

A First-Class Change-of-Command Parade at Fort Ikapa

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On Saturday, 10 November 2012, Colonel Bernie Ashlin formally handed over command of Fort Ikapa Military Base to Lieutenant Colonel Stephan Pierce. The change of command parade took place in perfect Cape Town summer weather, with the heat shimmering off the parade ground outside the Base Headquarters, and a very light breeze fluttering through the South African flags that lined the approach road.

Fort Ikapa is the first fully functional SA Army Reserve Force Base in the SANDF, and the first such base that is managed and operated by Reserves, supported by a very small Regular contingent. It provides training and log facilities for up to 300 troops at a time. It also houses a Distance Learning Centre for the SA Army Infantry Formation,

which was completed in December 2007, and the first system indoor shooting range.

Covering an area of 54 hectares, and surrounded by a 2.7km long electrified perimeter fence, the property belongs to the Graaff Trust. During World War II, however, it was ceded to the SA Army for life, or until the Army closes the base. In addition, it is a national fynbos heritage site, with several designated areas being home to very rare plants that are protected species.

The early beginnings of this base go back to 1999, when the Department of Defence was selling off certain SANDF properties, one of which was the area of the old 6 Base Ordinance Depot for the Wingfield Aerodrome, which was utilised by the English Royal Navy in 1941, during World War II, and thereafter became the home of 71 Motorised Brigade.

In February 2000, the Reserve Force Regimental Officers Commanding in the Western Cape, led by Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Gerstner, held a meeting with the then General Officer Commanding SA Army Infantry Formation, Major General Derek Mgwebe. At that time, the Reserve Force regiments were scattered all over the Cape Peninsula. It was decided that they all be moved to Acacia Park, which was to be the new home of the Reserves in the Western Province. The GOC instructed Colonel Alan Nelson to plan and implement the project, which became known as Project Fort Ikapa: its aim was to provide headquarter facilities, as well as shared accommodation and messing facilities, for all the Reserve Force regiments of the Western Province.



An impressive amount of work has been done at Fort Ikapa since 2000. Once the perimeter fence was repaired and secured, the hangars – originally used as stores – were converted into regimental HQs. Roads, electricity, sewage and water reticulation systems were installed. Overgrown vegetation and shrubs were cleared – an ongoing project. Accommodation and messing facilities for troops and Non-Commissioned Officers were constructed, and suitable accommodation for Officers and Warrant Officers is now available too. A new parade ground and obstacle course have also been constructed, as has a new hospitality facility.

Since its early beginnings, an increasing number of Reserve Force regiments have made this base their home. There are currently 12 regiments represented: Cape Field Artillery, Cape Garrison Artillery, Cape Town Rifles (Dukes), Cape Town Highlanders, Regiment Westelike Provincie, 3 Parachute Battalion C-Coy, Regiment Oranjerivier, 3 Field Engineers, 71 Signal Unit, 4 Maintenance Unit, 30 Field Workshop and 3 Medical Battalion.

Lieutenant Colonel J.C.A. Gerstner was Base Commander during its early years, from 2000 to 2003, with Colonel B.M. Ashlin taking over as Base Commander in 2004, a post that he held until October 2012, when Lieutenant Colonel S.E. Pierce was appointed.

Colonel Bernie Ashlin, born on 16 February 1948 in Cape Town, attended the Salesian Institute of Cape Town and obtained a BSc in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Cape Town in 1973. He worked at Metal Box in Epping from 1974 until 1992; between 1992 and 2006, he was Managing Director of Cape Manufacturing Engineers (Pty) Ltd, one of the Western Cape's largest and most established and most diversified manufacturing and engineering companies.

Colonel Ashlin completed his national service in the State President's Guard (1967-1968), before being posted to the Cape Town Highlanders in July 1969. He advanced through the ranks from

Guests attending the change of command parade at Fort Ikapa on 10 November 2012.



Colonel Ashlin and Lieutenant Colonel Pierce inspecting the parade with Major Boshoff of the Dukes.



Colonel Ashlin thanks Lieutenant Colonel Herman Morkel for delivering his speech so spectacularly by parachute.



Corporal to Battalion Commander, which position he held from July 1989 until his retirement in April 2000.

During his military career, he was deployed to the border between SWA/Namibia and Angola for Operation Savannah in 1976 and Operation Prone in 1988. He attended numerous brigade and divisional exercises at the then Lohatla Army Battle School and at De Brug Training Area between 1975 and 1995. He was part of Operation Thunder Chariot at Lohatla in 1984, and was deployed internally throughout the country from 1980 to 1994. In 2003, he came out of retirement to accept an appointment as Fort Ikapa Base E.T.D. (Education, Training and Development), before becoming Base Commander in March 2004.

Colonel Ashlin has received several medals and decorations, namely, the John Chard Medal and Decoration (12 years and 20 years), the John Chard Bar (30 years), the Unitas Medal, the General Service Medal, the Pro Patria Medal, the Cunene Clasp, a Chief Army Commendation Certificate and the Military Merit Medal.

