

*The integration of people with physical disabilities into the South African National
Defence Force: A photographic documentary project*

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Abstract

The nature of war and the preparation for armed conflict is such that those that participate are often injured or killed. Injuries are sometimes of such a nature that, although grave, it does not exclude disabled military personnel from employment. The South African Department of Defence Disability Committee requires that all Department of Defence departments and all four tiers of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) submit proposals for the advancement of the interests of persons with disabilities.

This project responded to this requirement and established a collection of photographs to create an awareness of disability within the SANDF. In accordance with the slogan "Nothing about us, without us" this project also interviewed disabled soldiers and provides insight into the thoughts and opinions of soldiers in these positions.

This paper further argues that visual awareness of disabled colleagues will cultivate a healthier working environment in the military community. By viewing photographs, intentionally or coincidentally, people will grow familiar with disability. This familiarity will assist with the organisational and societal perceptions and attitudes toward colleagues with disabilities.

This project challenge perception of disability in the SANDF by portraying people with disabilities in productive, integrated roles. It explores a subjective point of view, where the organisation that, theoretically, causes disability, is shown in a positive light. It also portrays the efforts of the SANDF to rehabilitate and reasonable accommodate people with disabilities.,

Background to the project

As early as 1918 the highest office in governments realised that the state had a responsibility toward the disabled soldier (Lakeman 1918: 115). Even before this, in the late 19th century, the medical fraternity began to see disability not just as a medical pathology but also as a matter that required state intervention (Linker 2011: 318). In South Africa, on 8 June 1922, an army medical officer appealed to parliament to provide artificial limbs to soldiers involved in the Great War (First World War 1914 – 1918). Colonel E. N. Thornton, Director Medical Services, Defence, wrote a letter to his superiors in which he asked the Minister of Defence to make parliament aware of the toll that the war had taken on these soldiers (Union of South Africa Defence 1922).

In a profession such as the military where physical prowess is valued and constantly measured, disability seems over exposed. This over exposure is apparent in the obvious contrast between disabled and able-bodied soldiers. The original expectation of the soldier and the consequent adjustment to a disability, presents the soldier and his or her commanding officer with emotional and attitudinal challenges. Despite legal rights and an ever-improving social conscience, many socio-cultural and other challenges still exist. People with disabilities live in complex broader societies with expectations and biases. Societies have basic, established rules of social interaction. As a protective mechanism, society treats those that they considered outside of the norm, differently. Persons with disabilities represent different or deviant forms of this norm and are a challenge to these rules (Yamamoto 1979: 7). People perceive, judge and treat every form of difference, or “deviance” differently.

Even modern advanced societies have a questionable record when it comes to the treatment of the disabled. Society is slow to equip itself and adjust to the new interactions. All these insecurities and uncertainties manifest when “normal” meet “deviant”. We expect employers in modern advanced societies to ignore instinctive uncertainties and personal biases and treat the application fairly when they apply for employment. Such expectations are not unreasonable. Not only do persons with disabilities have to cope with particular physical restrictions, but they also have to consider and adjust to the prejudice and social expectations of others (Craig 1996: 480). There seems to be an emphasis on understanding the emotional state of the disabled person and the social integration into society (Cassuto 2010: 218).

The Constitution of South Africa governs and protects the rights of all people, including disabled people. Under the Constitution, various laws, such as the Employment Equity Act, deal with employment of people with disabilities (South Africa 2002). Legislation requires that 2% of the South African National Defence Force’s (SANDF) strength comprises of disabled personnel (Snyman 2013). This 2% does not just apply to the Defence Force as a whole, but to every staff division, department and unit. This can apply to personnel who obtained injuries on duty and personnel that apply for positions in the SANDF as civilians. Currently disabled military personnel make up approximately 0.5% of the South African National Defence Force (Williams 2013). It is clear that there is disparity between the intention of the state and the reality. The Department of Defence Disability Committee (DOD) furthermore requires that all Force Structure Elements (Army, Navy, Air Force and Medical services) of the SANDF submit proposals for the advancement of the interests of persons with disabilities (Department of Defence Disability Committee

2013). This need and the call for proposals motivated a documentary photographic project of disability in the SANDF.

The aim of this project

This aim of this photographic project is two-fold: to contribute to the awareness of the existence, rehabilitation and deployment of soldiers with disabilities; and to portray a positive view of disability and of integration in the SANDF. The project documented, in writing and with photographs, the challenges and achievements of military personnel with disabilities. We argue that exposure to photographs of disabled soldiers will encourage interaction and a more compassionate military community and working environment. We also expect that these images, in a subtle manner, may improve the organisational behaviour and attitude of the military toward their colleagues with disabilities.

