

Oral History Society

A Springbok on the Somme: Joe Samuels, a South African Veteran of the Great War

Author(s): Bill Nasson

Source: *Oral History*, Vol. 25, No. 2, War and Peace (Autumn, 1997), pp. 31-38

Published by: [Oral History Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40179614>

Accessed: 12/11/2013 03:55

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oral History Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Oral History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

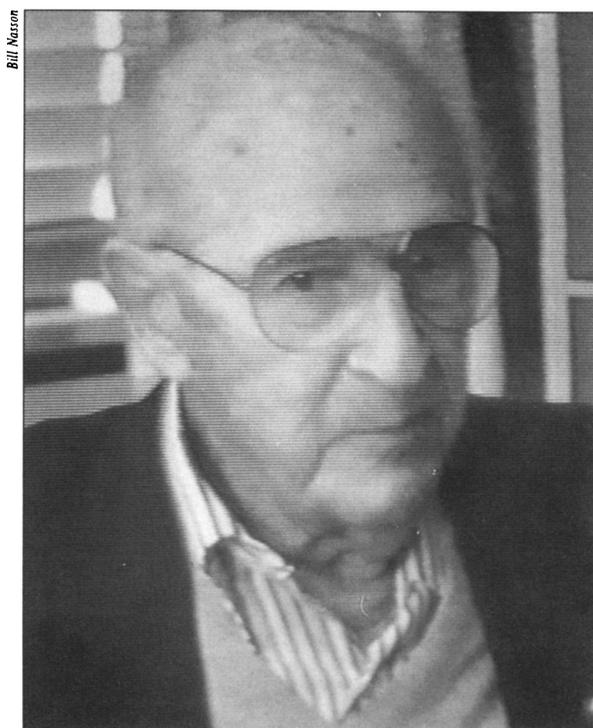
ARTICLES

A SPRINGBOK ON THE SOMME: JOE SAMUELS, A SOUTH AFRICAN VETERAN OF THE GREAT WAR

BILL NASSON

The oral history of Joseph Samuels, undoubtedly one of the sole surviving South African veterans of World War One, and certainly the only confirmed living survivor of the South African Infantry Brigade which fought in the Battle of Delville Wood during the July 1916 Somme offensive, offers a unique opportunity for understanding and analysing something of the roller coaster experience of the 1914–18 War for a white African colonial volunteer. It is not only as a sharp and buoyant witness to unfolding events in German South West Africa and on the Western Front that his striking testimony is so valuable. The thick detail of his measured war narrative affords a far more nuanced and realistic portrayal of the tone and texture of armed South African Great War involvement than is currently available in the established secondary historical literature.

The life and war memories of Joseph Samuels came to me essentially unsolicited. In May 1995, the Department of History at the University of Cape Town was contacted by his American nephew, Stephen Samuels, who was curious to find out on behalf of his relative if there were any historians with an interest in World War One soldiering experience. Quite fortuitously, at about this time I was developing a modest research interest in the impact of the Great War upon South African society, with a particular interest in ferreting out evidence on the social and cultural meanings of the legacy of war and collective remembrance. It turned out that having lived in Cape Town more or less continuously between the early 1900s and 1991, the year in which he emigrated to live with close relatives in the USA, Joseph Samuels had returned to the city on a brief two-week family holiday. For a historian finding that World War One research was to have an uncomfortably close kinship with a grave robber, to stumble upon a living South African veteran was to discover a Lazarus. More immediately, prior to what became an extended interview stretching over several days, I learned why Joseph Samuels, a man whose memory of war had long been a 'passive' fragment of his family identity, had suddenly become an 'active' narrator, wanting to tell his story. On his return to Cape Town, he had heard of the death of a last surviving Delville Wood comrade. Now he was alone, close to one hundred years of age, but his wiry body was still keeping its own time, and his need was to leave some record of his personal service experiences. That record, in the shape of an interview in a spot overlooking the Table Bay Harbour from which Joseph Samuels had sailed off to war in 1914, therefore emerged from a very particular moment for the respondent: a sense of sadness and finality with the snapping of the last remaining bond of



Joe Samuels

social kinship with a fellow veteran of the Great War, and a wish to enact and imprint memory on the historical record.

