

What do we prepare for ?

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I have often reflected on how ill prepared the Air Force that I joined in 1964, was for the tasks that lay ahead in the following twenty five years.

There were times that I resented those that were running the Air Force at the time for not anticipating and preparing for what we had to face.

Looking back now, with the benefit of a little more wisdom that age brings, it is clear that it was not because they were stupid or lazy or unimaginative.



Those gentlemen actually did a lot!

- The Static Northern Radar Air Defence network that we came to know so well (Devon, Mariepskop, Ellisras, Mafeking and provision for Louwsburg in Northern Natal), was created (on recommendations by a consulting team from the RAF during the late 1950s).
- The Mobile Radar unit was established.
- The Cactus missile system was acquired.



The Air Force also embarked on an impressive aircraft modernization program:

- Mirage III CZ & BZ fighters (with rocket boosters).
- Canberra bombers.
- Alouette II & III helicopters.
- Super Frelon helicopters.
- C 130 transport a/c.



This was followed by:

- Mirage III EZ, DZ & RZ.
- Buccaneer bombers.
- Naval Wasp helicopters.
- Puma helicopters.
- C 160 transport aircraft.
- Impala Mk 1 and later the Mk II.
- Mirage III D2Z & R2Zs.
- Mirage F1 CZ & AZ.



The reason for our ill preparedness was that ***the external environment changed radically and drastically*** in 1960 when the Uhuru “winds of change swept over Africa” - to quote Harold MacMillan, the British PM at the time.

The envisaged war of nuclear bomb carrying super sonic high altitude enemy bomber attacks that we prepared for, trained for and spent millions on, never happened!

Instead we found ourselves engaged in an insurgency or to use the current buzz word “Asymmetric” war that required different very different skills, equipment, training, tactics and thinking.



This as we know, caused South Africa to become isolated and embargoed and forced us to start overspending on defence – both in terms of the size and shape of the Armed Forces and the comprehensive Defence Industry that was created. This as we were to learn later, was not sustainable.

Many will remember the stress, effort, tears and blood it took to adapt and adjust to the challenges we faced. We can rightly be proud of what was achieved to turn the Air Force into a very good fighting unit at the close of this period.

We now find ourselves at a point where another twenty years have passed and ***the external environment again changed radically and drastically*** starting with the end of the cold war in the late 1980s.



The world has become a much more unpredictable and dangerous place.

- Regional conflicts in many parts of the world have markedly increased. Efforts to intervene and stabilize the situation are complicated and difficult as warring parties often revert to “asymmetric” tactics when adversaries are confronted with modern equipment and technology which they cannot meet on equal terms.
- Fanatical and desperate people exploited by ruthless leaders, are willing to sacrifice themselves and kill randomly – the era of the “suicide bomber” with all its terrifying consequences, has arrived. (USA – 9/11, India, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Israel, Afghanistan, etc)
- “What madness is it that makes us believe that humanity can just barrel along, out of control, ever increasing in numbers? And what greater madness is it that deludes us into thinking that out of this chaos we can deliver a better life based on notions of ‘sustainable growth and sustainable utilisation’, two buzz phrases of our time? *Nothing is sustainable as long as humankind is growing exponentially.* (There are now 60% more people on earth than when I was a child)



- We have a terrible addiction to growth in all spheres – it is wired into our systems, particularly in rich cultures. But, whether rich or poor, people have for decades outstripped the resources available to them, leaving a planet dipping dangerously into its already compromised natural resources. (A first world person on average, consumes about 30 times more resources than a third world person in a lifetime)
- The late Isaac Asimov, biochemist, writer and thinker, once wrote: 'Democracy cannot survive overpopulation. Human dignity cannot survive it. Convenience and decency cannot survive it. As you put more people into the world, the value of life not only declines, it disappears. It doesn't matter if someone dies. The more people there are, the less one individual matters.' “

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- This over population and poverty are causing unprecedented demographic movements as destitute and often desperate people try to improve their livelihood by moving to more prosperous regions.



