



ROYAL AIR FORCE OFFICERS' CLUB

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BRYANSTON 2021

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RAFOC REMINISCENCES AND RAMBLINGS - WEEK 272 12th SEPTEMBER 2025

GREETINGS:

While the world hurtles onwards the tsunami of news continues... night of 7 September saw a total lunar eclipse when the moon turned blood red... say good bye to 3 prong plugs in SA... South Africa's infrastructure collapsing in front of everyone's eyes... SANDF is on life support – SCOPA chair... The world's largest retailer, Walmart, is officially expanding to South Africa...

The continued Russian criminal terrorism attacks on Ukraine remove any doubts about the nature and intent of the Bolshevik monster that the free world faces... Poland shoots down Russian drones that repeatedly violated its airspace... funicular disaster in Portugal... Some Trump advisers angry over Israel's strike on Hamas leaders in Doha (no comment on the bus shootings claimed by Hamas in Jerusalem)... single missile has exposed the weakness of Qatar... Starmer reported to ICC for 'crimes against humanity' over Chagos deal... Channel migrants in line for millions in compensation ... Net zero's dirty secret risks costing Britain billions... John Cleese reveals why he'll never work with the BBC again... Met chief Mark Rowley is a "total muppet"...

BRABAZON:



On September 4, 1949, crowds gathered at Filton Aerodrome near Bristol to watch one of the most ambitious postwar aviation projects in Britain take to the air for the very first time. The aircraft was the Bristol Brabazon, a colossal airliner built to show that Britain could lead the world in civil aviation after the Second World War. With a wingspan of 230 feet, greater than that of a Boeing 747, and powered by eight Bristol Centaurus radial engines driving paired contra-rotating propellers, the Brabazon looked every inch the giant of its age. Its first flight, lasting about 25 minutes, was

smooth and successful, and hopes were high that the project would restore British prestige in the skies. The Brabazon was remarkable for its innovations. Its pressurized fuselage was designed for transatlantic comfort, with space for just over 100 passengers spread across lounges, dining rooms, and even sleeping berths. The enormous wing was strong enough to contain a full-sized passageway, allowing engineers to service engines in flight. Its flight deck was fitted with advanced instrumentation for long-range cruising, and its design placed passenger comfort on par with technical performance. In an era when many airlines still flew wartime conversions, the Brabazon's vision of quiet, spacious, luxury air travel seemed decades ahead. Yet this very ambition proved its undoing. The Brabazon was conceived for a market that did not exist. Airlines in the late 1940s wanted practical aircraft that could carry large numbers of passengers economically, not luxurious airborne cruise liners with lounges and writing desks. The rise of the pressurized Douglas DC-6 and the Lockheed Constellation, followed quickly by the coming jet age with the de Havilland Comet and later Boeing 707, meant that speed, efficiency, and operating costs mattered far more than luxury. The Brabazon never attracted a single airline order. Despite the successful first flight and extensive trials, the program was canceled in 1953 after costing tens of millions of pounds, and the sole prototype was eventually scrapped. Although the Brabazon failed as a commercial airliner, it left an important legacy for Bristol. The enormous assembly halls built at Filton for the Brabazon project later became the cradle for other advanced aircraft, including the turboprop Bristol Britannia and eventually the supersonic Concorde, which also had strong Bristol connections. Bristol itself shifted focus to military and civil transports, to missile development, and later became part of the British Aircraft Corporation, which merged into today's Airbus.

Seventy-six years after its first flight, the Brabazon is remembered as a bold but misguided attempt to leap into the future of aviation. It embodied a vision of grandeur and luxury that misread the needs of airlines, yet its engineering advances and the infrastructure it created paved the way for Britain to contribute to some of the most significant aircraft of the twentieth century.

DAKOTA RESURRECTION:



Despite not having flown for three years, reports that the C47-TP Turbo Dakota being retired from South African Air Force service appear to be greatly exaggerated.