This epic of small transactions and events makes a valuable addition to South African historiography of the Great War in a number of crucial areas. The motivations behind Joe Samuels' 1914 enlistment, his understandings of wartime conduct and of how war was being made, the profound personal effect upon him of the frightful slaughter of the Somme, and his decidedly ambivalent relationship to post-1918 rituals of war remembrance and commemoration, provide a fascinating glimpse of an almost unknown seam of white South African war experience and identity. While middle-class infantrymen left behind a reasonable dusting of letters, diaries, and even memoirs for the post-1914 conflict, the adjacent world of working class and lower middle class soldiers remains just about completely unknown. We may, in fact, know rather more about the social worlds of ordinary black South African army recruits¹ than we do about white working-class settlers. In this sense, through the linear war narrative of Joseph Samuels, the so-called inarticulate or hidden becomes voluble, helping not merely to

broaden existing historical knowledge, but to interrogate and alter historical understanding of the full context in which South African volunteers experienced military and other demands of the Great War.

ENLISTMENT AND COLLECTIVE INDIVIDUALISM

Joseph Samuels — Joe to his family and friends from an early age — was born on 19 November 1897 near Carnarvon in North Wales, one of seven children of a poor Jewish family. His father was an oyster-catcher and his mother scraped along as a casual fisheries worker. Towards the end of 1901, Joe accompanied part of his immediate family to Cape Town, South Africa, his emigrant father fancifully gambling on 'making gold' once the turn-of-the-century war between British imperialism and Southern African Boer republicanism had ended. But instead of being paved with gold, the pavements simply scraped his skin. After a few desultory years of Elementary Grade schooling, his restive son slipped school for the Kimberley diamond fields and thereafter the Belgian Congo, where, at the itchy age of about twelve or thirteen, Joe found work in warehousing and logging. 'I didn't particularly like loading goods', he recalls, 'but it was better than school, and I was free to go whenever I wanted to'. The responsibilities of his sinewy boyhood were few, with his early teens seeing him drifting between Leopoldville and casual office errand jobs in Johannesburg.

It was on the Witwatersrand, as he was again preparing to return to the Congo, that he first learned of the outbreak of a European war, 'On the streets . . . I never looked at a newspaper'. Dismissive of his Cape Town family's apprehensions, a sixteen-year-old Joe swiftly massaged his age and volunteered for infantry service in the Rand Rifles. Distant from any anchoring structure of home community or the stiffening presence of an established nest of friends, Joe recalls an unusually solitary enlistment, drifting into military service by impulse rather than being driven by masculine bravado or any patriotic tenacity. First and foremost among motivations was a hankering 'for something different', a release from having 'to be a messenger boy', in which 'regular pay for a steady period wasn't to be sneezed at'. Not particularly gripped by the rash of later-1914 war rallies, public meetings, and press exhortation which enveloped urban centres in the Union of South Africa,² Joe has trouble thinking of any animating beliefs about enlisting to fight, other than knowing of 'some problems with the Kaiser'. Here, in one of the few evident sequential slippages in his narration, he apparently conflates World War One with World War Two (in which he also served, but as a non-combatant). A further sentiment behind joining the Rand Rifles was an awareness 'of a lot of discrimination against Jews. Anybody of the Jewish faith, like me, couldn't not be worried'. Equally, Joe recalls of his service obligation that he had limits in mind. He did not necessarily anticipate being despatched to make war upon Germans. For him, a good soldier meant 'defending our border', guarding the Union against any menace from neighbouring German South West Africa.

