

South Africa: Memorial to Heroism and Sacrifice

The South African National Museum of Military History provides a home for the memory and study of military history. It does so by affording visitors a rare opportunity to view the actual artefacts of an often turbulent past.

Nation's Contribution

The Museum began its existence in 1942 when a few far-sighted individuals grasped the need to collect material evidence of our nation's contribution to the world history. After the First World War (1914 – 1918), the idea that a museum could serve as a war memorial led to the establishment of the Imperial War Museum in London. Sadly, no similar effort was made in South Africa, and much of the war material collected during that period was dispersed.



This oversight was not to be repeated during the Second World War (1939 – 1945). In 1940, Capt J Agar-Hamilton was appointed official historian to the Union Defence Forces. He formed a Historical Research Committee to ensure the preservation of documents and materials of military interest, laying a foundation for the establishment of the Museum.

The South African National War Museum was opened by Prime Minister Jan Smuts on 29 August 1947. In 1975, its name was changed to the South African National Museum of Military History to reflect its widening scope – all military conflict in which South Africans have taken part.

Unique Collection

Many of the displays can be viewed in the two Bellman aircraft hangars, the original buildings on site when the Museum was opened. Over the years, many other buildings have been added. The Museum is also the home to various enthusiast and military veterans' organisations. The children's playground is a popular venue for birthday parties while the conference and functions facilities are available for hire.

The Museum's reference library, archives and photo archives hold a large and unique collection of books, pamphlets, journals, archival documents, photographs, audio-visuals and maps with friendly staff on hand to assist a wide range of information-seeking visitors. The library is open to the public on working days between the hours of 09-00 and 16-00.

The Museum houses some of the rarest military equipment in the world. The German **Me 262** two-seater night fighter of the Second World War is a notable example. The aircraft was converted from a two-seater trainer to cater to the urgent need for an aircraft capable of combating the Mosquito of the Royal Air Force and was deployed in the defence of Berlin in early 1945. It was captured in Denmark at the end of the war and flown to the United Kingdom prior to it being shipped to South Africa in 1947.



Another interesting aircraft on display is the **Scout Experimental (SE) 5a**. This First World War fighter, the first to be powered by a purposely-designed aircraft engine, was one of the great combat aircraft of its time. Twenty two were presented to South Africa in 1920 as part of the Imperial Gift by the United Kingdom to assist in the formation of the South African Air Force. The Museum's example is the last remaining SE5a of the 1920 Gift and is also one of six examples known to be in existence in the world.

The Museum's **Molch One-Man Submarine** is one of several types of midget submarines built by Germany during the Second World War. These were intended for attacking Allied supply shipping off the European coast but were found to be unreliable and unseaworthy and, as a result, were not effective. The example on display was the first item to be acquisitioned at the Museum.



An example of a rare weapon on display is the German 7.92mm **Fallschirmjärgewehr (FG) 42**, an automatic rifle developed for German airborne troops following losses sustained during the attack on Crete in 1940. It was first used in action in September 1943 during the rescue of the deposed Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, by German glider troops. Thereafter it was used by German paratroopers in Italy and on the Eastern Front. A serious fault of the FG 42 was the positioning of the magazine to the left which unbalanced the weapon.

These are just some of the examples of the aircraft, armour, artillery, medical, naval and engineering equipment, small arms, medals, badges and uniforms, spanning the history of military conflict involving South Africans that are on exhibition throughout the Museum.

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