

## THE SOUTH AFRICAN NAVY DURING THE YEARS OF CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, 1966-1989

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

On 26 August 1966 the first clash between South African security forces and cadres of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) took place at Ongulumbashe.<sup>2</sup> This set in motion a train of events which in due course led to a full-scale guerrilla war in the north of South-West Africa (SWA)/Namibia; a war that also spilled over into Angola and which became intertwined with the liberation struggle and, later, the civil war in the latter country. Nearly 23 year later, on 20 June 1989, the last operational South African troops left SWA/Namibia,<sup>3</sup> and on 21 March 1990 Namibia became an independent country.

The war in SWA/Namibia, and later on also in Angola, was - in terms of the then South African Defence Force (SADF) - mainly fought by ground forces (i.e. the South African (SA) Army), assisted by aircraft and helicopters of the South African Air Force (SAAF), while the South African Medical Service (SAMS) played an important role with regard to the evacuation and treatment of casualties. But what about the South African Navy (SAN)?

It is the purpose of this article to give a review of the role played by the SAN in the years 1966 to 1989. In the light of the fact that the SAN's role in the conflict "up north" (i.e. in SWA/Namibia and in Angola) was - relative to that of the SA Army, SAAF and SAMS - very small, the emphasis will fall, not so much on the SAN's active military role, but on its development, achievements, problems and frustrations in the years 1966 to 1989, and on how the Namibian War of Independence (as well as conflict in other parts of southern Africa) affected the SAN.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, W Steenkamp, **South Africa's border war 1966-1989** (Gibraltar, 1989), pp. 21-2.

<sup>3</sup> **Sunday Times**, 25 June 1989, p. 11; **Die Burger**, 1 June 1989, p. 23 and 26 June 1989, p. 9; **The Star**, 16 June 1989, p. 1.

When the "troubles" started in SWA/Namibia on 26 August 1966, the SAN had about 270 officers and 2 700 ratings; two "W" class destroyers (SAS **Jan van Riebeeck** and **Simon van der Stel**); three Type 12 frigates (SAS **President Kruger**, **President Steyn** and **President Pretorius**); one Type 15 frigate (SAS **Vrystaat**, in reserve); two "Loch" class frigates (SAS **Good Hope** and **Transvaal**, both in reserve); four "Ford" class seaward defence boats (i.e. small patrol boats; SAS **Gelderland**, **Nautilus**, **Rijger** and **Oosterland**); one "Algerine" class ocean minesweeper (SAS **Pietermaritzburg**, in reserve); ten "Ton" class coastal minesweepers (SAS **Kaapstad**, **Pretoria**, **Durban**, **Windhoek**, **Port Elizabeth**, **East London**, **Johannesburg**, **Kimberley**, **Mosselbaai** and **Walvisbaai**); one hydrographic survey ship (SAS **Natal**, a converted "Loch" class frigate); one small inshore survey vessel (SAS **Haerlem**, a converted "Ford" class patrol boat); one boom defence vessel (SAS **Somerset**); one small training vessel (**Navigator**); three small harbour defence motor launches (HDMLs Nos 1200, 1203 and 1204); one coastal tug (**De Noorde**), and three small dockyard launches (DLs 1, 3 and 5).<sup>4</sup>

By the time the SADF withdrew from SWA/Namibia on 20 June 1989, the SAN had about 700 officers and 6 800 ratings (including about 2 000 national servicemen (i.e. conscripts) and 900 Marines); three "Daphné" class submarines (SAS **Maria van Riebeeck**, **Emily Hobhouse** and **Johanna van der Merwe** - renamed SAS **Spear**, **Umkhonto** and **Assegaai** in 1999); nine "Minister" class strike craft (i.e. missile-carrying fast attack craft; SAS **Jan Smuts**, **P.W. Botha**, **Frederic Creswell**, **Jim Fouché**, **Frans Erasmus**, **Oswald Pirow**, **Hendrik Mentz**, **Kobie Coetzee** and **Magnus Malan** - the last eight renamed SAS **Shaka**, **Adam Kok**, **Sekhukhune**, **Isaac Dyobha**, **René Sethren**, **Galeshewe**, **Job Maseko** and **Makhanda** in 1997); four "River" class minehunters (SAS **Umkomaas**, **Umgeni**, **Umzimkulu** and **Umhloti**); four "Ton" class minesweepers (SAS **Windhoek**, **East London**, **Kimberley** and **Walvisbaai**); two combat support ships (SAS **Drakensberg** and **Tafelberg**); one hydrographic survey ship (SAS **Protea**); one torpedo recovery/diving support ship (SAS **Fleur**); one small training vessel (**Navigator**); two air-sea rescue launches (**P1551** and **P1555**); 28 "Namacurra" harbour patrol boats; two coastal tugs (**De Noorde** and **De Mist**); one harbour tug (**De Neys**), and three small dockyard launches (DLs 2, 4 and 5).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> J Moore (ed.), **Jane's fighting ships 1966-67** (Coulson, 1966), pp.228-30; A du Toit, **South Africa's fighting ships past and present** (Rivonia, 1992), pp. 152, 210, 218-9, 246, 256, 258. These sources, as well as all the other sources consulted in writing this article, are freely available.

<sup>5</sup> R Sharpe (ed.), **Jane's fighting ships 1989-90** (Coulson, 1989), pp. 474-7; Du Toit, pp. 246, 255-6, 258-61, 296.

In comparing the SAN's inventory of 1966 with that of 1989, it is clear that in the course of 23 years (and while the SADF was involved in the war in SWA/Namibia and in Angola), the Navy underwent major changes, and it is the purpose of this article to explain why and how these changes came about. For example: Why did the SAN lose all its major surface combat ships (i.e. destroyers and frigates) without replacing them with similar types of ships? Why was it necessary to acquire a second combat support ship (especially if there were no more destroyers or frigates to replenish at sea)? How strong was the SAN in 1989, compared to 1966?

## 2. FROM NORMAL NAVAL CONTACT TO GRADUAL ISOLATION; AND A LOW-INTENSITY GUERRILLA WAR IN SWA/NAMIBIA, 1966-1974

In 1966 the SAN was still an exclusively British-equipped navy. With the exception of the South African-built training vessel (**Navigator**), three HDMLs and a tug (**De Noorde**), all the Navy's ships and craft were built in the United Kingdom, and in some instances were former Royal Navy (RN) ships. By the mid-1960s the Cold War was still showing no signs of abating, and the SAN (in particular its two destroyers and three frigates, plus three frigates in reserve, and its ten coastal minesweepers) was geared towards defending the strategically important Cape sea route in the interest of the West. The maintenance of a blue water navy, along with the defence of the Cape sea route, was in line with the Simon's Town Agreement of 1955,<sup>6</sup> which paved the way for the formal transfer of the RN's Simon's Town naval dockyard and base to the SAN on 2 April 1957.<sup>7</sup>

By 1966 the National Party (NP) government had been in power for 18 years and was implementing its policy of apartheid with more vigour than ever before. On 6 September 1966, only two weeks after the first SWAPO incursion in the north of SWA/Namibia had taken place, the South African prime minister, Dr HF Verwoerd, was murdered by a mentally disturbed messenger in parliament; but Verwoerd's successor, BJ Vorster, was at that stage committed to the vigorous implementation of the policy of apartheid. The events at Sharpeville (21 March 1960) and in other so-called black townships focused the international community's attention on South Africa's racial policies more than ever before, and gradually the country was isolated internationally. But by the mid-1960s the SAN still had normal relationships with most Western countries. This was reflected by the flag-

<sup>6</sup> A Wessels, "Die Simonstadse Ooreenkoms", *Yesterday and Today* 14, September 1987, pp. 18-21.