The process

Since this project took place within the milieu of the SANDF, a significant part of the methodology concerned the navigation of military authority and military culture. In order to obtain permission to take photographs in military units, formal letters served as official requests. We also requested and received additional authority from a Military Hospital Research and Ethics Committee. We restricted the project to physically disabled personnel in and around the Pretoria area where there are several military bases. Only fourteen of twenty-five potential participants eventually agreed to take part in this project. One participant agreed to an interview but requested not to be photographed.

The interviews and photography took place during rehabilitation sessions, social and sporting activities and in the working environment of the participants. The purpose of the interview and the questionnaire was to glean information regarding disability and the working environment. With a project such as this, ethical considerations concerning the dignity and privacy of the participants enjoyed priority. There was an introductory meeting, and sometimes a second meeting, where a date for the photographic session was set. Because the prospect of being photographed can be intimidating, the introduction was often awkward. Potential participants were sceptical of the project at first, but warmed to the idea after an explanation of the aim of the project. References from the SANDF's Disability Committee (DOD) and a military disability support group, the Curamus Association, facilitated the initial contact with the potential participants. The most valuable references however, were from other disabled people in the military.

The introductory meetings required the observation of all the necessary military protocol. In addition, security protocol in military facilities required extensive entry and exit procedures, and an armed escort in certain cases. The interview played an important role in forming a rapport with the potential participant. It established a certain level of friendship between the photographer and the participant. This was important as it set the subject at ease, encouraged cooperation, and contributed towards a relaxed and professional photographic session during subsequent meetings.

Ironically, in this study, this familiarity needed for the photography, also posed a military conundrum. Familiarity between officers and sub-ordinate ranks is discouraged in the military. This is to ensure a greater degree of professionalism in

times of war, when officers have to send soldiers into battle. To overcome this issue, the first author, who is a commissioned officer, wore civilian clothes as often as possible, kept conversations informal, encouraged the use of first names, and emphasised that participation was voluntary. Requesting sub-ordinate ranks to participate in this study, whilst dressed in a uniform, could have been interpreted as a formal instruction, and was avoided at all costs. This matter was not important where the first author was sub-ordinate in rank to a potential participant.

The style of photography intended for this project is classified as “candid”. With this in mind, the photographic equipment was discreet and did not interfere (by way of noise or bulk) with the photographic process. Ambient light was preferred and artificial illumination was restricted to the minimum. Consultation with the participant determined if flash was appropriate for low light environments. Image manipulation was limited to improving sharpness when required, adjusting brightness and contrast, and cropping in order to change or enhance emphasis.

The focus was to keep the images authentic and ethical and not to produce “aestheticized” images (Strauss 2003: 8). The first author visited the participant a number of times before the introduction of the camera. We followed this process of *introjections* in order to understand and interpret the person. The value of this *introjections* approach came to the fore when photographs from the third visit were judged to be better than the ones from the first or second visit. We deliberately avoided the technique of *confluence* and maintained a level of distance and professionalism. This technique creates a close, and even an intimate relationship between the photographer and subject (Zakia 2007: 234).

A reflection on some of the images for the project

Seven images of the project are discussed below. The discussion of each image is placed underneath the photograph.



Figure 1. Captain Stoltz in an intensive care unit.

Captain Stoltz (figure 1) is an intensive care unit sister at a Military Hospital in Pretoria. She sustained injuries in a motor vehicle accident 8 years ago, which left her paralysed from the waist down. She reported for duty at her former unit and has been working there ever since after hospitalisation, surgery and rehabilitation. Apart from her clinical duties, she also provides training for student nurses. One of the aspects of the conversations with her that stands out is that there is a constant need for “perception intervention” (Stoltz 2013). She agrees that a need for awareness exists but believes that frequency of campaigns will help to change perceptions. Successful integration and the theme of the project, does not mean that every photograph must contain a smiling, happy disabled person. “Successful integration” simply refers to people who are valuable to the SANDF despite being disabled. They will appear to have a degree of work satisfaction similar to that of their able-bodied counterparts. The photographs of Captain Stoltz for instance, could arguably be construed as gloomy or sad. She, nevertheless, fully integrates as part of a team in an intensive care unit at a military hospital, despite being a paraplegic. It is unfortunate that some of her patients will succumb to their illnesses or injuries.



Figure 2. Captain Stoltz in her workplace, interacting with other nurses.

A viewer is confronted with a different image in figure 2. Here Captain Stoltz appears to be joyful as she interacts with one of her student nurses. People with disabilities still experience the full gamut of emotions in the workplace. Captain Stoltz is the quintessential candidate for this project. She is a soldier, she became disabled and she integrated fully after rehabilitation. Her story is unique in another way; she fills the same position as she did before her accident. The photograph below testifies to her successful integration.