Although lacking an official announcement, 35 Squadron was advised in May 2024 that the C47-TPs, which it operated from Air Force Base (AFB) Ysterplaat, would no longer fly and were being decommissioned. This was hardly surprising as the last flight of a Turbo Dakota in SAAF service was believed to have been on 22 September 2022. In September 2024, Armscor informed Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Defence and Military Veterans (PCDMV) that all C47-TPs in the SAAF's inventory were grounded, with the prospect of them never flying again. The main obstacle was the challenge of finding a maintenance provider. After 82 years of military service in South Africa, it seemed the C-47 Dakota and its derivatives were finally being withdrawn. A request for maintenance last year had received no valid bids, forcing Armscor to cancel the process for the second time. "The Dakota C47-TP is a very old aircraft, thus the support for this aircraft is very limited in South Africa and the world," Armscor stated. "Due to the age of the aircraft, it is no longer supported by the OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer). There are no AMOs (Aircraft Maintenance Organisations) with a Dakota C47-TP stipulated on the Operational Specification." Armscor added that since 2018, there have been numerous attempts to secure a support contract for the C47-TP fleet, which had resulted in no valid bids and several amendments to the user requirement specification. "Discussions are being held with SAAF regarding the future usage of the aircraft due to reasons indicated above," Armscor stated in its presentation to the PCDMV. Currently, only five airframes remain viable, three configured for maritime surveillance and two for transport. These aircraft are in various stages of maintenance. Remarkably, at least one transport version continues to undertake ground engine runs, with the squadron maintaining its safety audits and conducting training days. Even without flight operations, the ground and engineering staff ensure their qualifications remain current, particularly through regular ground runs. The primary obstacle to resuming flights appears to be time-expired fire extinguisher bottles attached to each of the two PT6A turboprop engines. System engineers were reluctant to sign off on the aircraft for flight because of these components. While locally produced extinguishers could be fitted, no one was available to certify their suitability. (DefenceWeb)

AFB WATERKLOOF BREACH:



Air Force Base (AFB) Waterkloof, home to amongst others 21 Squadron operating the South African presidential Boeing 737-ED, is the latest (SANDF) facility to report a security breach.

The incident at the SA Air Force (SAAF) base in Centurion last Thursday (4 September) evening saw "forced entry" of an unauthorised vehicle through the western entrance, a Directorate Corporate Communication (DCC) statement has it, resulting in damage to the boom gate. Security personnel, presumably 504 Squadron, responded and in collaboration with Tshwane Metro Police

Department (TMPD), the vehicle was intercepted after crashing near what are called “the AAD water hydrants” in a DCC statement attributed to Rear Admiral (JG) Prince Tshabalala. A suspect was arrested at the crash site with two others apprehended soon afterward, the statement reads without specifying whether they were in or outside the base. Lieutenant General Wiseman Mbambo, Chief of the South African Air Force, praised members for their decisive actions, stating: “The vigilance and professionalism of our personnel at Waterkloof prevented a potential threat and demonstrated the Air Force’s unwavering commitment to safeguarding our bases, our people, and our nation.” The security breach is one of a number recently, including AFB Bloemspruit, and the wider Simon’s Town naval precinct, generating questions in Parliament and from defenceWeb readers. On 13 August, a break-in at Bloemspruit saw items of “limited tactical value” taken, while in August, items were stolen from a security guard’s house at the entrance to the Institute for Maritime Technology. Weapons, mobile phones and security scanners were amongst the items taken.

WATER BOARD FAT CATS:

Senior officials at struggling water boards are earning up to R100,000 per meeting, despite failing to deliver water to municipalities.

702's John Perlman is joined by Professor Mike Muller, Former Director General of Water and Sanitation and a Professional Engineer and Visiting Adjunct Professor at the Wits School of Governance.

While taps run dry in many municipalities across the country, senior members of South Africa’s water boards are pocketing nearly R50 million a year in board fees.

