

Foreword

With the outbreak of war on the 3rd of September 1939, the South African Government, under the leadership of General Jan Christian Smuts, declared war on Germany on Wednesday 6 September, three days after Chamberlain's declaration of war. And as was the case at the outbreak of war in 1914, the Union did not have a single war vessel of its own, with the seaward defence of the Union of South Africa and the protection of its trade on the high seas remaining firmly in the hands of the Royal Navy.

The Admiralty's war plan, based on experience gained during World War I, had made provision for port minesweepers, anti-submarine vessels and examination craft manned principally by the South African Division of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve RNVR(SA).

The RNVR(SA) had come into being in 1913 following the unification of the four British colonies in South Africa three years earlier to form the Union of South Africa. While it was constitutionally part of the Union Defence Force (UDF) Active Citizen Force, and funded by the South African Parliament, the Division's peacetime training, organisation, administration, and discipline was the responsibility of the British Commander-in-Chief at Simon's Town. And in war, the Division would be placed at the disposal of the Admiralty.⁶

However, the war was still in its infancy when the South African Government decided that the UDF should be responsible for the seaward defence of South Africa. As a result, General Smuts approached Rear Admiral Guy Hallifax, a recently retired Royal Navy officer living in South Africa, to establish and lead the new force.

The first task facing Hallifax was to acquire ships and to train men as quickly as possible to meet the new force's commitments. A large measure of assistance was rendered by the Royal Navy during the formation of the Seaward Defence Force (SDF), and the force took over most of the vessels which had already been requisitioned locally by the Admiralty. The Royal Navy also agreed to release some retired Royal Navy personnel living in South Africa and certain members of the RNVR(SA) to serve in the new force.

The SDF was the successor to the small South African Naval Service (SANS) which had come into being in 1922 and all but shut down in 1934 when the last of its three ships (two minesweepers) were returned to the Royal Navy mainly as a result of budgetary restraints

following the Great Depression, but also to some extent through the lack of interest demonstrated by the army and air force officers making up the senior leadership of the UDF in having a Navy at all. Fortunately, despite the demise of the SANS, the RNVR(SA) had continued to thrive, with training bases at all the major ports around South Africa. This had produced a ready pool of officers and men immediately available for war service.

In addition to serving in the RNVR(SA) on a part-time volunteer basis in peacetime, many South Africans had long made a career in the Royal Navy or served in the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR). Admiral Sir Edward Neville Syfret, GCB, KBE, who would go on to be the Vice Chief of Naval Staff from 1943-45 and command the post-war Home Fleet, was probably the best known South African-born officer in the Royal Navy.⁷

With the formation of the wartime SDF, existing members of the RNVR(SA) were given the option of volunteering to transfer to the new force, while men volunteering for wartime naval service could either join the SDF and serve in His Majesty's South African Navy ships (HMSAS) or join the RNVR(SA) and serve in the Royal Navy in His Majesty's ships (HMS). Later, the much-expanded wartime RNVR(SA) was amalgamated with the rapidly growing SDF, and from 1 August 1942 the new force was known as the South African Naval Forces (SANF). From that date, all members of the RNVR(SA) on loan to the SDF became members of the new SANF, while those serving around the globe with the Royal Navy became seconded members of the SANF for the period of hostilities.

As a result, besides serving at home and abroad in the SANF ships, South Africans served in just about every type of Royal Navy ship from the greatest battleships to small motor torpedo boats and took part in nearly every major naval operation of the war. They served in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, the Pacific and Indian Ocean, as well as in the famous Arctic convoys. They commanded British submarines, took part in the X-craft attack on the German battleship *Tirpitz* and many also served in the Fleet Air Arm. Significant South African losses were sustained when the *Neptune* and *Gloucester* were lost in the Mediterranean and the *Dorsetshire*, *Cornwall* and *Hermes* were sunk by the Japanese in the Indian Ocean.

Meanwhile, under the leadership of Rear Admiral Hallifax, the SDF had quickly assumed responsibility for minesweeping duties and anti-submarine patrols in the approaches to South Africa's major ports and took over the port war signal stations and merchant ship examination services at these ports. When it formally came into

existence on 15 January 1940, the SDF comprised 15 converted minesweepers, a few shore establishments, and a total personnel strength of 74 officers and 358 ratings. Of these, 36 officers and 182 men were volunteers on loan from the RNVR(SA), which had continued to exist and expand.

