Alfred Jimmy Davis is in his mid-eighties. He lives in a small flat in Wentworth, an area in south Durban, historically designated ‘coloured’ in terms of apartheid legislation, which he has shared with his son, daughter-in-law and two grandsons since the death of his wife.

Mr Davis is a humorous, pleasant man who, speaking from his favourite chair in the lounge, is surrounded by the framed images that matter most to him. Most evident are photographs of his family—in particular a portrait of his wife—his career in the church, significant of his deep religious conviction, and a studio portrait of him as a young soldier. These photographs form an integral part of the way in which Mr Davis remembers and tells his story. As he describes his enlistment and his training, he takes out a small photo album from the crowded display cabinet on his right and leafs through, stopping at images of himself in uniform, using them to remember and to illustrate his experiences. Yet he is aware too of the photographs as a fixed window on the past, divorced from time, a symbol of his youth and his mortality. When asked about a photograph taken of him in military uniform he laughs and says, “When I look at it I think, I think it’s not me, I’ve gone old, hey, I was about 22 there, full of energy […].”2 His photographs are a poignant reminder of the passage of time.

As Mr Davis speaks of his war-time service his mild-mannered reminiscences are prompted by his daughter-in-law Shirley who has heard

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2 Interview with Alfred Jimmy Davis conducted by Marijke du Toit and Suryakanthie Chetty at his home in Wentworth, Durban, March 3, 2005. I interviewed Mr Davis for the purposes of my PhD research as I wanted to understand the perspective of a black South African who had served in the Second World War and the sense made of that experience.
these stories so many times before that she now remembers for him. His words are punctuated by laughter and exchanges with Shirley, adding a vibrant depth to the spoken word. Yet there exists too some confusion, hesitation and forgetfulness brought about by his advanced years which both the photographs and Shirley work to overcome. Evident in his recollections, albeit tempered by his personality, is a strong sense of injustice as he points in the direction of Montclair where he believed housing would be reserved for him and his colleagues at the end of the war but which instead became a ‘white’ area given to men who never served. His return home was punctuated by a sense of disillusionment due to unemployment and the refusal of the army to give him skills training, leading him to sell his medals and badges to white souvenir seekers soon after. Yet Mr Davis embodies that moving contradiction—the years after 1945 only served to dishearten him but he is nonetheless proud of his contribution in defending his country and playing a small role in a significant historical moment. Shirley Davis’ ability to remember for him suggests that he had told and retold his war stories so that his family knew them as well as he did—his war service was a key event in his life to which he returned time and time again. His pride in the part he played is evident in his insistence in taking part in public commemorations along with other black veterans whose names do not appear on the memorials where they pay their respects.

His disillusionment was rendered concrete by the rise of the apartheid state and Shirley Davis produces an old scrapbook containing dozens of newspaper articles painstakingly put together by Mr Davis with the earliest articles more than fifty years old. These yellowed articles are the means by which Mr Davis connects himself to the larger historical narrative, for his war service has given him some small connection to the events of the war and the post-war era. Prime Minister Jan Smuts features prominently here and Mr Davis believes that Smuts’ death in 1950 marked the point at which South Africa took a turn away from the freedom and democracy envisaged during the war to a country that failed to live up to its war-time promises and entrenched racial inequality. Mr Davis’ citing of 1950 and the death of Smuts as marking the watershed highlights the way in which individual memory works, not necessarily in sync with the official history, but no less real, powerful and meaningful. For Mr Davis, Smuts embodied the potential for a new South Africa of social and racial equality and, as he remembers it, Smuts’ death marked the death knell of his hopes