Some are being paid as much as R100 000 per board meeting.

And that's not all, they're facing criticism for what has been condemned as a 'grotesque' misuse of public funds after some board members' travel and accommodation expenses exceeded R200,000. So what exactly is a water board, and what do its members do?

"They are the bulk water suppliers. They get water from rivers and dams across the country. They treat it, they put it in large reservoirs, and then they supply it to municipalities." Professor Mike Muller, Former Director General - Water and Sanitation.

And the board members? What is their role, and can it really be justified to the tune of R100 000 per meeting they attend, asks Perlman.

"The job of the board is to make sure everybody gets reliable, safe water. Now, if they do that job well, I don't want them to be robbed by some sort of private sector outfit that's going to offer them a couple of thousand rand more and a slightly easier life. (702)

DIAMONDS ARE NOT FOREVER:



“Things have honestly changed more in the last five years than they have in the last 125 years,” says Donald Greig of the luxury jewellery brand Charles Greig. Jewellers have been in the centre of the maelstrom. On the one hand, the gold price has rocketed 110% over the past three years; on the other, diamond prices have tumbled about 35% over that the time. The upshot: fine pieces remain expensive to produce, but aren’t as valuable as they once were.

There are several roots to this, including a slowdown in luxury sales in China in recent years, a country where the diamond jewellery market was once booming. But nothing has been quite as ruinous as the rise of lab-grown diamonds.

“Lab-grown diamonds have collapsed the whole diamond market globally, and it’s not something that’s going to recover,” Greig says, seemingly resigned to the finality.

But the data reinforces his grim prediction. Currency reported last year that lab-grown diamonds accounted for 14.3% of all diamond sales in 2023 – and that figure jumped sharply to 20% in 2024. Lab-grown diamonds are far cheaper to produce, even though they are molecularly, chemically and optically identical to natural diamonds. And, because they are produced industrially, supply is endless – puncturing the myth of diamonds as rare. Diamond producers are feeling this devastation in their pocket. The government of Botswana, which gets a third of its annual revenue from diamond sales, has warned that its joint-venture mining business, Debswana, will see a staggering 40% fall in output in 2025. De Beers, which owns the other 50% of Debswana, was forced to shed more than 1,000 jobs at the company in May.

“This model has reached its limit,” Botswana’s President Duma Boko said last month. “This is no longer an economic challenge alone; it is a national social existential threat.”

Jewellery giants like De Beers, once a hugely profitable part of Anglo American, have lost their relevance and value in the past decade, unable to compete with the mass production of lab-grown diamonds. Keeping the dream alive in the face of all this is a brutal task. Anglo American still owns 85% of De Beers, but has been itching to sell it. In February, it slashed the value of that stake by \$2.9bn, bringing its total write-down to \$4.5bn. No wonder, as De Beers made a \$189m loss in the first half of 2025. The once-dominant jewellery brand made a confused lurch into the lab-grown sector too with its own brand, Lightbox, positioning it as a low-cost trendy alternative to expensive natural diamonds. It was a disaster, only serving to confuse and cannibalise De Beers’ core business, so it quietly ditched that plan. *(Now we know why the Oppenheimer family quietly exited)*

LESOTHO: POLIHALI DAM CONSTRUCTION:

Construction of Lesotho’s giant Polihali Dam, which will boost the water supply to Gauteng, is advancing after years of delays. The dam in Mokhotlong is part of Phase II of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. It is advancing after years of planning setbacks. By the end of July 2025, about M18-billion (R18-billion) of the project’s M53-billion budget had already been spent, according to the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA) spokesperson Mpho Brown.

At the confluence of the Senqu and Khubelu rivers, the Polihali Dam will create a reservoir covering more than 5,000 hectares and holding 2,325-million cubic metres of water. Once completed, it is expected to boost annual water transfers to South Africa’s Gauteng region from 780 to 1,270-million



cubic metres and raise electricity production at Lesotho’s ‘Muela hydropower plant from 500GWh to 800GWh per year.

