

Chapter 2: Background on the establishment of the 61 MVA

Ariel Hugo

61 Mech's veterans, unlike the proverbial old soldiers, did not simply fade away. In 2005 Jaco Kirsten wrote a few humorous feature articles in the travel magazine *Weg* in which he looked back on his days in the SADF in 1980 and 1981. Kirsten's stories were greatly enjoyed by readers who had also served in the armed forces.

One of them was Ariël Hugo who was now living at Caledon in the Western Cape. Kirsten's writings had re-awakened treasured memories of his time at 1 SAI in 1980 and 61 Mech in 1981, so he wrote him a letter of thanks.

Another reader of the same vintage was Gert Minnaar, who had enjoyed Jaco's writings as much as Ariël, so he set about tracking him down. In December 2006 the two former Bravo platoon commanders met up for the first time since they had parted company in January 1982, almost 25 years earlier. Needless to say, the conversation began with some intensive catching up on what they had been doing in the intervening quarter-century, but then inevitably segued into their army days, basic training at 1 SAI, their advanced training at Oudtshoorn and De Brug, induction into 61 Mech's ranks with the notorious "Omuthiya Special".

Then, when they had covered all this ground, they began to wonder what had happened to all their old comrades, both the national servicemen and the Permanent Force members they had met up with and sometimes served under during their years of active service in the SADF. Right there the idea of a 61 Mech veterans' association was born and sealed on the spot with a photograph taken by a passing waitress they had roped in for the purpose.

Long-inactive soldiers might become somewhat rusty about procedures and techniques after 25 years, but never about the basic premise which had been hammered into them during their training and then cemented solidly into place at 61 Mech – namely that one must move from one secure base to another. Logically this would apply as clearly to establishing the association as a spiritual home for the veterans as 61 Mech had done with the young soldiers' before and during its various ventures to the sharp end.

And it was so. The idea developed, as Ariël says, into "a mighty tsunami" as one old comrade after another was run to ground. The association grew exponentially as each rediscovered veteran looked for others within his particular network of friends and acquaintances, and the newly discovered ones did likewise.

The combined search spread its tentacles to all conceivable places. Chris Walls (anti-tank fire group controller in Bravo Company in 1981, another of 61 Mech's expert bush navigators), was found in Bahrein, of all places. Etienne Gertzen (Bravo

Company's mortar platoon commander in 1981, and Alpha Company's in 1982) was in Pretoria, while Etienne Gilbert (Alpha Company platoon commander in 1981) was nearer home in Cape Town, and was in contact with Ferdi de Vos (platoon commander in Alpha Company in 1981 and adjutant in 1983) and Hubrecht van Dalsen (also a platoon commander in Alpha Company in 1981 and later the company's second in command during 1982); Ferdi was in Somerset West, within easy reach of Ariël and Gert, but Hubrecht was considerably further afield – in the Australian city of Brisbane, to be precise.

Ariël started collecting old comrades' names by way of Google, and eventually made contact with Roland de Vries via Roland Junior, who had resigned from the Permanent Force and was living in Knysna in the Western Cape. Ariël dialled Roland Senior in Pretoria. Ariël explained his and Gert's idea. De Vries immediately offered his support and provided Ariël with contact details for a number of other 61 Mech men. The first new contact Ariël made was Jan Malan, the Cuvelai ambush exponent. After that it was WO1 H G "Killer" Smit, now retired to Stilbaai in the Western Cape, then the indefatigable WO1 Henri "Duppie" du Plessis, the LWT maestro between 1980 and 1982, in the Karoo town of Worcester.

Others followed, and the result was that during the weekend of 10 and 11 August 2007 there was a gathering at Caledon of Gert van Zyl, Ariël, Hubrecht van Dalsen, Henri du Plessis, Servaas Lotter, Ferdi de Vos, Kowie Steyn, H G Smit, Chris Walls, Gert Minnaar, Roland de Vries, Ep van Lill and Jan Malan. Some of them had come an extremely long way to be there – Hubrecht all the way from Brisbane and Chris Walls from Bahrain.

From this point on the as yet informal veterans' association began to pick up momentum, fuelled by its founding fathers' energetic efforts. The result was that when the founders group and later joiners met in Pretoria on 30 August 2008 it was possible to formally establish the 61 veterans' association, which was later turned into a Section 21 not-for-profit company.

General Dippenaar was appointed as the association's first substantive patron – an entirely fitting appointment for the man who was 61 Mech's first commanding officer and played such a major role in shaping and leading it at a time when the entire concept was still untried and frankly doubted in some SADF circles.