This submerged, largely sub-political nexus of humdrum preoccupations and aspirations in no way corresponds to the clear and unambiguous depiction in contemporary South African historical literature of the social composition and motives of loyal, English-speaking white South African volunteers in 1914. Starting with John Buchan in 1920,³ these representations have continued to affirm fixed structures of historical 'character', and an overarching ideological sensibility. In sum, drawn from a well-schooled middle class social elite and bonded by colonial traditions of settler militarism and rugby-chorus masculinity, these volunteer soldiers were of an intensely ideological kind. Exuberantly pro-empire to a man, for English South African patriots, Dominion citizenship was Empire citizenship; steeped in the Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic race pride of school, church, and militia armoury, men were drawn to arms in 1914 by a burning sense of duty and intensely patriotic purpose.⁴ Most of all, as a whole, Union volunteers are depicted by South African military historians in fundamentally idealist terms, as believing that they were fighting for an abstract cause: for a budding 'Springbok' nationalism and for the 'freedoms' of a British Empire to which they felt indissolubly linked. Finally, this war universe was structured psychologically around a cluster of elite beliefs and cultural certainties which looked to the anticipated military romance and drama of a European battlefield. As Africa's pugnacious emissaries of European civilization, the Union's colonial boys were eager to embrace an imaginary real war, panting for combat in the trenches of Mons and Ypres.

How far are such depictions an accurate picture of the world of South African infantry? Obviously, without necessarily claiming too much for the 'representivity' of Joe Samuels' singular recollection of early wartime atmosphere, what can be said is that his revelation of the personal and the particular stands as a kind of social and cultural counterweight to simplistic affirmations of the homogeneous class character and worthy combat motivation of South Africa's white World War One volunteers. The raw material of Joe Samuels does not conform to the standard patterning of South African Great War historiography: his life testimony points to the need for disaggregation, and the exploration of differing, intersecting, horizons of personal war experience. Like other combatant nations, South African engagement to fight was collective: what this life history alerts us to is the need to understand that as collective individualism.

THE WHITE ZULUS

Before Christmas 1914, 'Sammy' (as he swiftly became dubbed by the men of his platoon) found the border of the Union of South Africa beginning to move, and he with it. Responding to a British War Cabinet request that South African forces should invade and seize control of the neighbouring German protectorate of South West Africa, the Union government thrust off a seaborne invasion force which included the Rand Rifles. Imbricated in Sammy's stories of the 1914–15 conquest of German South West Africa is a light or even lyrical mode of war remembrance, and a bob-

bing image of the invasion as a very low-key, rambling sort of do. Meeting no resistance when taking the capital of Windhoek, Sammy 'waded ashore' to assemble with his company on 'sand as fine as flour' and 'white as pearls'. Guarding railway lines from a dugout post for several weeks, his major preoccupations were the scorching heat and running sand, making it 'a job keeping your rifle working'. Once reassigned to the mobile interior campaign of the Expeditionary Force, Sammy anticipated 'going to the desert to meet the enemy', but confrontation remained rather elusive. 'We never saw them . . . a few prisoners were the only enemy I remember seeing, if they were the enemy. I suppose they must have been, even if we weren't fighting them'. Shortly before his departure from German South West Africa around mid-1915, Sammy had two encounters which he recalls as particularly poignant images of the German South West African war. One was guarding a clump of 'German political prisoners, they were civilians, mostly businessmen', who 'looked far too miserable to be real spies'. While 'doing what I had to do', Sammy felt it difficult 'to think of them as our enemy.' For Private Samuels, the African conflict with Germany had not conjured up the old notion of war as a breeding-ground of mutual respect between opposing warriors (still perpetuated by many historians); even less had it produced loathing of the enemy. In all, it had been mostly a puzzle: an engagement in which none of his 'pals' met injury or death, and a flat victory over a community which seemed perpetually confused and disoriented, 'so few Germans, I couldn't feel what the threat was . . . they just didn't seem to be any sort of real enemy . . . how could they be, if all you did was feel sorry for them?' A second moment was some realisation of the racially segregated and discriminatory terms of service in the South African army. Finding himself being coached in mule-riding by Coloured drivers of the Cape Corps Labour Battalion, Sammy remembers feeling an ambivalent mixture of sympathetic admiration for 'a tough lot', and a sense of his own group's social exclusivity and superiority. He found them 'tough soldiers whose lot seemed to be more work for less pay . . . their position was lower than us, so we never thought of them as pals'.

