

Tim Gosling looks at a partnership between the South Africa Armour Museum and the Sandstone Heritage Trust which has put a unique collection of military vehicles on display

'The military vehicles held at Sandstone are all directly connected to South African military history'

Heritage Collection



Fitted with an enclosed troop compartment the MK IIA Moffel is a mine resistant ambush protected troop carrier, locally built on a Unimog chassis



The Mark IV Sherman tank is one of 15 which were delivered to South Africa and which were retired only in 1965

I am sure I am much the same as most readers when considering destinations for family holidays. The most important consideration for me is "are there any military vehicle museums nearby"? One country which I am yet to visit but which is definitely on my wish list is South Africa and yes, there is a military museum there which I would like to visit.

In 1995, Sandstone Estates bought a farm within the Eastern Free State which had been in the same family's ownership for 150 years. With the purchase of the farm came a wonderful collection of old machinery including Field Marshall and Lanz Bulldog tractors and other old but still serviceable equipment. Farming continued but so did the

historical connection with the property when the Sandstone Heritage Trust was born – a museum to save and display agricultural equipment rapidly disappearing from South Africa.

In addition, Sandstone started to acquire 2ft Narrow Gauge threatened locomotives and rolling stock which formed the backbone of the world renowned 2ft

railway that exist today.

Something similar happened with the South African National Defence Force, formerly the South African Defence Force (SADF), via the South Africa Armour Museum based at Tempe military base in Bloemfontein. The headquarters of the museum is based in a beautiful building once occupied by

Lord Roberts after the occupation of the town during the Boer War.

An ever-increasing collection

At a formal dinner for the retirement of the defence force regimental sergeant major, a high-ranking officer approached representatives of the Sandstone Heritage Trust. He said it had a surplus

of old military vehicles which the Armour Museum could not accommodate, and were looking for an organisation that could repair, maintain, restore, and display them on its behalf.

Would they be interested? The trust already had well-equipped workshops and heavy transport for moving railway locomotives, so this would be just

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
 One of two Eland armoured cars in the collection which were introduced to replace the Marmon Herrington. This one is armed with a 60mm breech-loading mortar while the other has a 90mm DEFA gun;
 The Fowler B5 crane engine dates from 1901 and was used by the British during the Boer war
 Used by the South African forces in Italy the Jeep has an important relationship with South Africa during World War 2
 The Mk1 Ferret is one of four examples on display at Sandstone and one of 203 received by South Africa
 A beautifully presented Saracen one of 280 delivered to South Africa and one of three in the collection



'The oldest military vehicle at Sandstone (and probably one of the oldest anywhere in the world) is a Fowler B5 crane engine dating from 1901'



another step in the important role of displaying South African heritage.

A formal agreement was entered into whereby vehicles would be transferred to Sandstone for display but remain on the books of the museum. The collection grew as other interesting military vehicles from other locations were either donated or purchased outright. It now has nearly 60 military vehicles on display which are partly owned by Sandstone Heritage Trust and partly by the Armour Museum.

The military vehicles held at Sandstone are all directly connected to South African military history. They are either vehicles manufactured in South Africa or those used by the South African

forces either during World War Two, or the Border Wars.

The exception to this is the several Russian manufactured military vehicles that were captured by the South African Forces in Angola during the war and taken for analysis, but which still have a definite South African connection.

The oldest military vehicle at Sandstone (and probably one of the oldest anywhere in the world) is a Fowler B5 crane engine dating from 1901. This machine was one of 57 traction engines (or steam sappers as they were affectionately known) that were purchased by the War Department for service in South Africa during the Boer War.

Each engine could tow a train of wagons carrying troops and supplies across the

countryside, assuming enough water for the boiler could be found, of course.

The crane engine would not only haul its own train of wagons but would unhitch them when necessary and operate as a wrecker to recover other engines or wagons if they had become mired in soft ground or a ditch.

Vehicles steeped in history

Three days after Great Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, South Africa followed suit and would ultimately send two infantry divisions to fight in North Africa, and an armoured division into Italy, all supported by the South African Air Force.

The South African 6th Armoured Division

used a variety of British and American vehicles during the Italian campaign. These are represented by a running MK IV Sherman tank (which was restored at Sandstone), a Stuart tank, an M5 Half-Track, Willys Jeep, Dodge WC54 ambulance, Diamond T Tank transporter, Ford CMP, a selection of artillery pieces including a 25pdr and 6pdr anti-tank gun and probably the best known South African-built military vehicle, the Marmon-Herrington Ford armoured car. With 5,746 examples in several marks, the Marmon-Herrington armoured car would be the most numerous and travelled South African-built military vehicle.