Addressing journalists during a media tour of the project last week, Brown said about 30% of the main dam works were complete by July. The M2-billion Senqu Bridge, one of the largest structures under the project, was already 86% finished. Brown added that the project had created jobs for roughly 14,000 people, though he cautioned that it could not significantly reduce Lesotho’s 30% unemployment rate.

The development has reshaped life for thousands of people in the highlands. According to LHDA, more than 7,200 community assets have been expropriated, with M154-million paid in compensation for nearly 5,600 of them. Koali Hlasoa, Senior Integrated Management Officer at LHDA Polihali Branch, said delays in outstanding payments were often linked to identification and ownership documentation problems, family disputes, or the absence of bank accounts. In some cases, beneficiaries had moved to South Africa for work, further slowing the process.

Alongside compensation, the project has been forced to manage environmental impacts. Chief Resident Engineer Ivano Vanzaghi, from the Matla a Metsi Joint Venture supervising the dam works, said contractors had so far generated 20,500 litres of waste oil, nearly 9,000 kilograms of other hazardous waste, and over 34,000 cubic metres of wastewater. More than 49 tonnes of general waste had been sent to landfill. Communities have lodged complaints about dust, noise, air pollution, and water quality, while 40 environmental incidents have been reported. None were considered significant and the project supervisors are monitoring these reports, Vanzaghi said. But delays have been harder to manage. The main dam fell behind schedule during site establishment, with slow excavation and hold-ups on tunnelling and spillway works. By late August, Vanzaghi said only 44 of 87 interior plinth blocks — structures that secure the dam wall — had been completed. Grouting of the external plinths had not yet begun.

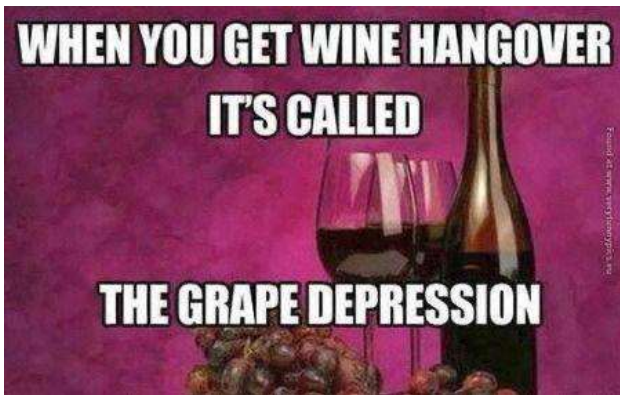
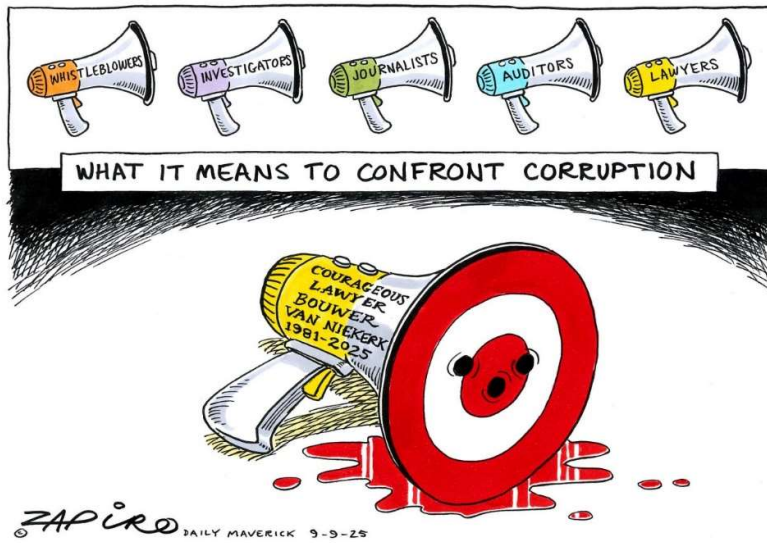
Water impoundment, once scheduled for January 2025, has now been pushed back nearly two years to November 2026. Full completion of the dam and related works is expected between August and September 2029.