Now integrated into a group of men from mostly later-nineteenth century British immigrant families, Sammy joined several 'pals' or 'mates' who, after their German South West Africa service discharge, opted to re-enlist in August 1915 in a further South African Expeditionary Force. This was the four battalion-strong 1st South African Infantry Brigade, raised for deployment on the Western Front. Here again, emphasis in the historical literature falls on the middle class voluntarism and esprit de corps of this contingent, 'businessmen, civil servants, academics, students',⁵ whose 'level of education and breeding was singularly high'.⁶ What Sammy offers up of his own life and that of other 3rd Transvaal and Rhodesia Regiment volunteers who included decidedly lower class miners, mechanics and craftsmen, are glimmers of a less heroic and seamless war narration.

Thus, disciplinary impositions after arrival in Britain in April 1916, arduous training at Borden and Aldershot, and

poor pay pushed some men close to a border line of rebellion. One especially rankling issue was the Union government decision in 1916 to cut the pay of South African infantry privates to British Army levels. Among 3rd Regiment infantrymen whose measure of personal worth was the higher British Dominion earnings of Australian, New Zealand and Canadian troops, 'there was almost a rebellion, real trouble was coming'. Although South African infantry allowances were subsequently improved, the miserable bottom rate of 1s per day still left Sammy and his pals feeling 'more like beggars than anything else . . . you could hardly afford smokes'. Popular dislike focused upon the tight-fisted Union Cabinet Minister, Sir Thomas Smartt, encapsulated as a mean ogre in soldiers ditties which Sammy is still able to recite with hypnotic precision and instinctive relish. In one cherished recollection:

All for a bob a day
 Bob a day
 Bob a day
 All for a bob a day
 Bob a day
 Bob
 Hold him down
 The lousy bugger
 Hold him down
 The money chief
 Hold him down
 Sir Effing Smartt
 Hold him down
 While we fart



South African Scottish arrive in Marseilles.

South African Digest, 1916

This raucous 1916–17 refrain is a sardonic version of a white colonial ‘tribal’ song, recycled and refashioned from late-nineteenth century Southern African settler folk memory. The stock piece, ‘Hold him down, you Zulu warrior. Hold him down, you Zulu chief’, was a mock, dressing-room chant to the essentialist ‘warrior spirit’ of the Zulu, by the early twentieth-century a subjugated and caged Southern African society, simultaneously glamorised and demeaned by white observers. Like many other soldiers of the Infantry Brigade, Sammy indulged in ‘Zulu’ burlesque as one of the fiercely masculine ritual inventions which reinforced the South Africans’ sense of a distinctive African imperial camaraderie and identity.⁷ For Sammy:

Well, we did a fair bit of prancing about I suppose, what with our native war cries and shaking rifles above our heads like spears. That was our sort of emblem, you could say, or our mark, coming as we did from South Africa.

HELL ARRIVED — ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Upon reaching the Western Front during May 1916, trench combat conditions presented a seemingly unintelligible tangle, a simmering war of stalemate where ‘almost nothing was active’, yet where exacting line deployment routines left Sammy ‘cold as hell’ from the mud and water, and ‘always fagged out’. Like the Senegalese conscript, Kande Kamara, whose oral record of West African experience of the Great War was captured in 1976,⁸ Sammy was struck by the contrast between the parcelled, arable countryside of northern France, and the immensity of African landscapes. And, like Kamara, he, too, recalls grappling for some meaningful understanding of what was meant to be going on, ‘it was plain that knowledge was not for privates’. The general invisibility of a British High Command seemed particularly baffling to the Rand Rifleman, who remembers not merely seeing, but being spoken to, by General Louis Botha, South Africa’s prime minister and commander-in-chief of the Union forces in the German South West Africa campaign. This was one of the ways in which Sammy first felt the shift from a commando campaign to a European mass industrial war: a shift from known, cherished leadership to a more remote generalship, which kept comprehension at arm’s length.

Up to the July 1916 Somme offensive, Sammy’s Western Front posting appeared not to resemble ‘the diffuse and chaotic experiences of trench warfare’ reflected by the German veterans whose war memories were probed in this journal several years ago.⁹ Conditions seemed more a paradoxical combination of intensely ordered, numbing routine (‘I prayed for anything to escape this, even for fighting’), of regular oscillation between trench lines, and yet simultaneously of ‘never knowing what the hell was going on, certainly down where we were, we were mostly just stuck out there in the open, hoping we would eventually see what was going on’. Approaching mid-July, Sammy’s battalion was prepared for a night march, with stops leaving men ‘standing around in the dark, it was two or three a.m., none of us

knowing where the hell we were, or where we would be going’. In exasperated anticipation, men groped around in a world of the unseen.

