

Show report

THE SOUNDS OF THUNDER

Every year in April the hills around the sleepy hamlet of Ficksburg in the Eastern Free State, South Africa, reverberate with the sounds of tanks and military vehicles being put through their paces. Andy Stead reports on this year's proceedings...



The occasion is the 'Stars of Sandstone' which takes place at the Sandstone Estates just north east of the town. The product of a Heritage Trust, and passionately run by owner Wilfred Mole, the military display is a major attraction and must stand out as the only one of its kind in Africa. The collection is a combined mix of vehicles located both on the estate, and those owned by the SA Armour Museum in nearby Bloemfontein. This arrangement works to mutual benefit and maintenance workshops on the estate are well equipped to handle any contingency.

The event runs for 10 days and attracts over 2000 visitors from all over the world. "The intention is to ensure that visitors

have access to all the working exhibits," says Mole. "This includes riding in all the trains operating during the event as well as

tractors, machinery and the military vehicles. Imagine being able to ride in or on the Trust's WW2 Sherman tank – a unique and highly significant war machine."

ECLECTIC MIX

The list of vehicles is impressive and covers not only South African military vehicles but also those captured during The South African Border War, commonly referred to



This Russian T72 still looks pretty menacing as it does its stuff in front of a crowd of enthusiasts.

as the Angolan Bush War in South Africa. This conflict took place from 1966 to 1989 largely in South-West Africa (now Namibia) and Angola between South Africa and its allied forces (mainly the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, UNITA) on the one side and the Angolan government, South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), and their allies (mainly Cuba) on the other. An example of one such vehicle is a restored Russian T72

main battle tank as well as a Russian Ural based Stalin's organ. These are complimented by a state-of-the-art Olifant Mk 1A Main Battle Tank which uses the hull of the British Centurian tank

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but with a Continental V12 diesel as opposed to the original Rolls-Royce petrol engine. Another such hybrid is the locally built Eland with a 60mm mortar which originated from

the French Panhard and is now driven by a 2.5-litre Chevrolet motor.

All in all there are over 35 vehicles all of which are active during the event. There is a daily military convoy which leaves the railway station and offers visitors the opportunity to drive in or on any of the vehicles. The choice of vehicles changes daily so there is always an opportunity to see and experience one's personal choice.

Right: A Sherman chucks up the dust near the sleepy hamlet of Ficksburg. Below: Olifant Mk1A made from a British Centurian but with a Continental V12 diesel instead of the usual Rolls-Royce petrol engine.



This Rooicat Mk1 wheeled artillery vehicle has an experimental turret fitted, marking it out from the standard issue SA Army trucks.

EXPERTS ON TAP

A commander or his deputy is available on each run and a member of the Armour Museum is there to answer questions and talk to enthusiasts. A typical convoy would consist of the 6x6 Ratel 90 which was indigenously developed by Sandock-Austral and produced in volume for the South African Army in subsequent decades, a Saracen Mk111 SA original from the UK but locally fitted with larger wheels, an Eland 60 and a vintage Canadian Ford gun tractor.

As well as the Eland 60, which formed the mainstay of South African armoured units, other exhibits included a Rooicat MK 1 wheeled artillery vehicle fitted with an experimental turret, and therefore not as per those Rooicats used in the SA Army.

Apart from the daily convoy there is also a mock tank battle where several of the heavy

vehicles run an obstacle course to 'attack' a cannon placed a kilometre away.

The highlight of the event is a Military Salute which takes place towards the end of the 10 days. The General Officer

commanding the South African Army Armour formation, Brigadier General Andre Retief, under which the SA Armour Museum falls, took the salute at a special parade of all the military vehicles taking place on the airfield.



The Buffel was developed in the 1970s under the auspices of ARMSCOR (Armaments Corporation of South Africa) to meet the operational requirements for a mine protected Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) for the South African Army. It uses a German Mercedes-Benz UNIMOG Model 416/162 series 4x4 chassis and featured a Merc engine. Around 2400 were built for the home and export markets and some are still being used by the South African Army.



Above: Inevitably the SA Army received lots of British kit, including this Saracen M3.



A Canadian Ford transporter acts as a viewing platform.

Right: The 6x6 Ratel 90mm was developed by SA defence contractors Sandock-Austral and produced in volume for the South African Army. The name is taken from the Afrikaans for Honey Badger which has a ferocious reputation for fighting. With its impressive firepower, the vehicle usually carries a crew of two or three with a seven-man infantry squad – the commander doubles up as a gun loader in the 90mm version.



A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY!
If you are interested in military vehicles and fancy a trip to Africa why not make a date in your diary for Sounds of Thunder 2015. You will not be disappointed! For more information visit www.sandstone-estates.com



Left and above: A Russian URAL based Stalin's organ represents a fair amount of firepower.



Above: The Eland 60mm mortar originated from the French Panhard but had a 2.5-litre Chevrolet engine and was assembled in South Africa during the Bush War. It formed the mainstay of South African armoured units.



Above: This Oshkosh eight-wheel M911 tank transporter is minus its trailer.
Below left: A Saracen Mk111 SA originally from the UK but modified with bigger wheels for farm use.



Above: Jan and son Francois with the Sherman they maintain and drive.