Voortrekker Monument. Although no objection was offered from the Control Board of the Voortrekker Monument, approval from Mr Erasmus was not forthcoming.

In December 1959 Mr JP Fouchè replaced Mr Erasmus as Minister of Defence. The matter was once again referred to a committee representing the Voortrekker Monument, the

Department of Public Works and the Transvaal Provincial Administration and chaired by Dr Nicol in his capacity as the Chairman of the Control Board of the Voortrekker Monument. Their first meeting on 15 June 1960 was also attended by Maj Gen BG Viljoen (Air Chief of Staff) and Brig CH Hartzenberg.

Col PM Retief of the SAAF had had two cranes placed on top of Bays Hill in such a way to represent the proposed apex of the memorial. He had taken photographs from various positions and a report from him stated that the visibility and impressiveness of the Voortrekker Monument would in no way be prejudiced. He also said that in contrast to the much bigger and higher water tower on Garrison Hill (Jan Kemp Hill) the proposed SAAF Memorial would appear almost insignificant. The committee and the officers also visited the site on Bays Hill.

The report from Dr Nicol and his committee was handed to Mr Fouchè on August 24th 1960. The committee unanimously approved the Memorial design and sitting. In relation to the Voortrekker Monument they stated that the SAAF Memorial would appear small and ethereal. Mr Fouchè did not delay his decision and on August 25th 1960 gave his approval for the erection of the Memorial.

The Chief of the Air Force, Maj Gen BG Viljoen appointed a committee to oversee the erection of the Memorial.

The committee also included representation from the SAAF Association:

Col GT Moll, SAAF, Chairman
Col DA Du Toit, SAAF, Vice Chairman
Officer Commanding, Swartkop Air Station
DS Rogan, President of SAAFA
Dr JVA Leppan, Past President of SAAFA
VB Ruiters Maj Samuels, SAAF, Secretary

The committee met for the first time on November 14th 1960 to formulate a program. The also appointed the following professional team:

Architects: Taylor & Taylor
Quantity Surveyors: T Moore & Bell
Consulting Structural Engineers: Ove Arup & Partners

The architects were asked to make certain initial amendments to the design, including enlarging the area of the Memorial Hall.

The known dolomitic nature of the area was the first challenge of the team. Test holes were drilled early in 1961 and Mr B Isaacs of Ove Arup & Partners confirmed the suspect nature of the ground conditions. He however stated that the Bays Hill area was probably the best spot in the area due to good surface drainage and no apparent underground holes. He further confirmed that the weight of the Memorial itself would not be a problem. He did recommend that special care be taken with the foundation of the Memorial.

Various other studies were done, amongst other by the Mining Department, the University of the Witwatersrand and the CSIR.

Ove Arup & Partners investigated various techniques to deal with the foundation problem. One was to put down a huge concrete column on which the Memorial could be placed. This plan would call for a column of about 24 meters deep. The eventual design was to use a concrete raft composed of six major beams each 1,2 x 2,4 x 46 meter long. These were reinforced with some 160 tons of scrap steel railway lines. Smaller intermediate crossbeams connect the larger beams. The foundation and earthworks contract to the value of R16,000 were awarded to the firm Katzen & Rodgers and started on May 1st 1962.

The contract for the superstructure and remainder of the work was awarded to Transvaal Construction (Pty) Ltd. The total estimated cost, including the foundations, now stood at R77,000, considerably more than the original estimates which did of course not envisage the special foundation requirements. It was nevertheless agreed to proceed with the project and the SA Air Force and the SAAF Association agreed to guarantee R40,000 and R37,000 respectively. The parties further agreed to have joint responsibility over the control and maintenance of the Memorial, an arrangement that still stands today.

Generous donations were received from British Aerospace Limited and the Society of British Aircraft Constructions Limited. The Parks Department of the Pretoria Municipality, through Mr Brunsligh, donated 36 olive trees to form an avenue next to the road leading to the Memorial.

Construction of the Memorial started in May 1962 and Transvaal Construction, of which Mr Henk Muuren was the principal director, achieved a good standard of work, in spite of the complexities of the reinforced concrete structure. Great care was taken to use as much local material such as Granite from Namaqualand and Stinkwood from Knysna. The original gates from the Waterkloof Memorial were re-used at the main entrance of the new SAAF Memorial.

The Memorial, together with terraces for seating, roads, grassing etc, was completed in 1963 and careful and detailed planning for the opening, particularly by the SAAF, proceeded for the opening ceremony on September 1st 1963. The SAAF and SAAF Association worked

wholeheartedly towards this goal.

A plaque on the Memorial reads: "Erected by the South African Air Force and the Air Force Association. In remembrance of all who offered up their lives in peace and in war".

The ceremony on September 1st 1963 was a magnificent success and was attended by some 5000 people whose number included a long list of dignitaries. Mr Jim Fouchè, Minister of Defence, attended, as did Air Force representatives from neighbouring countries. These included the Chief of Air Staff of the Royal Rhodesian Air Force, Vice Air Marshal AM Bentley, and the Chiefs of the Portuguese Air Forces in Mozambique and Angola, Gen MPM de Barros and Gen JB Paiva.

The State President, Mr CR Swart, was the principal guest and conducted the unveiling. The whole occasion was meticulously planned and conducted as was usual by the SA Air Force. The public was entertained to tea following the ceremony.

The passage of time has not always been kind to the Memorial in spite of the use of good materials. From a cost point of view there was limitation on certain external materials for instance, the use of slate instead of granite for the access paving and terrazzo instead of granite for the surrounds to the three pools. The slate paving had in due course to be replaced. The terrazzo finish around the pools also had to be replaced in later years and was done by covering the previous work with pre-cast terrazzo units. The roof lights over the central memorial hall required attention to avoid leaking and special aluminium framing and lead sheeting achieved this.

The SAAF Memorial is a living monument, with continuous upgrades and development. The surrounding gardens has grown significantly over the years and the access roads and parking areas were changed to ease the flow of traffic during Memorial Days.

With the end of Apartheid in 1994 and the subsequent amalgamation of the various Air Forces into the new SA Air Force, the memorial was found not to be representative of the relevant history, as it did not include all groups. To this end a Commemorative Stone with an Eternal Flame was designed and built in the center of the main entrance walkway to the SAAF Memorial. It lists the forces that became the new SA Air Force as:

Azanian Peoples Liberation Army

Bophuthatswana Air Force

Ciskei Defence Force

Air Wing Mkontho We Sizwe

SA Air Force

Transkei Defence Force Air Wing

Venda Defence Force Air Wing



The Commemorative Stone is situated in the centre of the main walkway from the parking area to the Memorial, giving due prominence to the memory of the "Unknown Airman".

On 5 May 2002, the Chief of the National Defence Force, Gen S Nyanda, SSA, DMG, MMS, MMM unveiled this addition to the SAAF

Memorial during the Air Force Memorial Day of that year.

The Air Force Memorial site is open from 09h00 to 15h00, Monday to Sunday except Good Friday and Christmas Day. Entrance is free.

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