<sup>7</sup> PJ Henshaw, "The transfer of Simonstown: Afrikaner nationalism, South African strategic dependence, and British global power", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 20(3), September 1992, pp. 420-44; *Cape Argus*, 3 April 1957, p. 11; *Die Burger*, 2 April 1987, pp. 1, 8, 9 and 3 April 1957, pp. 1, 5, 7, 9, 15.

showing visits to foreign countries undertaken by units of the SAN, and similar visits by foreign warships to Simon's Town and other South African ports, usually with concomitant joint exercises.

The Six Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbours (1967) led to the closure of the Suez Canal (which was only opened again in 1975), and to an increase in traffic around the Cape. For the next few years many foreign warships consequently also sailed to the Indian Ocean and/or Far East, or back home, via the Cape sea route, and often these warships called at South African ports; for example, in 1968 at least 44 RN (and auxiliary) ships visited Simon's Town; in 1969 there were at least 39 such visits; in 1970 at least 36 visits; and 50 visits in 1971.<sup>8</sup> Most of the SAN's exercises involved RN ships (and sometimes also a submarine), but ships from France (a country that until 1960 had many colonies in Africa, and thereafter still a few possessions in the Indian Ocean, and was determined to have its influence felt on the continent and adjacent seas), Portugal (the oldest colonial power in Africa, and by the mid-1960s still determined to cling to its colonies, notwithstanding the fact that guerrilla wars had broken out in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea), and the United States of America (USA) also participated from time to time. In February 1967 the aircraft carrier USS **Franklin D Roosevelt** visited Cape Town. Black American sailors were not allowed to go ashore, because under apartheid laws they could not be guaranteed equal treatment - and that put an end to USA naval visits to South Africa.<sup>9</sup>

Anticipating that in future SAN warships might no longer be welcome to refuel in several ports, the SAN acquired the Danish oil tanker **Annam** in 1967. The ship was converted into a fleet replenishment (logistic/combat support) ship in Durban and on 19 August 1967 it was commissioned as SAS **Tafelberg**, the SAN's first-ever replenishment tanker.<sup>10</sup> It was employed at sea to enable the SAN to operate independently of foreign ports and over longer distances than ever before. This newly-acquired capability of the SAN was successfully demonstrated when the tanker accompanied the frigates SAS **President Kruger** ("PK") and **President Steyn** ("PS") on a month-long Transatlantic cruise (24 October - 27 November 1967) that took the task force to Puerto Belgrano and Buenos Aires in Argentina - a country never before visited by the SAN.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, the minesweepers SAS **Kimberley** and **Mosselbaai** visited Luanda (capital of the then Portuguese colony

<sup>8</sup> WD Jones, List of ships visiting Simon's Town 1965-1978 (copy of typed list in author's possession).

<sup>9</sup> **Die Burger**, 10 November 1994, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Du Toit, p. 240.

<sup>11</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 187, 226; Documentation Service Directorate (South African National Defence Force, Pretoria): log-books of SAS **President Kruger** and SAS **Tafelberg**; information supplied by the late Cdre DK Kinkead-Weekes.

Angola) in October 1967.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the SAN deployed both its largest ship (the **Tafelberg**) and some of its smallest ships ("Ton" class minesweepers) as grey diplomats, i.e. warships that were sent to other countries to establish better relations or to strengthen ties that already existed.<sup>13</sup>

In October 1968 warships of the Republic of South Africa (RSA) were sent on two important diplomatic missions. The frigates SAS **President Steyn** and **President Pretorius** ("PP"), accompanied by SAS **Tafelberg**, were sent to Australia on a 58-day cruise (7 October - 3 December; the first such visit by South African warships since the frigate SAS **Transvaal** had visited Australia in January-February 1951),<sup>14</sup> while the destroyer SAS **Simon van der Stel** and minesweepers **Kimberley** and **Mosselbaai** visited Lourenço Marques (today Maputo) in the then Portuguese colony of Mozambique.<sup>15</sup> In October 1969 the destroyer SAS **Simon van der Stel**, frigate SAS **President Pretorius**, minesweepers SAS **Port Elizabeth** and **Walvisbaai**, and the replenishment ship SAS **Tafelberg** visited Angolan ports,<sup>16</sup> and in July 1970 the minesweepers SAS **Port Elizabeth**, **Windhoek** and **Johannesburg** visited Lourenço Marques.<sup>17</sup>

In the meantime the SAN decided to convert its three Type 12 frigates into helicopter-carrying ships. This was not the first time that the Navy had embarked on such a project. From 1962-6, first the destroyer SAS **Simon van der Stel** ("Simon") and then its sister ship, **Jan van Riebeeck** ("JvR"), were given a second lease on life when they were modified to carry two Westland Wasp HAS Mk1 anti-submarine warfare (ASW) helicopters each.<sup>18</sup> The modifications to the Type 12s were also carried out by the Simon's Town Naval Dockyard and included the construction of a hangar for one Wasp helicopter and the fitting of two triple 324-mm tubes for ASW torpedoes. "PK" was the first ship to undergo the conversion (29 January

<sup>12</sup> SA Naval Museum (Simon's Town): History of the mine countermeasures flotilla 1922-1988 (unpublished manuscript), pp. 41-2; Du Toit, pp. 197, 213.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on these and other diplomatic missions (1966-89) that involved SAN warships, see A Wessels, "South Africa's grey diplomats; visits by South African warships to foreign countries 1946-1996", *Scientiae Militaria* 27, 1997, pp. 76-86.

<sup>14</sup> SA Naval Museum: Report of proceedings - visit to Australia - period 7<sup>th</sup> October to 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1968; Du Toit, p. 226; *Navy News* 8, December 1986, p. 9; *Commando* 20(4), April 1969, pp. 13, 15 and 20(5), May 1969, pp. 13, 15, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Documentation Service Directorate: log-book of SAS **Mosselbaai**.