CHEERS FOR NOW...

This may be a somewhat abbreviated issue of Ramblings as the Editor is in the Bushveld, very busily dividing his time between enjoying the Bushveld Spring - where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile - and drinking copious cold beer in order to avoid the risk of dehydration...By the time this issue is on your screens it will be the **Battle of Britain Lunch, this Friday 12 September 2025 12h30 for 13h00 at Wanderers.**

TAILPIECE:





SAW A FLYING SAUCER TODAY. IT APPEARED RIGHT AFTER THE FLYING CUP THAT MY WIFE THREW AT ME.

86-YEAR-OLD RUGBY BALL RETURNS HOME TO MARITZBURG COLLEGE...

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

We start off today's assembly with a very special presentation to Maritzburg College of an 86-year-old rugby ball. Maritzburg College is very proud of many of its former sons: its bishops, generals and admirals, its war dead, its Rhodes Scholars and judges; and its hundreds of sporting internationals. But, amongst all those sons of this place, few can match PHILIP Nel the Head Prefect of 1921, who captained the 1937 Springbok team that won the test series vs the All Blacks 2-1 in New Zealand – in doing so, earning the immortal title of the “Greatest Springboks”. We are honoured that Phillip Nel was one of us, and at the end of last year we were proud to open the Philip Nel Pavilion on Goldstone's in his honour.

So, what about the 85 year-old rugby ball? Its story was told by Philip Nel's widow, Josie, before she died aged 102. As the All Blacks and Springboks prepared to face each other in the 3rd and final test at Eden Park in Auckland, they were on level pegging on one test each, with all to play for. As you will have gathered, the Springboks duly won that all-important test in Auckland in front of 55 000 New Zealanders and with it the test series. After the team celebrations, Philip decided to spend the night with his young wife, and so he told his Springbok team to “go out and paint the town red, as long as you don't wear your Springbok colours.” The splendidly named Ebbo Bastard [*that was his name!*], the tough flanker from Kokstad, had kept the historic match ball from the test, and with two team-mates was walking back to the Hotel at 03h00, playing with the ball. It was suddenly caught up in some telephone wires, and, while they were trying to retrieve it, Officer Gleeson from the local police force arrived and wanted to know exactly who they were, to which Ebbo Bastard responded “We're Springbok rugby players.” When asked their names, Ebbo introduced himself as BASTARD, after which Officer Gleeson arrested them all, retrieved the ball and locked them up. Ebbo was given permission to 'phone his captain, Philip Nel, who arrived in the wee hours of the morning, arranged to have them released, and announced that in order to keep the incident out of the newspapers the team would sign the ball and present it to Officer Gleeson, which he duly did.

We now fast-forward 85 years. After a huge amount of detective work, including by the late Jos Robson and Mr Lesur here, the old ball was tracked down, having been passed down through the Gleeson family for all these years. Jan Walters-Gleeson, whose late husband was the great-nephew of Officer Gleeson from 1937, kindly agreed to donate the old ball to College, and so she delivered it to Old Boy Laurie Sharp in Auckland in October – and Laurie handed it over to his great friend and fellow Old Boy, Ian Cairns, to bring the historic ball to College – across the Indian Ocean, 11 378 km away from Auckland!

We are delighted to be able to welcome Ian and his wife Tessa today, to make the formal presentation. I add that Ian is a very staunch Old Collegian, whose refereeing of the 1st XV on Goldstone's long ago is also part of College's mythology. But that's another story altogether! And so I call on Ian Cairns of the Class of 1968 to present the old leather rugby ball that was used in the historic third test of 1937, won 17-6 by the Springboks, to the headmaster and Mr Lesur.