On 10 November 2012, Colonel Ashlin officially handed over command of the base to Lieutenant Colonel S.E. Pierce, during a first-class parade that evidenced excellent collaboration between the various Reserve Force regiments. Military officers praised the professionalism and discipline of the participants, and remarked on the very high standards set by this parade.

Lieutenant Colonel Stephan Edward Pierce, born on 29 May 1962 in Bellville, Cape Town, matriculated from the J.G. Meiring Secondary School in Goodwood in 1979. Thereafter, he completed two years of national service at 5 South African Infantry Battalion, during which he qualified as a platoon commander and spent time on the SWA border. He was transferred to the Western Province Command Training Wing as a course leader, until he reported at Regiment Boland, the then sister unit of Regiment Westelike Provincie (RWP), in July 1982. He obtained a National Higher Diploma in Construction Technology at the then Cape Technikon in 1987, and received a prize as the best student in the final year of study.

During his service in Regiment Boland, he advanced through the ranks, until the unit was taken up by RWP. In 2000, he was appointed the Battalion second in command of RWP. After he had completed his Battalion Commanders Battle Handling Course at Infantry School in 2005, he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and appointed as Officer Commanding of RWP. He is credited with building RWP into one of the best transformed infantry units in the SANDF Reserves.

Lieutenant Colonel Pierce has received several medals, namely, the Pro Patria Medal, the Unitas Medal, the General Service Medal, the John Chard Medal, the 20 Years and 30 Years Good Service Medals, and the Tshumelo Ikatelaho (General Service Medal for participation in internal/external military operations).

The troops welcome their new Officer Commanding of Fort Ikapa, Lieutenant Colonel Stephan Pierce.



Lieutenant Colonel Stephan Pierce, the new Officer Commanding of Fort Ikapa, is congratulated by Lieutenant Colonel Johan Conradie (SO1 of the Defence Reserves Provincial Office Western Cape), as Colonel Bernie Ashlin looks on.



The parade was attended by Commanding Officers, Regimental Sergeants Major, Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, and soldiers of various military regiments, as well as veterans and friends. Special guests included Brigadier General M.J. de Goede (Director Area Defence at SA Army Infantry Formation), Colonel Siseko Nombewu (Officer Commanding of the School of Infantry in Oudtshoorn), Colonel Alan Nelson (Director of Project Fort Ikapa) and Captain (SAN) Trunell Morrom (SSO Defence Reserves Western Cape).

Captain John Manning of the Cape Town Rifles (Dukes), in his role as announcer, welcomed the assembled guests, who took their seats by 09h45. The SA Army Band Cape Town under Drum Major WO2 André van Schalkwyk, wearing their chilli-red tunics, and the Cape Town Highlanders Drums and Pipes in their dark-green Gordon tartan kilts, provided a fitting musical backdrop to the parade. Colonel Ashlin and Lieutenant Colonel Pierce were escorted to the podium by Captain John Dorrington of the Dukes and Captain Will Carter of the Cape Town Highlanders. Chaplain Koegelenberg led the scripture reading.

A special surprise was the dramatic arrival – by parachute! – of Lieutenant Colonel Herman Morkel 101 Air Supply Unit, who leapt out of a high-flying Oryx helicopter. All eyes were focused on him, as he circled lower and lower, obeying the signals of the red, orange and green smoke grenades, until he landed safely on a small grassy area adjacent to the parade ground. His flawless and skilful landing was acknowledged with much appreciative applause.

Everyone had come to pay their respects to Colonel Ashlin, whose resourcefulness and dedication to the long-term vision for Fort Ikapa had cemented the foundations of what has developed into a well-established military base. The fact that it is to be used as a model for other Reserve Force bases throughout the country is testimony to the high esteem in which it is held.

Colonel Ashlin explained that he had come out of retirement because he valued the strong sense of camaraderie he experienced in the military, and because he wanted to devote his energies to an important project: “By serving your country, the greatest gift you will receive is not money, but friendship of a special kind.”

He emphasised his view that the regiment is like family, and that a strong regiment is essential to ensure a strong Reserve Force. Unlike their counterparts in the Regular Force, however, reservists – and especially those in full-time civilian employment – sometimes find it challenging to balance the three different areas of their lives: their work, their families, and their commitment to their regiment. Often, he commented wryly, it is the family – the spouse and the children – who do not receive enough quality time, and thus he was looking forward to spending more time with his family after his retirement.

He added that it was essential for the Reserve Force regiments to provide training for their own troops on the base, and underlined that many of these troops were in fact being deployed both internationally and nationally along South Africa’s borders, even more so than in the past.

Colonel Ashlin spoke eloquently and from the heart, thanking all the guests who had come to say goodbye: “I would like to say a special thank you to all the people here today who have influenced my life and become my friends and helped me grow.”

In closing, he stated: “Fort Ikapa is a model of friendship – here, units from all the formations cooperate, help communicate, assist one another – today is proof of this. You are unique and this model is being rolled out to other provinces. You are role models to your country and the SANDF and must be thanked for your spirit to serve.” 🌀