<sup>16</sup> SA Naval Museum: Newspaper cuttings (file); information supplied by Capt. RC Cousens; Du Toit, p. 226.

<sup>17</sup> SA Naval Museum: History of the mine countermeasures flotilla 1922-1988, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> Du Toit, pp. 196, 199. For more on the history of these two ships, see A Wessels, "Snelstomers: torpedojaers in Suid-Afrikaanse vlootdiens, 1950-1975", *Journal for Contemporary History* 29(2), September 2004, pp. 25-42 and A Wessels, *South Africa's frigates and destroyers 1944-1985*, *Naval Digest* 11, November 2005, pp. 37-56.

1968 - 5 August 1969), followed by "PS" (5 August 1969 - 11 May 1971), and then "PP" (1973 - 12 July 1977), which underwent a more elaborate modernisation.<sup>19</sup>

Towards the late 1960s the SAN acquired a few more vessels; for example, on 23 July 1969 the new harbour tug **De Neys** was procured, and on 1 November 1969 two 29,3-m German-built (1961-2) air-sea rescue launches (taken over from the SAAF, when the SAN assumed responsibility for air-sea rescue work) were acquired, along with the new torpedo recovery/diving support vessel SAS **Fleur**, built in Durban.<sup>20</sup> In the meantime, a cabinet decision of 1964 to equip the SAN with submarines became a reality when the first of three SAN "Daphné" class patrol submarines was laid down on 14 March 1968 in the French port of Nantes. SAS **Maria van Riebeeck** ("Maria") was launched on 18 March 1969 and commissioned on 24 July 1970; SAS **Emily Hobhouse** ("Emily") was laid down in Nantes on 18 November 1968, launched on 24 October 1969 and commissioned on 26 February 1971; and SAS **Johanna van der Merwe** ("Johanna") was laid down in Nantes on 24 April 1969, launched on 21 July 1970 and commissioned on 27 August 1971.<sup>21</sup> The SAN would have preferred to acquire the larger British "Oberon" class submarines, but in 1964 the Labour Party came to power in the United Kingdom and decided not to supply any further arms to the RSA. In the years that followed it became clear that the "Daphnés" were an excellent "second choice", and these boats in due course contributed towards the SADF's war effort by supporting ground forces in various ways.

It was decided that the new submarines would sail to South Africa, but they had to be escorted by a surface vessel. This afforded the RSA's grey diplomats the opportunity to visit ports in Europe and along the west coast of Africa. SAS **President Kruger** departed from Simon's Town on 28 January 1971, visited Luanda, Las Palmas and Lisbon, and linked up with "Maria" in Toulon. En route back to South Africa (arrival: 13 May 1971) the South Africans visited Gibraltar, Porto Grande on São Vicente (Cape Verde Islands), Luanda and Walvis Bay. In the meantime SAS **Simon van der Stel** visited Lobito in Angola (27-30 April), then rendezvoused with SAS **Tafelberg**; and the two ships then in turn rendezvoused with "PK" and

<sup>19</sup> Du Toit, pp. 226-7, 239. For more on the history of the Type 12s, see A Wessels, "Die Suid-Afrikaanse Vloot se eerste fregat-era, 1944-1985(2): die 'President'-klas fregatte", **Journal for Contemporary History** 29(1), June 2004, pp. 27-41 and Wessels, **South Africa's frigates and destroyers 1944-1985**, pp. 15-33, 35-6.

<sup>20</sup> Du Toit, pp. 249, 252, 260.

<sup>21</sup> SA Naval Museum, Submarines (file): History of the South African Navy submarine service (typed manuscript), pp. 1-3; SA Naval Museum, loose file: Abbreviated history of SAN submarine branch (typed manuscript), p. 1; **Through the periscope. South African submarines: the first thirty years. Reflections past and present** (Simon's Town, 1999), pp. 22-5, 29-35. For more on the history of the SAN's "Daphné" class submarines, see A Wessels, "Duikbote in die Suid-Afrikaanse Vloot: die eerste fase, 1970-2003" (published in two parts), **Journal for Contemporary History** 30(2), September 2005, pp. 180-94 and 30(3), December 2005, pp. 92-108.

"Maria".<sup>22</sup> SAS **President Steyn** left Simon's Town on 1 September 1971, visited Lisbon, Hamburg, Kiel, Portsmouth and Portland, and teamed up with "Emily" in Toulon. On passage to the RSA (arrival: 10 December 1971) the vessels visited Cadiz, Porto Grande, Luanda (where "PS" 's Wasp helicopter crashed, killing the pilot and three others on board) and Walvis Bay.<sup>23</sup> "PS" also escorted "Johanna" back to South Africa, visiting Porto Grande and Las Palmas en route to Toulon, and visiting Cadiz, Porto Grande, Luanda and Walvis Bay on passage back to Simon's Town, arriving on 19 June 1972.<sup>24</sup>

In the meantime the SAN's new hydrographic survey ship, SAS **Protea**, was commissioned at Scotstoun, Glasgow, on 23 May 1972, and sailed to South Africa (after work-up at Portland) via Lisbon, Luanda and Walvis Bay, arriving at Simon's Town on 14 July 1972.<sup>25</sup> (The ship replaced SAS **Natal**.) Two other tailor-made flag-showing cruises also took place in 1972: the minesweepers SAS **Johannesburg**, **Walvisbaai** and **Windhoek**, and torpedo recovery/diving support ship SAS **Fleur**, visited Durban and Lourenço Marques towards the end of May, and in the second week of November the minesweepers SAS **Johannesburg** and **Mosselbaai** visited Lobito.<sup>26</sup> In January-March 1971 and January-March 1973 SAS **Tafelberg** acted as guardship during the Cape to Rio yacht races,<sup>27</sup> and from 29 March to 7 April 1973, "PK", "PS" and "Johanna" visited Lourenço Marques<sup>28</sup> - the last visit of its kind before Mozambique became independent.

With the arrival of the third new submarine, the SAN was now stronger than ever before in its history; as a matter of fact, it was the strongest it has ever been to date. Over and above the three submarines, the SAN at the end of 1972 also had two modernised destroyers, three relatively new frigates (two of which had already been further modernised), three old frigates in reserve, ten coastal minesweepers, one old ocean minesweeper in reserve, four small patrol vessels, one HDML, one large replenishment ship, one large modern and one small survey ship, one boom defence

<sup>22</sup> Documentation Service Directorate: log-books of SAS **President Kruger** and **Simon van der Stel**; Du Toit, pp. 226, 242, 271.

<sup>23</sup> Documentation Service Directorate: log-books of SAS **President Kruger** and **Simon van der Stel**; Du Toit, pp. 226, 242, 271.