While in general terms uncomfortably aware of the heavy losses which British forces had already sustained on the Somme, Sammy did not at this juncture anticipate the carnage which now awaited the 1st South African Infantry Brigade. At dawn on 15 July, he found himself in the vicinity of ‘a big forest, thick and green . . . it looked a lovely spot’. Although close by his platoon encountered ‘quite a lot of dead bodies’ which had ‘turned dark blue . . . gassed, that was why’, the densely oaked woodland ahead still looked like ‘a handy place for a rest, and to have a cup of coffee, or whatever’. The looming spot, however, was hardly recreational. This was the enemy-held territory of Delville Wood on the German second line, thickly occupied by entrenched Bavarian troops who were aided by the availability of formidable blanketing artillery fire. German command had stipulated that the Wood be held at whatever cost. Likewise, Brigadier-General ‘Tim’ Lukin, the South African Brigade Commander, had accepted British XIII Corps signals to take Delville Wood at ‘all costs’.¹⁰

That price was to be carried by Joe Samuels and some 3,000-odd fellow Springbok infantrymen. Between 15 and 18 July (when he was wounded and withdrawn from combat), Sammy found himself at the outermost margin of human endurance in the pulverising Battle of Delville Wood or ‘Devil’s Wood’ or ‘Nightmare Wood’ (as it quickly came to be called by both sides), in the words of one prominent interwar historian, ‘the bloodiest battle hell of 1916’.¹¹ As formations broke up into virtual free-for-all combat grounded upon continuous attacks and counter-attacks, and horrendous shelling, Sammy’s recollection is that ‘hell arrived . . . what we found ourselves in is still unspeakable, in every minute of our situation then it was kill or die’. His traumatic Delville Wood experience is articulated in three especially intense and expressive ways. One is the tremendous heat of the battlefield, ‘boiling, hotter than the Congo’, and the effect of this upon unburied corpses, ‘it was everywhere, that smell, just of rotting away around you’; another is the sense of disorientation, or of being ‘almost in a trance’, and of an uncanny numbness in engaging with the enemy, ‘no feelings at all, really, all I knew was self-preservation, perhaps that was what the Germans knew too’; a third is a brooding silence about the deaths of comrades he witnessed personally, as an apparent means of coping with the haunting legacy of Delville Wood. Deadpan yet inwardly flinching, this is, in a sense, the taboo side of Sammy’s war memory, where ‘all I can say is that the whole thing was terrible. I know what happened to people, but it’s too painful, it’s too bad to think about, even now’. For Joe Samuels, the dead are to be left on the field of battle. He stresses that unlike some other soldiers of the South African Brigade who sought to commemorate the Delville Wood dead immediately after the battle, he found it too painful to pay ritual homage to the dead, particularly those whose faces and words had marked them out as erstwhile close companions.



The Graphic: 20 September 1916

'The Springboks repel a German counter-attack in Delville Wood' (above); Delville Wood, September 1916 (below).



South African National Museum of Military History

Although his personal emotional shroud over fallen comrades has long been taut, he remembers in considerable detail his own bloodstained bandages and the date of his shrapnel wound. On 18 July, he was stretchered out of Delville Wood and consigned to a dressing-station in the nearby village of Longueval. Sammy recalls feeling fatalistic, 'not knowing when I'd be fixed up to go back into that horror, but for that moment I felt saved, and that felt like enough'. Two days later, having played a crucial role in helping to capture and cling on to Delville Wood, Sammy's haggard Brigade was relieved by British reinforcements. The Springbok contingent had been decimated: a force of 3153 men on 15 July had been whittled down to a muster of just over 700 men by 20 July. Final casualties exceeded 2500 killed, wounded, missing presumed dead or captured. Sammy had shrapnel in his skull, but his luck had been with him, for 'no one else in my own section came out at all, dead, all of them dead'.

