

Foreword

This book tells the remarkable story of the little known and largely unsung but vital contribution made by the small, converted, anti-submarine trawlers and whalers that operated off the East Coast of the United States and around the Cape of Good Hope to counter Axis submarines during the Second World War.

In South African waters, the Admiralty's war plan, based on experience gained during World War I, was to requisition trawlers and whalers for use as anti-submarine vessels and port minesweepers. These vessels would be principally manned by the South African Division of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR(SA) which 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), and funded by the South African Parliament, the part-time Division's peacetime training, organization, administration, and discipline was the responsibility of the British Commander-in-Chief at Simon's Town. And in time of war, the Division would be mobilised and placed at the disposal of the Admiralty which remained responsible for the seaward defence of South Africa and the protection of its trade on the high seas.

With the war still in its infancy, the South African Government under the leadership of General Jan Smuts decided that, for sovereignty reasons, the UDF should be responsible for the seaward defence of South Africa. As a result, Smuts approached Rear Admiral Guy Hallifax, a recently retired Royal Navy officer living in South Africa, to establish and lead the new service, which would be known as the Seaward Defence Force (SDF).

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 SDF, and the force took over the vessels that had already been requisitioned locally by the Admiralty. The Royal Navy also agreed to release some Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) and retired Royal Navy (RN) personnel living in South Africa as well as some 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 minesweeping trawlers which had been used to train the RNVR(SA), were returned to

the Royal Navy. The service's other ship, which had been returned a year earlier, had been a hydrographic survey vessel. The demise of the tiny SANS was mainly the result of budgetary cuts following the Great Depression. But the situation had not been helped by the lack of interest shown by the army and air force officers making up the senior leadership of the UDF at the time. But, despite this retrograde step, the RNVR(SA) had continued to thrive. This had produced a ready pool of officers and men immediately available for war service in 1939.

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 in South Africa could either join the SDF, or the RNVR(SA) and serve in the Royal Navy. Later, the much-expanded wartime RNVR(SA) was amalgamated with the rapidly growing SDF, and from 1 August 1942—just before the first U-boat offensive began in South African waters—the amalgamated force became 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. In addition, many South Africans had long made a career in the Royal Navy or served in the RNR and had reached the highest levels.

South Africans consequently served in just about every type of ship from the greatest battleships to small motor torpedo boats and took part in nearly every major naval operation of the war. Besides serving at home and abroad in SANF ships, they served with the Royal Navy in the Atlantic, including in the King's ships sent to the US eastern seaboard, the Mediterranean, the Pacific and Indian Ocean, as well as in the famous Arctic convoys. They commanded British ships and 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 anti-submarine patrols and minesweeping duties in the approaches to South Africa's major ports and had taken 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).

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. By December 1940 there were eight anti-submarine vessels and 24 minesweepers in commission. 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 consisting of the four Southern-class anti-submarine vessels, and a flotilla of minesweepers were dispatched to the Eastern Mediterranean to join the hard-pressed British Mediterranean Fleet under Admiral Cunningham.

In local waters, the situation facing British and South African naval forces upon the onslaught of U-boat attacks in October 1942, while like that experienced earlier in the US Eastern Sea Frontier, was even more acute. With patrol duties off Cape Town, nearby Saldanha Bay, and Durban occupying much of the efforts of the fourteen SANF anti-submarine whalers and trawlers, additional vessels were desperately needed to augment these ships and the handful of RN escorts at the Cape to shepherd vessels between South African ports. Fortunately, help began to appear in late 1942, with the arrival of the first four British anti-submarine trawlers at the Cape on 24 December, vanguard of a group of eighteen Royal Navy anti-submarine trawlers and whalers previously employed in American waters. These vessels would remain in South African waters for the remainder of the war.

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, was operating modern anti-submarine frigates which would form the backbone of the permanent navy established immediately post-war for the protection of the vital Cape route during the ensuing Cold War.

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