<sup>24</sup> Documentation Service Directorate: log-books of SAS **President Steyn** and **Johanna van der Merwe**; information supplied by Rear-Adm. (JG) SK Stead; Du Toit, p. 228; *Navy News* 10, August-September 1991, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> SA Naval Museum: SAS **Protea** (file): brochures, etc.; *The Cape Times*, 15 July 1972, p. 1; *Die Burger*, 15 July 1972, p. 1; Du Toit, p. 263.

<sup>26</sup> SA Naval Museum, History of the mine countermeasures flotilla 1922-1988, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> SA Naval Museum: Cape to Rio race guardship duties – SAS **Tafelberg** – report of proceedings; Du Toit, p. 242; information supplied by Capt. RC Cousins; *Cape Argus*, 13 January 1973, pp. 1, 11; *Die Burger*, 13 January 1973, p. 1 and 15 January 1973, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Du Toit, p. 229.

vessel, one torpedo recovery/diving support ship, three air-sea rescue launches, one coastal and one harbour tug, three dockyard launches, and a small training vessel.<sup>29</sup>

During the first half of the 1970s, foreign grey diplomats continued to visit RSA ports; for example, in 1973 19 British, eight French, four Malaysian and one Iranian warship visited Simon's Town, and during the following year 19 British, at least four Israeli, three French, three Iranian, one German and one Kenyan warship visited Simon's Town.<sup>30</sup> Owing to the coming into power of the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom in 1970, the SAN was able to order the **Protea** (to which reference has already been made), as well as two small 22-m air-sea rescue launches (**P1554** and **P1555**),<sup>31</sup> but in 1974 the Labour Party once again came into power. The delivery of the last of seven additional Wasp helicopters was cancelled, and on 16 July 1975 the Simon's Town Agreement was abrogated.<sup>32</sup> Towards the end of that year, the destroyer SAS **Jan van Riebeeck** was decommissioned for the last time (the last of the SAN's major World War II-vintage ships to be withdrawn from service), its sister ship, **Simon van der Stel**, having been placed in reserve in March 1972. "Simon" was broken up for scrap metal in Durban, but a more dramatic end awaited the "JvR"<sup>33</sup> (see section 3, *infra*).

While all these developments were taking place in the SAN, the war "up north" had gradually intensified. From 1966 onwards the South African Police (assisted by helicopters of the SAAF) had for several years been able to contain SWAPO's military operations, but the escalation in the conflict led to the SADF taking over counter-insurgency operations in 1973.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. A CIVIL WAR IN ANGOLA; AND GROWING ISOLATION FOR THE NAVY, 1975-1979

By the mid-1970s there had already been many coloureds serving in uniform in the SAN; Indians would join in numbers thanks to the establishment of a training base for Indian recruits in Durban on 15 January 1975 (later named SAS **Jalsena**); and in due course more women would also serve in uniform in the Navy. While the

<sup>29</sup> J Moore (ed.), **Jane's fighting ships 1973-74** (London, 1973), pp. 267-70.

<sup>30</sup> WD Jones, List of ships visiting Simon's Town 1965-1978 (copy of typed list in author's possession).

<sup>31</sup> Du Toit, pp. 253-5.

<sup>32</sup> A du Plessis, **Die maritiem-strategiese betekenis van die Simonstad-vlootbasis** (Pretoria, 1979), pp. 26-7.

<sup>33</sup> Du Toit, p. 197.

<sup>34</sup> SL Barnard, " 'n Historiese oorsig van die gewapende konflik aan die noordgrens van SWA/Namibië 1966-1989", **Acta Academica** 23(1), March 1991, pp. 112-4; CJ Nöthling, **Geskiedenis van die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag** (2) (Silverton, 1996), pp. 18-9, 24.



SAN gradually rid itself of apartheid's shades, the RSA as a whole was still firmly under the control of the NP and its outdated policies.

As long as there were pro-RSA governments in Mozambique and Angola (both of which countries were still governed by the autocratic Portuguese colonial power by the mid-1970s), as well as in Rhodesia (where Mr Ian Smith proclaimed a unilateral declaration of independence on 11 November 1965 in a desperate effort to ensure white minority rule), South Africa had a physical buffer that separated it from the rest of (independent, black) Africa; and both SWAPO and the banned South African liberation movements - the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) - found it difficult to infiltrate and attack targets in SWA/Namibia and the RSA.

In 1974 a regime change took place in Portugal; and soon Portugal withdrew from its African colonies. At that stage there were plans to have three light frigates built for the SAN in Portugal, but the new Portuguese government did not want to supply warships to the RSA.<sup>35</sup> Mozambique became independent on 25 June 1975, and Angola on 11 November 1975. The fact that both these countries henceforth had pro-communist governments, had serious strategic implications for the apartheid regime in South Africa, and also affected the SAN. The Navy's grey diplomats were no longer welcome in Angolan or Mozambican ports, units of the Navy were soon to be deployed operationally in Angolan (and in due course also in other) waters, and in the course of time the SAN would have to be scaled down, and would also be obliged to change its policies; on the one hand as a result of boycotts, but also, on the other hand, because defence spending would henceforth focus on the land and air forces that bore the brunt of the fighting in SWA/Namibia and in Angola.

In October 1975 the SADF invaded Angola (Operation Savannah) in an effort to support the pro-Western União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) and Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA) against the pro-communist Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA). The South African task force advanced rapidly, covering 3 159 km into Angola; but when the troops were in sight of Luanda, political considerations forced the South Africans to withdraw - the last troops leaving Angolan territory on 27 March 1976.<sup>36</sup> Although most of the fighting was carried out by land forces, supported by aircraft and helicopters, the SAN also played a small but noteworthy role. For the duration

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<sup>35</sup> TD Potgieter, "Another apartheid dilemma: corvettes for the South African Navy", *New Contree* 47, September 2000, pp. 90-4.

<sup>36</sup> FJ du T Spies, *Operasie Savannah: Angola 1975-1976* (Pretoria, 1989), *passim*; Barnard, pp. 114-6; Nöthling, pp. 24-5.

of Operation Savannah, several SAN units were deployed off the coast of SWA and Angola, including the frigates SAS **President Kruger** and SAS **President Steyn**, the submarine SAS **Maria van Riebeeck**, the replenishment ship SAS **Tafelberg**, and a number of minesweepers; while the submarine SAS **Johanna van der Merwe** had even been deployed in Angolan waters before Operation Savannah had started. The SAN ships and submarines had to be on stand-by, in case SA Army personnel had to be evacuated, and they also had to monitor the movements of Soviet Bloc ships that might have been transporting weapons and military equipment to the MPLA.<sup>37</sup> On 20 November 1975 "PS" took over the patrol work off the Angolan coast from "PK", while **Tafelberg** also stayed in the area to replenish the frigate's fuel and stores. In the early hours of 28 November the boats and helicopter of "PS" picked up nine South African officers, 15 other ranks, two civilians, as well as some equipment, from the beach near Ambrizete, a small fishing village north of Luanda, and took them to Walvis Bay.<sup>38</sup> Although the SAN's role in Operation Savannah was limited, it was nevertheless of great importance - and successful.

