

# WAR IMAGE

## RETURNS TO HIS HOMETLAND

By Louise de Wet

This is a unique, wonderful true story of a magnificent, dark bay stallion that has made history and won hearts within and way beyond the American Saddlebred industry. And although the story is quite complete, as far as people know it, it is still very much in the making.

Our hero is War Image, who was bred by Mr. Johan Kotz of Sterkfontein, Bethulie. He was foaled in 1985. He is by the stallion, Warlord (Trojan x Cameo's Lady Jane), and out of the mare, Perfect Image (Supreme Fortune x Paula M).

This gifted athlete and strikingly beautiful horse first excelled by winning the SA National Saddlebred Junior Three-Gaited Stake in 1989, when shown by the late, great, show rider, Mr. Pieter van der Meulen. He also won the same class on him at the Tarkastad Regional Championships that year.

Until he was shown again at the age of 11, War Image was used as a breeding stallion. He sired some extremely good colts, some of which went on to become broodmares of note and the dams of prize winning offspring. One of his daughters, Moon Shadeaux, is the dam of one such top class colt, Space Spider. He was the South African Grand Champion Weanling Colt in 2007.



War Image being led by Larry Hodge in grand style as he is formally presented back to South Africa at a beautiful homecoming ceremony.

Somewhat of a late maturer, but with an awesome performance, he went on to win the SA Novice Five-Gaited Championship in 1996. The next day he was shown by his owner, Mr. Johan Kotz, in the Grand Championship Five-Gaited Stake. He and his sire, Warlord, who was shown by Mrs. Koekie de Villiers, both came forth with

absolutely brilliant performances, as they competed for the top honors.

The resemblance between these two stallions was amazing, as they thrilled the crowd during every lap of the ring. There could, however, be only one winner which turned-out to be Warlord. But War Image was destined for greater things and that same year he was sold, to compete against the world's best Saddle Horses in the US.

His sire, Warlord, was the South African Grand Champion Five-Gaited Horse in 1990 and 1991, when he was shown by the late Mr. Pieter van der Meulen of Tarkastad, and in 1995 and 1996 when shown by Mrs. Koekie de Villiers of Studcor, Mortimer.

I saw War Image being shown at the Bloemfontein Saddle Horse Club Show in 1996. He was then shown by his trainer, Mrs. Koekie de Villiers, in thrillingly good form, to become a most worthy winner of the Five-Gaited Championship.

In 1997, War Image was exported to the US, for Elisabeth (Goth) Chelberg, of Lebanon, Ky. She, very successfully, showed him in

fine harness classes for a couple of years a real credit to this horse's versatility. In 1999, she moved him to Joan Hamilton, owner of Kalarama Farm, Springfield, Ky. From there he was to campaign as a top class five-gaited contender. Larry Hodge, the resident trainer of Kalarama Farm, started preparing him for the green shavings of Freedom Hall, where



War Image, with C.J. du Plessis, Luci Nouwens and Larry Hodge, after his great win as the SA Grand Champion Stallion In Hand in 2007.

the American Saddlebred Championships take place, and to win there is an extremely great honor.

A month prior to the big one, War Image made his first major statement at the Shelbyville Horse Show, where many of the top contenders for the World Championships have a final test run. Mr. Hodge would be the first to tell us how his horse had a mind of his own, but when they tuned-in to each other, they made an awesome team. The chemistry worked and the Kalarama Team were very confident about their five-gaited entry for the Louisville 2000 World Championships.

A month later, War Image gave Hodge an almost faultless ride. In his own words, Hodge said that it was one of the most thrilling horses he had ever ridden, after they had won the Stallion/Gelding Five-Gaited title. The pressure was then really on and they entered the Saturday evening finals, with nine other contenders, as firm favorites.

Tension grew and his fans will remember how the favorite brought the house down when he was stripped for the conformation judging and stood up in perfect form an African Statue, looking way above any other being in the hall that evening. A re-ride was called for and three horses took to the rail for a final workout. War Image was riding larger than life, as he tuned in to the cheering crowds, but his excitement caught him off his feet a couple of times at this critical stage, which cost him dearly! He won the Reserve World's Five-Gaited Champion-

ship that evening, but he was truly a champion in his own right and this can never be taken away from him.

Having proved all he needed to, to Elisabeth Goth, he was then retired to stud at Kalarama Farm, but she reserved him for her own, small group of broodmares. Hamilton eventually took over ownership of War Image in 2006 and he stirred in her a strong feeling to send this war hero, now going on 21, back to his homeland to spend his last days under the African Sun.

I regularly see, in the American magazines, that some of his offspring are winning at shows in the States. Amongst others I really admire, one of his foals, Khyber Pass, a beautiful pinto colt, and his younger brother, also a pinto, that are making their mark in the American show rings.

Hamilton's wish was made possible by Luci Nouwens of Harrismith, who decided to bring him back to his homeland. In March 2007, War Image boarded a plane for the second time in his life and was flown back to South Africa. Here he could, hopefully, share lots of special time with those who care, as he still has so much to give where his roots are in South Africa.

Although his arrival was a little later than planned, and he would be in quarantine until the middle of April, the idea was to show him as a surprise entry, in the Stallion In Hand class at the South African Saddle Horse Championships in Bloemfontein. Miss Hamilton and Mr. Hodge came to South Africa especially to see War Image compete

and to be here for his Welcome Home ceremony. The surprise and excitement was great among the spectators when he was led into the ring. Larry Hodge and Mr. C.J. du Plessis of Ruigtevlei, Bethulie, showed War Image in absolutely grand style and the spectators were amazed and pleased that this 20-year-old stallion could take the top honor as the South African Grand Champion Stallion for 2007, over stallions ten years or more his junior. He was the unanimous choice of all three judges. A note of interest is that War Image and the Reserve South African Grand Champion Stallion, Rock This Country (Warlord's Touch x Perfect Image), are very closely related, in that Warlord's Touch is also by Warlord and they were both out of the same dam. So this shows that blood does count!

