

## THE NEW SANDF RANK INSIGNIA

### *A missed opportunity for creating a common identity*

---

CHARLES VAN WIJK

The SANDF has missed a critical opportunity to enhancing a unified corporate identity with the introduction of their new rank insignia. Cultural and organisational symbols reflect and create corporate identity. Military uniforms are important symbols in expressing affiliation and loyalty. Rank insignia are important indicators of further sub-group identity. The SANDF was formed out of the integration of various armed forces in 1994. The newly formed SANDF recognised the need for new symbols to reflect their new identity—a break with the past—and to enhance their unified identity. New rank insignia were introduced in 2002, with different symbols for the different services. The author argues that this will create greater service-bound identity, and encourage less unity in the corporate identity of the SANDF.

### Introduction

The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) recently changed its corporate identity through the introduction of new rank insignia for the four services. This commentary argues that although it created new symbols of its identity, the SANDF failed to achieve increased cohesion or 'jointness'. Rather, it created further division between the four services of the SANDF.

For the sake of clarity, the following definitions will be used throughout this commentary: Culture is those shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and symbols that members of a group adhere to. Symbols (sometimes called artefacts) are physical objects that

convey meaning within a specific culture. This commentary explores cultural symbols and social (group) identities. Symbols of individual identities, like status (e.g. officers or non-commissioned officers) fall outside the scope of this discussion. After a brief overview of cultural artefacts and identity, uniform as a cultural artefact that creates and expresses identity will be discussed.

### Cultural symbols and identity

Alvesson and Billings<sup>1</sup> describe three basic forms in which culture is often expressed and reproduced, namely rituals; artefacts and symbols; and metaphors. The military is particularly rich in symbolic expressions of organizational culture.

Corporate culture and identity are often expressed through symbols: physical objects, like offices, furniture, logos, and forms of dress that convey meaning within an organization. Dress is a highly salient artefact used to convey corporate identity and values<sup>2</sup>. In fact, observed adherence to perceived cultural elements, like uniform, predicts commitment to the organisation's values by its members.<sup>3</sup>

#### *School uniforms*

Schools, as organisations, use uniforms to both give and reflect identity. Wearing a particular uniform signifies belonging to a specific school. High school students believe that uniforms provide a common identity for all students. It serves as a common badge of affiliation, which identifies students as members of the same learning community.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, school uniforms lead to competition and rivalry between schools. Through marking the wearer's identity as belonging to a specific group (school), it leads to a separation of in-groups (own school) and out-groups (rival school). The 'others' are clearly marked through their uniforms. The use of uniforms in education is carried further in adult life, and in particular into the military, where very distinctive uniforms are worn.

#### *Military uniforms*

Military people are identified by, and identify with, their uniforms. It makes visible their status, through rank and mustering. It gives them a sense of belonging, to their particular service in general, but also to other particular sub-groups as well. In the context of identity, uniform is of particular significance. Uniform binds people together. Uniform signifies affiliation to a specific group, but also rivalry between groups.

#### *Uniforms in the SANDF*

In the SANDF, uniforms symbolised one of its core values: that of the four separate services. They are the SA Army, SA Air Force (SAAF), SA Navy (SAN), and SA Military Health Service (SAMHS). They previously operated with a high degree of individualism, which is reflected in their distinct uniforms. This led members of the SANDF to develop

an individual commitment to their own service, and not to the force in total.

Uniforms are therefore more than just an expression of military culture, but also an expression of identifying or affiliating with a specific service sub-culture. Members develop their identities in response to the uniform they wear. It can therefore be concluded that within the SANDF context, uniform not only reflects identity, but also confers identity upon those wearing it.<sup>5</sup>

To understand the symbolism of the SANDF military uniform, the national context has to be considered. Some aspects of South African history will briefly be touched upon.

### **History of military uniforms in SA**

#### *British influences*

The ultimate predecessor of the SANDF was the Union Defence Force (UDF), formed in 1912. South Africa was a British (Crown) possession at the time, and the UDF was therefore modelled on the British military system. In particular, the rank insignia and other badges were taken from the British model.<sup>6</sup>

#### *South African nationalism*

In 1948 the National Party came to power in SA, and heralded an upsurge in South African, mainly 'Afrikaner', nationalism. As SA gradually positioned itself further from the British Crown (British domination), its changing identity was reflected in the changing uniform of its military. In 1951 the British star worn by officers was replaced with a symbolic five-point star, showing the national Coat of Arms in the middle. In 1957 the crown worn by senior officers was replaced with a 'castle', based on the design of the castle in Cape Town<sup>6</sup>.