- This has had the result that virtually no country in the world can claim to have homogeneous populations anymore. People with very different cultures, religions, value systems and education have to co-exist and share schools, universities, the workplace, transport systems, health services, towns, cities, etc.
- New immigrants (legal and illegal) often retain strong cultural, political and factional links with their countries of origin.
- The friction caused by all this could and often does erupt into violence and acts of terrorism, especially when ruthless and militant leaders with hidden agendas manipulate the involved people's hardship and stir them up to commit unthinking emotion driven horrors. (Remember what happened in the UK and Spain recently?).
- History has also shown that revolutions usually occur when militant leaders use the misery and desperation of the poor to achieve their ambitious goals to come to power. The widening gap world wide between rich and poor, has uncomfortable undertones in this regard – the warning lights are flashing.
- Selfish, piggish and immoral capitalism also dumped the global economy into chaos. The resulting world wide recession (depression?) which according to some analysts could last up to a decade, does not help matters either.



- Increased competition for markets and work (where foreign workers are prepared to work for much less), further increases friction and tension, causes instability and escalates the risk of conflict. (Xenophobic attacks occur with all too regular frequency in many countries)
- Added to this is the looming threat of rising trade barriers and protectionism. This might have short term benefits but fosters long term suspicion, mistrust and resentment between countries and regions. (This was probably the main reason why Japan embarked on an aggressive rearmament program in the late 1920s and early 1930s).
- As already said, the earth's resources are being consumed at disastrous and unsustainable rates – more people are competing for diminishing resources. *Competition for resources has probably resulted in more wars than any other cause in history.*
- Global warming is causing climate changes that are putting even more strain on the available resources.



The result of all this is that the conflict potential of the 21st century has become quite frightening.

It would therefore be very naïve to assume that South Africa will be able to limit our future military involvements to the current Peace Operations in Africa. (Which is already significant - I understand, we already have more than 3000 SANDF personnel deployed in various unstable regions of the continent).

The question that therefore needs answering is:

What do we prepare for ?



History is rife with examples how often we get it wrong anticipating and preparing for the conflicts of tomorrow. To put it in another way, wars seldom happen the way we thought they would! (The Maginot line after WW I, the demise of the Battleship in WW II and the fiasco the USA's second war in IRAQ proves the point).

The tragedy of such mistakes is that futile millions and effort are spent on equipment and training that turns out to be inadequate, unsuitable and even useless. This in turn usually also results in the much more painful unnecessary loss of young lives.....

Our theme for the year “***What will the expected nature of the threat be beyond 2020 and what should we as the EW community do to meet the challenge***” is therefore very appropriate.

Getting the answers right will however be even more appropriate but much more difficult to achieve!



I believe a lot of time and effort should therefore be spent to try and find the answers.

Serious and open minded discussion and debate between all parties i.e. military, industry and research institutes, will also be vital. The importance of this cannot be overstressed.

From my position as the President of The Aardvark Roost, I appeal to all of you to make this a priority and spend quality time on it.

I am absolutely convinced that the right solutions will not be found by just plodding along or by following a reactive pragmatic approach or to think that some novel technology will somehow bail us out.



Technology will for sure play a huge role but is quite useless unless it is guided and harnessed by inspired thinking and insight to solve the operational problems of tomorrow.

It is of course unrealistic to expect that solutions for every future threat situation will be in place when needed. We just don't know what we don't know!

We should however strive to at least have the right technologies and capabilities in place so that we can respond rapidly to come up with solutions when the unexpected happens.

The challenge will therefore be to identify in which technologies and capabilities we should invest in.



“We learn from history that we don’t always learn from history”

Hegel - German Philosopher

We should at least try to avoid this becoming true yet again - what we get wrong today will haunt us tomorrow.....

”History is the prelude to the future”

Inscription in front of museum in Washington



Thank you