As war approached, South Africa, which lacked an automotive industry, looked

to develop an armoured car of its own. Using a Canadian Ford truck chassis, a drive train manufactured by the US company of Marmon-Herrington, armour plate manufactured by the South African Iron and Steel Industrial Corporation and with final assembly undertaken at the South African factory of Dorman Long, this machine fulfilled a vital need in supplying a much-needed armoured car. The design of the Marmon-Herrington would undergo a series of modifications and from 1942 the completely redesigned MK IV now equipped with a 2pdr gun would enter service.

There are two MK IV Marmon-Herrington's at Sandstone, one of which is a static exhibit but the other was

restored to operational condition by ex-national serviceman Andy Selfe. Missing the original engine, a Perkins diesel was fitted but apart from that change and with the assistance of an original manual the armoured car has been returned to the original configuration and stowage it would have had during the Western Desert campaign. The Marmon-Herrington is an incredibly durable design which is demonstrated by the final user of these armoured cars, the Greek Army disposing of their last ones in the mid-1990s, more than 50 years since they were first introduced. Following the end of World War Two, the Union Defence Force (becoming the SADF in 1957) reorganised itself in



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

The Samil 100 is an upgraded German built Magirus Deutz 6X6 ten ton truck, here being used as a gun tractor for a 25pdr gun

Currently on display at Bloemfontein is this Mk II Crusader, one of 25 which were delivered to South Africa

This well presented series 3 Land Rover has been fitted with a communications body

Equipped with a 90mm DEFA gun the South African designed and built Ratel has been in service for 40 years and is only now being replaced

Captured during the border wars is this Russian Ural 375D configured as a BM21 Grad rocket launcher

Designed to deal with conditions during the border war, the mine resistant Casspir would go on to be exported to 20 other countries around the world



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equipment and doctrine to enable it to fight alongside British forces in the Middle East and Africa if necessary.

With World War Two vehicles such as the Sherman, Universal carrier, Stuart, Crusader and Comet, which were supplied to South Africa following the war, now being phased out, South Africa became the destination of modern British military vehicles.

It would receive 203 Centurion tanks (of which 38 MK 1 and 26 MK 2 are still in service although enormously upgraded and known as Olifant), 280 Saracen armoured personnel carriers, 203 Ferret

armoured cars as well as large numbers of Land Rovers and Bedford trucks.

Due to the political situation, the British Government stopped supplying South Africa with military equipment and due to a lack of spare parts, most of these vehicles (which were not necessarily suitable to the conditions in South Africa anyway) were placed into storage.

Several different variants of these British-built vehicles (except for the Centurion) are on display at Sandstone including a very unusual prototype of the Saracen which has been fitted with

a dummy 77mm HV tank gun just above and behind the driver.

I have no idea how successful this would have been, but it does demonstrate a concept that would manifest itself in the South African-built Ratel armoured a few years later.

With vehicles no longer available from Great Britain, the SADF looked elsewhere, particularly to France and West Germany. With much international co-operation, the country's first armoured vehicle factory was established by SanDock Austral at Boksburg where locally manufactured

hulls were built and fitted with imported engines and drive trains.

With a change in military doctrine, South African vehicles had to be rugged and built to a simple design allowing maintenance to be undertaken away from workshops.

Unlike the NATO and Russian forces, wheels were preferred over tracks that were more suitable for the flat terrain and less prone to wear. What the SADF would go on to develop is a fascinating range of wheeled, armoured vehicles, many of which were mine-protected, a long time before such vehicles were being designed to confront

improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan.

Displayed at Sandstone is a large number of these locally manufactured vehicles many of which were deployed during the Angolan conflict, and which played an important part in the history of South Africa.

This joint venture between the government and the private sector has been an excellent way for two organisations with the same aims and objectives to work together preserving and displaying historically important military vehicles for posterity.

This has been demonstrated by the full restoration within the Sandstone workshops of the Mk IV Sherman tank and a rare mine-protected Hippo troop carrier which is based on a 1961 Bedford (and which was universally unpopular with the crew).

The collection is focused on military vehicles manufactured or used in South Africa, so although it has grown rapidly, the pace will slow as most appropriate vehicles are already in the collection. However, I am sure the collection would not turn down any other military machines if they had an appropriate connection. ◀