By April 1940, two of the initial fifteen trawlers and whalers had been fitted out with Asdic (sonar) for detecting submarines, and a month later, the new SDF was engaged in the arduous task of clearing mines laid by the German commerce raider *Atlantis* in the main shipping route near Cape Agulhas, at the southernmost extremity of the African continent. Early operations were also undertaken with the Royal Navy in local waters, including the successful high-seas interception of a Vichy French convoy off the South African coast in November 1941.

In mid-1940, two more anti-submarine whalers had been added to the growing SDF and five large Southern-class whale catchers, the best equipped and most modern in the Antarctic whaling fleet had been requisitioned. Four of these were converted to anti-submarine vessels, while one was fitted out as senior officers' ship for the Mine Clearance Flotilla. And by October 1940 the SDF had grown in strength to 183 officers and 1,049 ratings. In December there were 24 minesweepers in commission and eight anti-submarine vessels. Over the course of the next two years, a further 12 anti-submarine vessels and 13 minesweepers would be brought into service.

The activities of the SDF were not confined to South African waters, and less than a year after its formation, the new Service extended its operations far beyond the borders of South Africa. In response to an urgent request from the Admiralty in November 1940, a flotilla of four Southern-class anti-submarine vessels, the so called 'Southerns,' constituting the 22nd Anti-Submarine Group, sailed for the Eastern Mediterranean to join the hard-pressed British Mediterranean Fleet under Admiral Andrew Browne Cunningham. The Group arrived in Alexandria on 11 January 1941 and was almost immediately put to work protecting the exposed supply route between Alexandria and Tobruk. The Flotilla tackled this task with youthful energy and determination in the face of incessant air attacks and, sadly a month later HMSAS *Southern Floe* became South Africa's first wartime loss after striking a mine off Tobruk.

Southern Floe was replaced by HMSAS *Protea*, a converted Antarctic whaler very similar to the 'Southerns,' and the number of South African ships in the Mediterranean steadily increased, reaching a peak of four anti-submarine vessels, eight magnetic minesweepers and the salvage vessel HMSAS *Gamtoos* which performed valuable work in reopening

captured ports. In addition to their brave exploits on the supply run to the besieged Australian troops at Tobruk, South African ships in the Mediterranean theatre also played a notable part in later operations along the North African and Levant coasts, on long-range convoy escort duties between Port Said and Gibraltar and in the final phase of the Italian and Adriatic campaigns. In addition to the *Southern Floe*, the minesweepers *Parktown*, *Bever* and *Treern* were also lost through enemy action in the Mediterranean between June 1942 and January 1945.

This book tells the remarkable story of the sacrifices and gallant contributions made by not only the ships of the 22nd Anti-Submarine Group in the Mediterranean, but also the selfless role that the officers and crew of the minesweepers HMSAS *Parktown* and HMSAS *Bever* played during the evacuation following the fall of Tobruk in June 1942. This resulted in the loss of *Parktown*, South Africa's second wartime naval loss, and its first against the enemy, less than a month after she became a unit of the Mediterranean Fleet. *Bever* would later become the third South African ship lost in the Mediterranean when she was sunk by a mine during minesweeping operations in the liberation of Greece.

Although South Africa had no navy of her own at the outbreak of World War II, the establishment of an efficient seagoing force, and the rapid expansion of the SANF during the conflict, was remarkable. South Africa's 'little ships,' which were awarded 129 battle honours, earned an enviable reputation in local waters and overseas, and South African sailors established a proud fighting tradition. At the peak of hostilities in 1944, the South African fleet consisted of 78 vessels, and by the end of the conflict in 1945, the SANF, which was by now operating modern anti-submarine frigates forming the backbone of the permanent navy established immediately post-war, had a strength of 8,090 officers and ratings. A total of 324 members of the SANF were killed in action or died in service and 244 awards for gallantry or distinguished service were bestowed on South African sailors during World War II.

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