With SAS **Tafelberg** supporting other SAN ships involved in the Angolan conflict, SAS **Protea** acted as guardship for the yachts that took part in the 1976 Transatlantic race, and also visited Rio de Janeiro.<sup>39</sup> In that same year a SAN ship visited the USA for the first time, when SAS **President Kruger** sailed via Walvis Bay, Abidjan and Las Palmas, and then to Norfolk and New York to take part in the commemoration of the USA's 200<sup>th</sup> year of independence. The passage home took "PK" via Charleston and Las Palmas back to Simon's Town, where she arrived on 6 August 1976 at the end of a 64-day cruise.<sup>40</sup>

While "PK" was on passage to the USA, the riots in Soweto broke out on 16 June 1976, spreading to other so-called townships, which led to the implementation of intensified measures by the apartheid regime to quell all opposition; and this (together with events such as the death in police custody of black consciousness leader Stephen (Steve) Bantu Biko on 21 September 1977) in turn led to further isolation for South Africa, including the imposition of an all-embracing mandatory arms embargo by the UN against the country (4 November 1977). At that stage the SAN was eagerly awaiting the completion of two Type 69A light frigates and two "Agosta" class submarines, all nearing completion in France. As a matter of fact, the frigate SAS **Good Hope** was commissioned without fanfare at Lorient on

<sup>37</sup> Spies, pp. 147, 168, 174-6; **Through the periscope. South African submarines: the first thirty years**, pp. 48, 65.

<sup>38</sup> C Bennett, "Ambrizette", **Naval Heritage Trust Newsletter**, November 2004, pp. 2-9; Du Toit, pp. 231-2; Steenkamp, pp. 51-2; Spies, pp. 141-2.

<sup>39</sup> **Cape Argus**, 10 December 1975, p. 6; Du Toit, p. 263.

<sup>40</sup> Du Toit, p. 232; information supplied by Rear-Adm. PA Wijnberg; **Navy News** 11, April 1992, p. 27.

17 September 1977; but the delivery of this ship, its sister ship (SAS **Transvaal**), and the two submarines, was embargoed, and all crew members were sent home.<sup>41</sup>

In the meantime the first of three missile-carrying strike craft (fast attack craft), SAS **Jan Smuts**, was commissioned in Israel on 8 July 1977, and arrived in Simon's Town in September 1977, followed by SAS **P.W. Botha** (commissioned on 2 December 1977; renamed **Shaka** on 1 April 1997) in January 1978 and SAS **Frederic Creswell** (commissioned on 6 April 1978; renamed **Adam Kok** on 1 April 1997) in May 1978. Three other strike craft, built under licence by Sandock Austral in Durban, soon followed: SAS **Jim Fouché** (commissioned on 22 December 1978; renamed **Sekhukhune** on 1 April 1997), SAS **Frans Erasmus** (commissioned on 16 March 1979; renamed **Isaac Dyobha** on 1 April 1997) and SAS **Oswald Pirow** (commissioned on 28 September 1980; renamed **René Sethren** on 1 April 1997). The first live firing of a missile by the SAN took place on 25 March 1980, when SAS **Jim Fouché** fired a Scorpion missile at the decommissioned destroyer **Jan van Riebeeck**, ripping a huge hole in its hull - after which the destroyer was sunk by gunfire.<sup>42</sup>

In the years 1975-9 a number of SAN ships were modified and a few new vessels and craft were acquired. In 1975 the replenishment ship SAS **Tafelberg** underwent a major refit, and a flight deck was constructed aft of the funnel for the operation of light helicopters. At about that time, the minesweepers SAS **Kaapstad** and **Pretoria** were converted into patrol ships, and in 1976-8 their sister ships SAS **Port Elizabeth** and **Mosselbaai** were converted to become the SAN's first-ever coastal minehunters. On 23 April 1978 the Navy commissioned a ship that was officially known as an oceanographic survey ship. The **RSA** was built in Japan in 1961 as an Antarctic supply and research ship for the Department of Transport, and served in that capacity until 1978 when it was replaced by SA **Agulhas**. In the Navy it was simply known by its pennant number, namely **A331**, and was apparently used for electronic surveillance along the coast of Angola and northern SWA/Namibia, in support of the SADF's war effort. After serving in the SAN for less than two years, it was decommissioned on 17 March 1980.<sup>43</sup>

In December 1978 the SAN received a new coastal tug, **De Mist**, which had been built in Durban. In an effort to safeguard South Africa's harbours against sabotage by insurgents, 30 "Namacurra" harbour protection boats (HPBs), known by their pennant numbers, **Y1501-1530**, were built in South Africa, and entered service as

<sup>41</sup> Du Toit, pp. 281-9; Potgieter, pp. 94-5.

<sup>42</sup> Du Toit, pp. 303, 309. Later, three additional strike craft were built. See Section 4, *infra*.

<sup>43</sup> Du Toit, pp. 213-6, 242, 291-3. **A331** was returned to the Department of Transport, later became an alongside training ship in Cape Town, and was broken up in 1995-6.

from 1979. They were manned by the Marines (until 1990), and based in all the major harbours. An unexpected acquisition in 1976 was the small patrol boat known as **P1558**, built for Malawi in Durban, but not delivered, because, as a result of Mozambique becoming independent in 1975, the boat's planned delivery route through that country was no longer accessible. After serving briefly as a training tender to the Military Academy at Saldanha Bay, and as an air-sea rescue boat, it operated from Walvis Bay as a patrol boat.<sup>44</sup>

In the meantime SWAPO, with its newly-acquired bases in a now friendly Angola (under MPLA control), continued its campaign against the SADF in (and the people of) SWA/Namibia with renewed vigour. In the light of South Africa's deteriorating international situation, the NP government was wary of ordering new cross-border operations; but when SWAPO started to infiltrate SWA/Namibia with ever-larger growing groups of guerrillas (now usually 80-100 strong), and the conflict started to acquire the characteristics of a semi-conventional (rather than merely guerrilla) war, the SADF received permission to launch a number of cross-border operations. The first such action was Operation Reindeer (May 1978), which included the attack on Cassinga, and which in due course led to much controversy. Several other cross-border operations followed, which succeeded in stabilising the situation and preventing SWAPO from breaking through further south into the predominantly white farming areas in northern SWA/Namibia.<sup>45</sup>

Towards the end of the 1970s there were only two flag-showing opportunities for the SAN, and both involved SAS **Protea**. At the beginning of 1978 the ship took part in an international krill research project, sailing around Cape Horn (the first SAN ship to do so) and then through the Beagle Channel to Ushuaia in Argentina to pick up scientists, thence to Deception Island and the South Shetland Islands (both British possessions), and then to Puerto Belgrano in Argentina, before returning to Simon's Town.<sup>46</sup> Political considerations compelled the organisers of the fourth Transatlantic yacht race (1979) to switch the finishing point from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil to Punta del Este in Uruguay. SAS **Protea** acted as guardship, and also visited Ilha da Trindade (a Brazilian island group), Punta del Este and Montevideo in Uruguay, and Buenos Aires in Argentina.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 278-9, 294-5. **P1558** was laid up in reserve for most of the period 1976-86, and was eventually sunk as a target on 15 September 1988.