South Africa's pro-war press scrambled to construct a settler nationalist mythology around Delville Wood, 'a pasture of heroic khaki gazelles'¹², cast as an experience of sacrificial national achievement and masculine resolve to echo the Australian and New Zealand Anzac legend and the military prowess said to have been demonstrated by Canadians at Ypres in 1915. Delville Wood conjured up a South African Gallipoli, that of the myth of nationhood through fire. Meanwhile, at a somewhat lower level, Sammy was heading back from the Western Front for treatment and recovery in a London hospital.

Around October 1916, Sammy was shipped across to a French training ground at Rouen, 'one of those bull rings', in which 'sergeants made sure you were made fit again, ready to be slaughtered'. After these rigours, he spent 'a long time, four, maybe five months', occupying trenches around Arras. Here, for Sammy and his comrades there were relatively few casualties, but severe winter weather, the exhaustion and misery of trench life, and the repeated demands of trench-raiding parties made this another burdensome posting. Sammy remembers 'everyone having to volunteer at least once' for a storming party to raid the German front line, 'often late at night or before dawn, a mad, dangerous business'. Men 'blackened up' with smears of candle soot to reduce their visibility, and 'charged across like Zulus', perhaps emulating their Springbok soldiering identity of *le Zulu blanc*.

In one of these madcap episodes Sammy became entangled in German wire and was again wounded, this time by a defender's bayonet. He recollects thereafter a Channel crossing by hospital ship in which he and other invalided South African infantry privates shared their growing distrust of British brass hats, and expressed anger at the lack of service rewards for lower-ranking colonial volunteers. One biting chant, especially effective for both remembrance and recitation because of its simplicity, was a cocky marching piece aired on the voyage:

Springboks duck
Springboks pluck
Springboks fly
Springboks die
But this side of the ocean
You get no promotion
But this side of the ocean
You get no promotion

Following a further 'bull ring' stiffening at Calais, Sammy was posted back to the Somme area where he remained until September 1917 when, with other 'Johannesburger' remnants of the 3rd Regiment, he took part in the Third Battle of Arras. He evidently continued to lead an extraordinarily charmed life. At one point he was reported missing, presumed dead, news which tipped his Cape Town family into black mourning — and he understandably relishes an opportunity to display treasured copies of his official newspaper death notification.¹³ At another, he nearly drowned in the engulfing mud of Ypres, 'like filthy soup, pouring into me'. After days of mostly prostrate trench warfare, Sammy sustained a shoulder wound from a shell burst, and for a third time was hauled away 'so they could have me doctored up'. He found himself worrying increasingly about a further combat round, as 'so many had gone West', and 'probably this time you'd be your own grave-digger'. But his war as an infantry regular was about to end.

Still weak after treatment and lengthy convalescence at an Eastbourne treatment camp, Sammy was now classified unsuitable for further front-line duty. The last year of the war saw him working as an orderly in a supply base at Folkestone, a posting from which combat life in France:

Felt unreal. It was hard to believe that we and the Germans were just going on and on, killing each other, and all this only a few miles away. I felt myself longing for South Africa's sun. Being away from it all, I seem to have lived a hundred lives. And when I thought about those Somme battles, it all seemed like some terrible dream.

One more life lay ahead. In November 1918, Joe Samuels left Southampton aboard the 'Galway Castle' for South Africa and demobilisation. With the poorest possible timing, the dawn of Armistice Day, Sammy's ship was torpedoed in the Bay of Biscay by a U-boat.¹⁴ Pitched into the sea, he rolled onto a raft, 'watching the lights going out on our ship, which was slipping slowly under the water', and was finally to be picked up by a British cruiser. Following his fourth close shave, Sammy's war eventually ended at Maitland Dispersal Camp, Cape Town, in February 1919, where he was discharged with a clutch of meal and railway tickets, 'a couple of pounds', and 'a dark suit, which was much too short and much too tight, quite a joke at the time'.