Two days later, after winning the Grand Championship Stallion In Hand class, which made the moment all the sweeter, he was officially welcomed back to South Africa at a unique evening ceremony at the South African Saddle Horse Championships. He looked absolutely stunning and was again superbly presented by Messrs. Hodge and du Plessis. A garland of roses was placed over him and Hodge led him around the ring in grand style. While he was being led around the ring, the theme song from The Lion King filled the evening air with - Can you Feel the Love Tonight. Anyone interested should listen to the words of the song, which could have been written especially for War Image as it speaks of a wide-eyed wanderer.

While he was being presented to the public, the following narrative was read by Miss Leanne Mione, in honor of him and SA Saddlebred Horses, which brought tears to many eyes:

*The Saddlebred Horse has indeed captured the interest of horsemen way beyond America's borders. Those first horses, which were imported, spent many weeks (sometimes five to six weeks) aboard ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean to South Africa. Later, horses were flown in, and even later, exceptional South African horses were, and still are, being exported to the US, to claim top honors at important shows, in the original Land of the Saddlebred.*

*War Image is one such horse. He is an awesome dark bay stallion, who first turned heads as a junior three-gaited horse and then as a five-gaited performer of exceptional brilliance. One of his most memorable shows*



(L to R) Toasting War Image —Johan Kotzé, breeder and former trainer of War Image, Koekie de Villiers, also one of War Image's trainers in the '90s, Luci Nouwens, War Image's best friend and new owner, and Joan Hamilton, owner of Kalarama Farms, War Image's last home in the US.

would be the South African Grand Championship for Five-Gaited Horses at the South African Championships in 1996, against his sire, Warlord. There could only be one winner, but to this day, there are still different opinions about the final battle where War Image placed second to his sire.

That same year, War Image crossed the ocean to triumph on the green shavings of Freedom Hall in Louisville, Ky., as World Champion Five-Gaited Stallion in 2000, and as Reserve World Grand Champion Five-Gaited Horse in the same year. He looked awesome on that Saturday evening. His fans will remember how the favorite brought the house down when he was stripped and stood up in perfect form — an African Statue looking way above any other being in Freedom Hall that evening.

War Image also excelled in harness while owned by Elisabeth Goth, and it was Larry Hodge who rode him to the glory of his world five-gaited crown.

He was successfully bred to a very select number of mares in the States and the great value of his offspring is only now becoming evident.

But his story goes on as Joan Hamilton took ownership of him. War Image stirred a strong feeling in his new owner to send this war hero back to his homeland to spend his last days under the African sun.

Those privileged enough to have known

him, will know that he is a truly special horse; he is sensitive, proud and so ready to give in return for respect from his handler.

Luci Nouwens, on a visit to Kalarama Farm, met him and she was to return him to his homeland, to share some special moments with those who care, because he still has so much to give, in South Africa, where his roots are.

Who will forget the emotion as Miss Mione ended this presentation with the following words:

*Tonight we salute War Image our own hero who did us proud on the world stage and is the only Saddle Horse to return home to live it up in the African sun.*

Joan Hamilton and Larry Hodge are proud to present our World Champion to his new owner, Luci Nouwens, and reunite him with his trainers of years gone by Johan Kotz and Koekie de Villiers.

*It is indeed good to witness such a happening in times when we, all too often, do not stop and smell the roses.*

The War Image story was broadcast on National TV in South Africa. Another first for our Saddlebred Industry and was hailed by



War Image and Luci are set to live happily ever after.

South African TV as one of the best documentaries they have ever shown. (DVD's of this program are available from the SA Show Horse Magazine Website: [www.showhorse.co.za](http://www.showhorse.co.za) or I, Louise de Wet, can be contacted at e-mail: [louisedw@absamail.co.za](mailto:louisedw@absamail.co.za)

Response to this program was overwhelming, including responses from viewers from way beyond our industry. One 72-year-old gentleman telephoned to say that we should treasure this horse as he was God's own Horse. A well-known fashion designer traced Miss Nouwens to tell her that she had never seen such a beautiful horse and that the program had brought a tear to her eye. Complementary e-mails and SMS messages poured in for days as the program was being aired, at different times over a period of about two weeks.

Joan Hamilton is looking to fulfill a special ambition to immortalize War Image in a truly different way, as she prepares to write a children's book about this remarkable horse, that was born in Africa and went to America to become a world star. He sires some great foals, and one day, this lady from his home country comes to take him home where he is welcomed back as a hero. He meets old friends and makes new ones as he lives his last years in his home country. Depending on how long she takes to write her book, and what Luci Nouwens and War Image get up to, the last chapter in Hamilton's book could be a whole story in itself.

After the South African Saddle Horse Championships, War Image moved to Harrismith with Luci's two other show horses, Solitaire and The Entertainer. He has never looked back and has settled-in well at his new home. His gentlemanly attitude and good stable manners are a credit to this international hero.

Listening to Luci, it seems that War Image, has only come of age and we will, hopefully, see and hear more about him in years to come. He is still sound, very keen to work-out and could possibly still sire some great progeny.

As is the case with all of Luci's horses, he will share in a full life of fun and love, as she enjoys them in whatever way as Saddlebred trainer, Harold Poil says, If that blows your hair back — enjoy it Honey.

As War Image's 21st birthday comes up in December, we hear that a special party is on the cards for him. How lucky can a horse be?