<sup>45</sup> Barnard, pp. 116-9; Nöthling, pp. 25-6; MN Louw and JS Bouwer, **The South African Air Force at war: a pictorial appraisal** (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Melville, 1995), pp. 146-61; Steenkamp, pp. 61-87.

<sup>46</sup> Documentation Service Directorate: log-book of SAS **Protea**; line-book of SAS **Protea** (consulted on board the ship); **Navy News** [2], August 1982, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> Documentation Service Directorate: log-book of SAS **Protea**; **Navy News** [2], August 1982, p. 14; **The Cape Times South Atlantic Supplement**, 12 January 1979, p. 3; Du Toit, p. 265.

#### 4. THE WAR CONTINUES; ALMOST TOTAL ISOLATION, AND A NEW ROLE FOR THE NAVY, 1980-1989

In the course of the 1980s the Namibian War of Independence became inseparable from the Angolan civil war (1975-2002), and although the conflict in the north of SWA/Namibia continued to display characteristics of both a guerrilla and a semi-conventional war, the conflict inside Angola was partially a semi-conventional war, but was increasingly becoming a full-scale conventional struggle, with the SADF and UNITA sometimes fighting pitched battles against the MPLA and their Cuban, Eastern European and Soviet allies. Angola indeed became one of the most important (and tragic) battlefields of the Cold War. In August 1981 the SADF launched a large cross-border raid (Operation Protea) in which SWAPO suffered heavy losses, with more than 1 000 killed, plus a large number of wounded and more than 3 000 tons of Soviet equipment captured by the SADF. Other cross-border actions followed, for example Operation Daisy (October-November 1981), Operation Super (March 1982), Operation Phoenix (February 1983) and Operation Askari (December 1983-January 1984). After Operation Protea, the SADF did not withdraw all its troops from Angola. Instead, small units remained in the country to disrupt SWAPO's (and its allies') infrastructure and military capabilities. When the Joint Monitoring Commission between the RSA and Angola (February 1984-May 1985) failed to stop SWAPO's incursions and restore peace in the region, the war in SWA/Namibia and in Angola escalated. In 1985-6 the MPLA, SWAPO, the Cubans and their allies launched several attacks against UNITA, but the latter succeeded (with limited but crucial SADF support) in surviving and continuing their struggle. By July 1987 at least 25 000 men, supported by armour, jets, attack helicopters and surface-to-air missile systems, had been mustered for a new all-out onslaught against UNITA's headquarters at Jamba. UNITA would not have been able to survive such an attack, and asked the South African government to intervene. The SADF was consequently ordered to cross into Angola once more in numbers to fight a conventional war (as in 1975-6). In Operations Modular, Hooper and Packer the SADF inflicted severe casualties on the anti-UNITA forces, and in August 1988 the last SADF forces left Angola. Negotiations followed, which eventually led to the RSA withdrawing from SWA; and Namibia became independent on 21 March 1990.<sup>48</sup> But what happened in the SAN while all these developments were taking place?

In the light of the fact that the SAN had ordered two new light frigates from France, "PK" and "PS" were placed in reserve in 1977, and "PP" remained as the Navy's only operational frigate. As a matter of fact, at one stage the possibility of selling

<sup>48</sup> Barnard, pp. 119-25; Nöthling, pp. 37-42; Louw and Bouwer, pp. 162-234; Steenkamp, pp. 89-184.

all three Type 12 frigates was considered. When the UN arms embargo led to the cancellation of the French contract, "PS" (1978) and "PK" (1980) were once again returned to service. During the latter ship's recommissioning ceremony (15 August 1980) the Chief of the SAN, Vice-Adm. RA Edwards, made it clear that the frigate era in the SAN was virtually something of the past. The SAN had to adopt a new role: henceforth it would no longer defend the Cape sea route in the interest of the West, but would rather concentrate on safeguarding the RSA's harbours and coasts, and the Navy would in due course become a small-ship force. SAS **President Steyn** had already been withdrawn from service on 1 August 1980, and used for a short time as an accommodation ship for the mine-countermeasures (MCM) flotilla, before being stripped of all usable equipment in an effort to keep "PK" and "PP" going for as long as possible.<sup>49</sup> But in the future the small strike craft would become the backbone of the SAN's surface fleet. Consequently it was decided to build another six such ships locally, to make up a total of 12. However, in practice, only three more were built in Durban, making up a total of nine. The three additional ships were SAS **Hendrik Mentz** (commissioned on 11 February 1993; renamed **Galeshewe** on 1 April 1997), SAS **Kobie Coetzee** (also commissioned on 11 February 1983; renamed **Job Maseko** on 1 April 1997) and SAS **Magnus Malan** (commissioned on 4 July 1986; renamed **Makhanda** on 1 April 1997).<sup>50</sup>

Other additions to the SAN at the beginning of the 1980s were the four "River" class minehunters. Two were built by Abeking & Rasmussen in Germany and shipped to Durban for fitting out (commissioned on 13 January 1981 and 1 March 1981), while two other ships were built by Sandock Austral in Durban (commissioned on 30 October 1981 and 15 December 1981). They were all built under the guise of research vessels to be operated by the SAN for the Department of Transport; were initially named **Navors** (i.e. the Afrikaans for "research") **I**, **II**, **III** and **IV**, and were painted blue with white upperworks. Their true identity was only unveiled in 1988, albeit that they had already been renamed **Umkomaas**, **Umgeni**, **Umzimkulu** and **Umhloti** in 1982.<sup>51</sup>

In 1980 Zimbabwe-Rhodesia (as the country had been known since 1978) finally became Zimbabwe, and an independent country recognised by the international community; but henceforth with a government that was hostile towards the RSA. In a desperate effort to stay in power, the NP extended voting rights to coloured and Asian people, and inaugurated the tricameral parliament in 1983 in South Africa, thus making it clear to the black majority that they were still not regarded as part of the political future of a united RSA. This led to an increase in the political agitation

<sup>49</sup> Du Toit, pp. 232-4; **The Cape Times**, 18 August 1980, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Du Toit, pp. 304, 306, 309.