WAR MEMORIES

There are a number of general concluding observations to be made about this 'war memory biography' and the structure

of its composition. First, re-interviewing over several days, probing the same ground and checking incidental detail, produced stories and memories of events characterised by astonishingly consistent and precise construction. There was almost no descriptive variation across a number of repeated versions. In this sense, the seemingly self-contained core of Joe Samuels' memory of war differs from what is more or less an oral history convention: namely, that each time a story from memory is told or re-told, almost inevitably the opportunity opens up for fluctuating emphases, perhaps disclosing entirely new information or sometimes appreciably amending the actual rendition of historical detail.¹⁵

The reasons for Sammy's constancy and staunch adherence to a particularly formulaic way of remembering are probably likely to be forever elusive. But one factor may be his unusual isolation from established clusters of other ex-servicemen after 1918. He had no desire to 'get together' with other veterans to reconnect with any collective memory of South West Africa, Picardy, or Flanders; instead, a long-enduring, individual 'repression of war experience'¹⁶ and a deliberate distancing from South African veterans' associational culture sprang from his imagination of the infernal, a sense of unspeakable horror at the heart of his Delville Wood experience. Sammy's pattern of remembering may therefore be relatively 'autonomous', rather than continuously reconstructed over time with the encrustations of shared knowledge at reunions and swapping of stories through active contacts with old pals. Neither was his memory of the Great War much validated through reading the reconstructions of war memory produced by some more articulate and literary Delville Wood veterans in the 1920s and 1930s: 'What was there to read? I knew how it had been. What more was there?'

In this way, Sammy's war memory is crafted rather differently from that of Australian Great War veterans such as Percy Bird or Fred Farrall, whose absorption in the Anzac remembrance culture of ex-servicemen has been explored so illuminatingly by Alistair Thomson.¹⁷ South Africa had no popularising official war correspondent of the like of Australia's Charles Bean to circulate revivalist accounts of masculine prowess in the trenches of the Western Front. And in another important respect, the social legacy of the war was less prominent here than in other British Dominions. The presence of South African Great War veterans was comparatively thin: while New Zealand, for example, had put forty-two percent of its adult male population on active service, stark pro-war and anti-war divisions between English empire loyalists and nationalist Afrikaners meant that the Union had mobilised just ten percent of its settler population.

Second, a significant number of Sammy's observations and encounters echo servicemen's letters and diaries written in the immediacy of combat experience, most significantly in the 1915–16 South African transition from a somewhat obscure, sub-imperial 'small war' in German South West Africa to the dreadful ferocity of fighting in France. Crossing continents was both an extreme widening of war experience,

and a visceral deepening of its Europeanised intensity.

Third, Sammy was not an ideological volunteer, and represents an alternative construct to the 'high diction' of South African military history which has continued to represent English and loyalist Afrikaner war volunteers in Europe as an educated class elite which enlisted through national patriotic conviction and empire duty.

The fourth and final conclusion is perhaps the most striking. In the aftermath of the war, Sammy had no stomach for any involvement in the mostly elite remembrance exercises of Delville Day Parades, ceremonies and services. For this scarred and solitary veteran, there was no pride in the post-war articulation of a legendary Delville Wood narrative of national white South African sacrifice in a war for civilisation and democracy. As he wryly stresses, he only joined the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTHS), the locally based association of ex-servicemen, late in the 1930s, 'because you could get a few discounts, for insurance and things like that'. Another stifling factor was the robustly Christian form and procedure of Delville Wood commemorative gatherings and anniversary rituals which Sammy found 'well, I think their interest was only in talking about Jesus and people's sacrifice'. In contemplating an exclusively Christian sacred space for commemoration of the dead, it was Sammy's Jewishness which left him estranged, aware that 'I had my own faith, but there was never any place for it'.