Figure 3. Mrs Smith, a switchboard operator

The photographs in figure 3 illustrate the power of photography to portray a negative or a positive message. Mrs Smith was born blind. The choice of picture used for publication, can either reinforce or counter negative societal perceptions. The pictures of the blind switchboard operator are both accurate in their portrayal of the subject but the one on the right will not portray a positive message. The interaction between photographer and subject, the direction by the photographer, the mood of the subject, and even the climate can play an essential role in capturing an image to support the goal of being positive and integrated. The photographer had to coax the subject into revealing that required expression. Sometimes it was necessary to ask a serious question with the camera at eye-level, waiting for the response; sometimes it was necessary to be light hearted.



Figure 4. Captain Steenkamp consulting with Corporal Bruintjies.

The successful integration of soldiers with disabilities into the SANDF depends on a variety of support structures. Medical rehabilitation is the first step; sporting activities is another. Figure 4 shows a health care practitioner in consultation with a patient. Captain Steenkamp is a Medical Orthotist Prosthetist, here in consultation with Corporal Bruintjies during the fitting of his prosthesis. Captain Steenkamp explained that willingness and attitude towards rehabilitation is essential to the recovery and integration of injured soldiers (Steenkamp 2013).



Figure 5. Nolwazi Madlala, Clinical Psychologist

Sport and physical activities play an important role in any military. In fact, because of the importance of fitness and health, the SANDF considers sport as official duty. Soldiers may obtain permission to practice sport during working hours. Physical activities are also a valuable part of rehabilitation after injury. Nolwazi Madlala, who is a civilian clinical psychologist in the SANDF and a paraplegic, emphasised the importance of the socialisation aspects of rehabilitation in sport.



Figure 6. Lt Col Williams at a shooting range

Figure 6 shows Lieutenant Colonel Williams taking part in a clay pigeon shooting exercise. Also, note that the shooting club has made reasonable accommodation for his disability by allowing him to use a chair. Lt Col Williams is a senior officer in the human resources department. Although his disability (left leg amputee) prevents him from taking part in many physical activities, there are many other sporting opportunities still available to him. Because there is such an emphasis on physical training in military culture, Lt Col Williams is another example of the successful integration of a soldier with a disability. Medical classifications, such as Lt Col Williams has, exempt him from any required physical activities. His participation in sporting activities is voluntary.



Figure 7. Warrant Officer Minnie

Only once the injuries have healed and the rehabilitation has been successful, can integration of the soldier into the workplace begin. Figure 7 shows Warrant Officer Minnie in his place of work, where he is an aircraft safety inspector. His amputation does not hinder him at all in the execution of his duties. In the execution of his specialised duties, he did not seem “disabled” at all.