<sup>51</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 310-5.

at local level by the United Democratic Front (UDF), formed in 1983, working hand in hand with its parent organisation, the ANC, which operated on the international level to isolate the RSA. It also led to an increase in acts of terror by Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC. Moreover, in due course black-on-black violence also led to the death of thousands of people, as organisations jostled to place themselves in the best possible position, should the apartheid regime collapse or change its policy.<sup>52</sup>

As the political and security situation on the home front in the RSA deteriorated, the political stakes were raised, the NP became ever more isolated and desperate, and a low-intensity civil war developed in certain areas. At the same time, the war in SWA/Namibia and in Angola escalated; South African security forces conducted raids into other neighbouring countries; and the SADF had to commit more and more of its resources. In an effort to acquire a greater role for the SAN in the country's defence, and to ensure a greater role for the Navy in the struggle "up north", the Marines, as a branch of the Navy (which had previously existed from 1951-5 as the South African Corps of Marines and consisted of coast and anti-aircraft artillery regiments and their radar and workshop units) were resurrected in 1979. Hundreds of Marines were sent to the Zambezi River in the north of SWA/Namibia, where the river for some distance forms the border between that territory and Zambia, and at the furthest eastward point of the Caprivi Strip also meets Botswana and Zimbabwe. The Marines patrolled the Zambezi and surrounding areas, for example using "Vredenburg" launches and smaller boats. Their riverside base was called Wenela.<sup>53</sup> In the meantime, larger surface units of the Navy continued to undertake electronic and other patrol work along both the west and east coasts of southern Africa, sometimes in support of missions undertaken by special forces, strike craft and/or submarines.<sup>54</sup>

Indirectly, the SAN's submarines contributed greatly towards the SADF's war effort. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the ANC and SWAPO asked the Soviet Union to become involved on a larger scale in the liberation struggle in southern Africa - for example, by employing an intervention force in the area. One

<sup>52</sup> W Beinart, *Twentieth-century South Africa* (Cape Town, 1994), p. 229 *et seq.*; TRH Davenport, *South Africa: a modern history* (4<sup>th</sup> edition, Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 397-437.

<sup>53</sup> Steenkamp, p. 197.

<sup>54</sup> A lack of unclassified archival sources makes it impossible to give full credit to the SAN for their military achievements in this regard. This role must still be thoroughly researched. However, it is interesting to note that there are references to the SAN's clandestine operations (which involved combat support ships, strike craft and submarines) in support of SADF special forces along the west and east coasts of southern Africa in sources such as G Mills and D Williams, *7 battles that shaped South Africa* (Cape Town, 2006), pp. 173-5 and P Stiff, *The silent war: South African recee operations* (Alberton, 1999), pp. 48-52, 260, 272-3, 347-50, 357-8, 372-3, 378, 392, 458-69.

of the reasons why this did not happen in practice was that such a large force would have had to be transported by sea, and there was the danger that ships carrying the intervention force could be attacked by one or more of the SAN's "Daphné" class submarines – an eventuality that could lead to the escalation of the conflict, and also to possible intervention by the USA. The Soviet Union was not prepared to take such risks. Thus, owing to the fact that the small SAN had an effective submarine service, a mighty superpower was kept at bay.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the submarines probably played an important role with regard to shallow water operations, including surveillance and the gathering of information.

In the early hours of 18 February 1982 the SAN suffered its greatest (and most embarrassing) tragedy to date when the frigate SAS **President Kruger** was involved in a collision with the replenishment ship SAS **Tafelberg**, and sank soon afterwards some 78 nautical miles south-west of Cape Point, with the loss of 16 lives. For the time being SAS **President Pretorius** remained in commission as the SAN's last operational frigate, but on 26 July 1985 it was withdrawn from service owing to a lack of funds and a personnel shortage. Throughout the years 1966-89 budgetary constraints hampered the SAN in its day-to-day functioning, as well as with regard to the acquisition of new equipment. (Plans to completely rebuild "PS" and "PP" were eventually shelved. In April 1991 "PS" was sunk as a target by missiles and gunfire from strike craft, and in December 1992 "PP" was sold and then broken up in India as scrap metal.) In 1985 a further 14 ships were withdrawn from service as part of an elaborate rationalisation process of the SAN: the "Ton" class patrol ship (ex minesweeper) SAS **Kaapstad**, minesweeper SAS **Johannesburg**, and minehunters (ex minesweepers) SAS **Port Elizabeth** and SAS **Mosselbaai** were sold and broken up, and SAS **Pretoria** (in Hout Bay) and SAS **Durban** (in Durban) were preserved as museum ships outside the SAN (the **Pretoria** later becoming a multipurpose ship called MV **Madiba**, and today (2006) still operating out of Cape Town); the "Ford" class patrol boats SAS **Gelderland** (expended as a demolition target), SAS **Nautilus** (rebuilt as a super yacht and in 2006 still to be seen in Cape Town), SAS **Rijger** (sold to a civilian, but by 2006 rotting away in Hout Bay) and SAS **Oosterland** (sold to a civilian, and in 2006 still in a reasonably good condition in Hout Bay), as well as SAS **Haerlem**, the "Ford" class patrol boat converted into an inshore survey vessel in 1963 (scuttled as an artificial reef); the boom defence vessel SAS **Somerset** (still preserved as a museum ship in Cape Town); the air-sea rescue launch **P1554** (sold to a civilian) and the patrol boat **P1558** (sunk as a target).<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> D Walsh, "Why do we need submarines?", *African Armed Forces Journal*, February 2005, p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> Du Toit, pp. 142-4, 176, 178, 207-10, 218-9, 255, 278-9.



These negative developments were somewhat counterbalanced by the fact that in 1983-4 SAS **Tafelberg** underwent a comprehensive refit and was structurally rebuilt to accommodate two large helicopters (flight deck plus hangars) as well as assault boats, a hospital and substantially more accommodation. Henceforth it was a genuine combat support ship which, over and above the retained ability to replenish other ships at sea, could now also conduct long-range search-and-rescue missions, be employed on long-range patrol work, and land and support a sizeable amphibious force.<sup>57</sup> On 11 November 1987 the SAN commissioned a second combat support ship, SAS **Drakensberg**, purpose-built for the Navy, and the largest ship thus far designed and built in South Africa. Over and above the ability to replenish other ships' fuel and stores at sea, the **Drakensberg** was clearly designed to support the SADF's operations in the southern oceans, as well as along the west and east coasts of South Africa, including amphibious operations, long-range patrol and surveillance work, and search-and-rescue missions.<sup>58</sup> Henceforth the SAN was in the unique situation of having two replenishment/combat support ships, but no large units such as frigates or destroyers to support at sea. But then, it must be kept in mind that the **Drakensberg** was born out of the necessity to support smaller naval units and to provide assistance to the SAAF and SA Army in the context of the type of conflict in which the RSA was then involved; and ideally, at least one such ship should always have been in commission. In due course both it and the **Tafelberg** also became South Africa's most active grey diplomats, visiting many other countries - although these visits mainly occurred only after South Africa had resumed normal international relations.