Above all, though, the horror of battle at Delville Wood had revealed to Joe Samuels the hideous cost of the war, and had invested it with an almost incommunicable crust of personal tragedy. He had escaped death, while his surrounding pals had been slaughtered to a man. 'Dead, all of them . . . I still can't bear to think of that, even today. The war took my pals, and I can't go back to thinking about that part'. This insistence on a silent memory of his most traumatic combat experience perhaps reflects two realities about the way in which Joe Samuels has lived the 'meaning' of his war. One is that of the haunted survivor of the Great War, his back turned on ritualistic public expression of a collective war memory which was in any event less unifying than in belligerent European countries. This reinforces one sense of himself as a man who has felt war at its most savage, and yet has developed the fortitude to leave behind forever images of dead and mutilated comrades. Yet, in the end, it is another meaning which may be the more compelling. Sammy's silence about, or apparent distancing from, the most intensely traumatic events of the 1916 battlefield may be in part a means of coping with a frightening memory of hideous images, or partly a sign of his inability to come to terms with the enduringly unendurable. But the real key to understanding this dimension of Joe Samuels' memory may ultimately be social: 'knowing' the watershed of battle as a soldier provides no bridging language to those who do not. This case study underlines Richard Holmes' knowing observation that the outpouring of 'military memoirs and myriad of wartime anecdotes are only one side of the equa-

tion: on the other is reticence'. Perhaps Sammy simply exemplifies this important understanding.

Sometimes a reluctance to talk about 'their' war reflects not only veterans' desire to avoid rummaging amongst unpleasant memories, or their feeling that an outsider cannot possibly understand what they have to say: they are also reluctant to let someone else into a world which belongs to

a group from their own generation. It was their war and remains their memory, and is a currency not to be cheapened by inflation.¹⁸

In this respect, however rich and full the echoes of Sammy's distant war, its shared memory continues to flinch at any re-visitation of his Delville Wood dead.

NOTES

I am indebted to Joe Samuels for his assistance, and for so generously sharing his memories. He was interviewed in May 1995, and one extended session, 'Joe Samuels: A South African Veteran of the Great War', is lodged in the audio-visual collection of the Department of History, University of Cape Town.

- ¹ For which, see Albert Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War: South African Blacks and the First World War*, Johannesburg, Ravan, 1987.
- ² Bill Nasson, 'A Great Divide: Popular Responses to the Great War in South Africa', *War and Society*, vol.12, no.1, 1994, pp.47-49
- ³ John Buchan, *The History of the South African Forces in France 1915-1919*, Edinburgh, Nelson, 1920.
- ⁴ See, for example, Ian Uys, *Rollcall: The Delville Wood Story*, Johannesburg, Uys, 1991, pp.5-12.
- ⁵ Peter K A Digby, *Pyramids and Poppies: The 1st SA Infantry Brigade in Libya, France and Flanders 1915-18*, Johannesburg, Ashanti, 1993, p.17.

⁶ Buchan (1920), p.18.

⁷ For white South African troop culture and identity on the Western Front, see my, 'Le Zulu Blanc: South African Infantry in Flanders', in Peter Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective: A New Study of the Third Battle of Ypres*, London, Leo Cooper, 1997 (in press).

⁸ And published by Joe Harris Lunn, 'Kande Kamara Speaks: An Oral History of the West African Experience in France 1914-18', in Melvin E Page (ed), *Africa and the First World War*, London, Macmillan, 1987, pp.29-53.

⁹ Gabriele Rosenthal, 'German War Memories: Narrability and the Biographical and Social Functions of Remembering', *Oral History*, vol.19, no.2, 1991, p.36.

¹⁰ R E Johnstone, *Ulundi to Delville Wood*, Cape Town, Maskew Miller, 1926, p.148.

¹¹ Basil Liddell Hart, *The Real War*, London, Faber, 1930, p.256.

¹² *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 July 1916.

¹³ *Cape Times*, 15 June 1917.

¹⁴ *Natal Witness*, 26 November 1918.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Bridget Macey, 'Social Dynamics of Oral History Making: Women's Experiences of Wartime', *Oral History*, vol.19, no.2, 1991, p.43.

¹⁶ Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946*, Oxford, Berg, 1994, pp.19, 86.

¹⁷ Alistair Thomson, 'The Anzac Legend: Exploring National Myth and Memory in Australia', in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By*, London, Routledge, 1990; 'Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia', *Oral History*, vol.18, no.1, 1990, pp.25-31; *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994, csp. pp.205-8.

¹⁸ Richard Holmes, *Firing Line*, Pimlico, London, 1994, p.395.