The changes were instituted to reflect the identity of SA nationalism and increasing independence from the British Crown.

#### *Political integration*

In 1994 the South African National Defence Force was born. This heralded the political integration of former statutory and non-statutory forces of the Apartheid era. The new government of national unity wanted to break

with the symbols of the past, which were sometimes associated with negative connotations. The government therefore embarked on a program of replacing elements of the uniform worn by the old South African Defence Force, on whose uniform the SANDF uniform was initially based. This culminated in the introduction of new rank insignia in September 2002.

## Symbols and identity in the SANDF

The SANDF rightly recognised the need for unifying symbols. There was a need for new symbols to break with the past, and also to incorporate the new national Coat of Arms. The new rank insignia were to reflect a new identity through the use of national symbols. They were also to enhance the integrated or cohesive identity of the SANDF, often referred to as unity or 'jointness'. The new symbols were to be "rallying points for...strengthening unity".<sup>7</sup>

The integrated identity referred not only to the previous forces that formed the SANDF, but also to the new force structure (four services and a Joint Operations command). The four services were mentioned previously. Before September 2002 they wore separate uniforms, but with two services wearing the same rank insignia. The SA Navy and SA Air Force had separate rank insignia.

### *New rank insignia*

The new rank insignia were introduced in September 2002. The four services retained their separate uniforms, but now also had very distinct symbols of rank. The SA Military Health Services (SAMHS) appear to have expressed their perpetual identity crisis again by copying the SA Army's rank insignia directly.

Apart from separate symbols of rank, the various services also wear their rank differently. The SA Army and SAMHS chose to wear their officer insignia on the shoulder, and non-commissioned officer insignia on the upper arm. The SAAF and SAN wear all insignia on the shoulder.

Through locating insignia on different parts of the uniform, the individual services, with the exception of the SAMHS, retained

their separate identities, which was further emphasised by their new rank insignia.

The SA Army and SAMHS opted for a part of the national Coat of Arms as symbols for senior officers but they used different background colours. The SAAF and SAN used gold stripes, but of a different type, to indicate officer status and also used different background colours. In effect, the new rank insignia maintain and then accentuate the separate identities of the four services. The changes failed to even address issues of unity, but rather fostered the separation of the services.

This is unfortunate, as the service identities could have been maintained in the colour of their uniforms, and their unique sub-group identities through specialisation badges. A uniform system of rank insignia could have been instrumental in creating that cohesive identity that the SANDF strives for. The SANDF could have maintained the separate service uniforms with their unique background colours on which the rank insignia is worn. At the same time, insignia could have followed the same design across services, and be worn on the same place on the uniform.

## Conclusion

Cultural and organisational symbols not only reflect, but also confer identity. Corporate uniforms, like the military wears, are important symbols in reflecting identity and emphasising affiliation. In the military, uniform symbolises affiliation and loyalty. In the SADF, the four different services had different uniforms and partially different rank insignia. In SA it led to separate identities between the services. After the integration of former adversaries in 1994, the SANDF recognised the need for new symbols to reflect their new identity. The need arose from a desire to break with the past, to incorporate the new national Coat of Arms, and to act as rallying point for unity ('jointness'). New rank insignia were introduced in 2002, with vastly different symbols for the different services. This can only lead to greater affiliation to a specific service. This will in turn lead to less unity and 'jointness' in the identity of soldiers. The SANDF has missed a critical opportunity to enhance their internal identity.

## Notes

1. M Alvesson & YD Billings, *Understanding gender in organizations*, Sage Publications, London, 1997.
2. MG Pratt & A Rafaeli, Organisational dress as a symbol of multi-layered social identities, *Academy of Management Journal* 40(4), 1997, pp 862–898.
3. JS Guber, Predicting an employee's organisational commitment using an organisation's common cultural elements, *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*, 62(8-B), 3834, 2002.
4. B Shimizu, A study to determine what impact, if any, the implementation of a mandatory uniform dress policy has had on improving student behaviour, *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 61(6-A), 2135, 2000.
5. ME Roach-Higgins & JB Eicher, Dress and Identity, *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10(4), 1992, pp 1–18.
6. L Jooste, Die politieke koerswending van 1948 besorg a nuwe identiteit aan die Unie Verdedigingsmag, *Militaria* 26(2), 1996, pp 113–122.
7. AC Hurribunce, Creating a defence force with a high morale, *SA Soldier* January, 2003, pp 26–28.