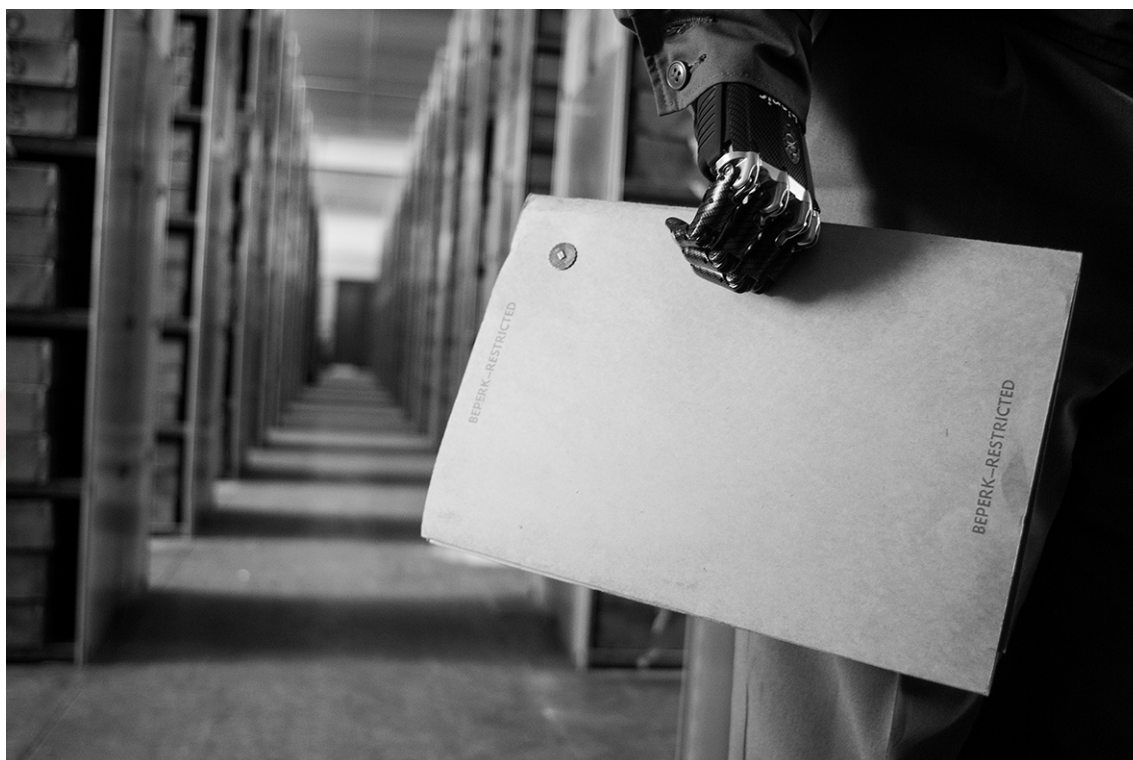


Figure 8. WO Chambers

Composition, focus and exposure are the factors that convey the photographer's intention. By controlling these factors, the photographer manipulates, on behalf of the viewer, the intended message. The photographs in this project followed a similar pattern regarding content, positioning of the subjects and light. The subject was usually placed to one side, either left or right, loosely following the rule of thirds (the composition is divided into 3 horizontally and vertically. The focal point is placed on one of the intersecting lines). By making economical use of space in the frame, the rest of the composition is available for supporting information. In figure 8, Warrant Officer Chambers holds a document in his bionic hand. The focus is on the hand, as this is the central message of the project. The composition deliberately includes the document to have a reference for the function of this person. To the left is visual content that completes the picture. This area gives the viewer additional information. It is out of focus so as not to interfere with the area of main emphasis. As the first author moved closer to the subject, exploring different angles, it was inevitable that, eventually, the camera would arrive close to the subject, capturing this detail. This composition was regarded as more successful because of its simplicity. The photograph comprises of four elements that tell the story and support the title of this project. It is not certain which element the viewer will notice first, the file or the bionic hand. Beyond those two main features, the text on the file and the rows of shelves in the background, are the other elements that complete this photograph.

The wondrous and realistic modes of representing people with disabilities support the ethos required called for such projects (Wehbi 2012). The photographs of this study place subjects in a realistic working environment in the SANDF. The images testify that disabled SANDF personnel are integrated in a team and in some cases, they perform similar functions as able-bodied people.

Discussion of the project

This project could have the inadvertent outcome of making a conscientious comment on war and politics. There is a place in documentary photography for objection and criticism, but this was not the intention here. The project intends to improve interpersonal relationships between able and disabled military personnel. It aspires to do this by creating awareness of military personnel with disabilities amongst peers and superior officers. The interviews and images captured seem to suggest that some disabled soldiers do successfully rehabilitate and integrate back into the SANDF. There are also examples that are not so successful. The painful reality is that members that do not integrate successfully are probably not to be found in the military system anymore. The relatively small number of disabled participants that willingly participated in this project could be an indication that integration and acceptance requires active intervention and not mere passive intentions and resolutions from meetings. A body of photographic images now exists with which the SANDF may raise awareness and educate the military community about the capabilities and potential of disabled colleagues. Disabled soldiers can play a valuable role in the building of morale in the SANDF by showing potential despite their adversity.

One of the participants, Mr Daan De La Rey was deployed to South West Africa (now Namibia) during the South African Bush War in the early eighties. He was then a uniformed member of the SANDF. He lost both his arms when he attempted to disarm an anti-personnel mine. Mr. De La Rey went through extensive surgery and rehabilitation. For his service, he received two medals. The first is the Southern Cross Decoration awarded for “Outstanding service of the highest order, and utmost devotion to duty (Officers)”. He was the lowest ranking officer ever to receive this medal (Captain). The second is the Castle of Good Hope Decoration “Most conspicuous bravery”. Remarkably, Lt Col De La Rey returned to his duties after his rehabilitation. In the early nineties Mr De La Rey demilitarised (when he carried the rank of Lieutenant Colonel) and became a civilian in the Defence Force. He now heads the department responsible for the training of civilian personnel in the DOD. When prompted to explain how it was possible to perform his duties without arms, he replied that the mind was a soldier’s greatest weapon. Mr De La Rey is however sceptical of this project. He reluctantly agreed to an interview. His scepticism can be summarised by a sentence that he uttered within minutes of commencement of the interview: “Disability is not a qualification” (De La Rey 2013). He explained that people with disabilities do not qualify for special treatment in the workplace just because they are disabled. People with disabilities require reasonable accommodation, just like everyone else. At the time of writing, Mr De La Rey has not yet agreed to be photographed.

Considering the medical classification guidelines of the SANDF, the writers accept that people with disabilities can no longer perform combat duties. The contribution to the combat readiness effort of the SANDF, however, goes beyond this standard. People with disabilities can play an essential role in the support environment (medical, logistical, financial etc.) of the SANDF. Consequently, the SANDF retains valuable skills and experience and the disabled person is employed and contributes to society.

The military, by its very nature, is destructive; photography is creative. It is the hope that, to some extent, the latter can restore the former.

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