In the light of South Africa's isolated international position in the 1980s, this decade was characterised by the lowest level of naval contact that ever occurred between the SAN and other navies. The only foreign visitors to South African ports in those years were: two destroyers and a repair ship from Taiwan that visited the RSA in May-June 1981 for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the RSA, an event that also brought the Chilean sail training ship **Esmeralda** to South African shores;<sup>59</sup> two new Malaysian frigates that briefly visited Simon's Town, for about a day, for bunkers (October 1984);<sup>60</sup> two Taiwanese destroyers and a repair ship that visited RSA ports in July 1985;<sup>61</sup> the **Esmeralda**, which once again visited in August-September 1988,<sup>62</sup> and another Taiwanese task force of two destroyers and a repair ship that visited in May-June 1989.<sup>63</sup> In August-September 1988 the SAN

<sup>57</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 242-3.

<sup>58</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 316-22.

<sup>59</sup> **Paratus** 32(6), June 1981, p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> **Navy News** 3(10), 1984, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> **Ibid.** 4(3), 1985, pp. 3-7, 11-4.

<sup>62</sup> S.A. Naval Museum, Chilean ship *Esmeralda* (file): various documents.

<sup>63</sup> **Paratus** 29(1), January 1978, p. 2.

took part in Exercise Magersfontein, the largest peace-time exercise of its kind. The naval exercise mainly took place at or in the vicinity of Walvis Bay, and participating SAN units included SAS **Tafelberg**, **Drakensberg** and **Maria van Riebeeck**, five strike craft, as well as three MCM vessels.<sup>64</sup> It took place against the background of the negotiations with regard to ending the wars in Angola and in SWA/Namibia; i.e., the SAN successfully projected power in support of diplomatic efforts.

Flag-showing opportunities for the SAN were obviously also very limited. When a Boeing 747 of the South African Airways crashed near Mauritius on 28 November 1987 en route to South Africa from Taiwan, SAS **Tafelberg** and **Jim Fouché** were sent to Port Louis to assist in wreckage salvage operations; but the first tailor-made SAN flag-showing cruise undertaken by the SAN after 1976, was the visit by SAS **Drakensberg** and **Frans Erasmus** to Chile in February-April 1988, stopping at Valparaiso, Talcahuano, Puerto Montt and Punta Arenas.<sup>65</sup> In November and again in December 1988, SAS **Drakensberg** paid visits to Beira in Mozambique to supply the Mozambican government with non-combat military equipment and vehicles to assist them in their efforts to protect the Cabora Bassa power line against attacks by the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO) movement.<sup>66</sup> After decades of conflict, a spirit of optimism was sweeping across southern Africa, as enemies were meeting at negotiation tables, and changes were on the cards; just as Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were also experiencing dramatic political changes.

## 5. CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES

South Africa's navy of 1989 was completely different from the 1966 navy. When the SAN's inventory of 1989 is compared with its 1966 inventory (see types and names of ships listed in the introduction, *supra*), it is clear that with the exception of four "Ton" class minesweepers, a coastal tug and a dockyard launch, all the other 1966 ships had been withdrawn from service by 1989; i.e. both the SAN's destroyers and all six frigates (including the three that had already been in reserve in 1966<sup>67</sup>), the minesweeper **Pietermaritzburg**,<sup>68</sup> six of the "Ton" class mine-

<sup>64</sup> *Navy News* 7, December 1988, pp. 12-3.

<sup>65</sup> Du Toit, p. 320; *Navy News* 7, June 1988, pp. 2, 7-10, 16 and 11, April 1992, p. 27.

<sup>66</sup> Nöthling, p. 35; information supplied by Lt AP Putter and Sub-Lt DJ Olivier.

<sup>67</sup> The fate of the destroyers and operational frigates was discussed in sections 3 and 4, *supra*. As far as the reserve frigates are concerned, **Vrystaat** was expended as a target (sunk by a submarine torpedo) on 14 April 1976, and **Good Hope** and **Transvaal** were sunk as artificial reefs in Smitswinkel Bay, near Cape Point, on 12 June 1978 and 3 August 1978 respectively. Du Toit, pp. 167, 205.

<sup>68</sup> It was eventually sunk as an artificial reef off Miller's Point, False Bay, on 19 November 1994. *Weekend Argus*, 12-13 November 1994, p. 19; A Wessels, "SAS Pietermaritzburg (1943-1994), mynveër van die Suid-Afrikaanse Vloot", *Springbok* 77, July 1995, pp. 8-9.

sweepers, all five "Ford" class patrol boats, and the remaining boom defence vessel. None of the destroyers or frigates were replaced by similar types of ships, but they were to some extent superseded by nine strike craft. The "Ford" class ships were not, strictly speaking, replaced, albeit that their coastal patrol work was henceforth performed by the strike craft. The SAN's MCM force was strengthened by the addition of four "River" class minehunters (which replaced the two "Ton" class minesweepers that had been converted into minehunters), although the overall MCM strength was reduced from 11 to eight hulls. Four new types of ships were introduced in the years 1966 to 1989: two combat support ships (although by 1989 there were no longer any destroyers or frigates left to be replenished at sea), a torpedo recovery/diving support ship, four air-sea rescue launches, and - most important of all - three submarines. By 1989 the SAN could support land operations (especially special forces) more than ever before, and it had a very strong anti-surface capability; but it had completely lost its surface ASW capability, and only had a limited anti-aircraft capability.

In 1966 the SAN had about 3 000 personnel and 26 major/noteworthy ships (two destroyers, six frigates, four patrol boats, 11 minesweepers, two hydrographic survey vessels and a boom defence vessel); in 1989 the SAN had about 7 500 personnel (including some 900 Marines) and 24 major/noteworthy ships (three submarines, nine strike craft, four minehunters, four minesweepers, two combat support ships, a hydrographic survey ship and a torpedo recovery/diving support ship). One can argue that there is no real substitute for destroyers or frigates; but in practice the acquisition of submarines and missile-carrying strike craft compensated at least to some extent for the loss of the larger units, and the combat support ships extended the range of SAN ships and submarines, and made the Navy more flexible. The overall fire-power and deterrence potential of the 1989 navy was indeed greater than that of 1966. Of the 26 major ships at the Navy's disposal in 1966, ten had a full-load displacement of more than 1 000 tons; in 1989 there were only three such ships, but owing to the acquisition of two large combat support ships, the total full-load displacement of all the above-mentioned major ships increased from approximately 30 000 tons in 1966 to approximately 53 000 tons in 1989.<sup>69</sup> However, if the two combat support ships (which made up about 75% of the total full-load displacement) are not taken into account, it is clear that on the whole the SAN had by 1989 indeed become a small-ship navy. It is also interesting to note that while **all** 26 major units of 1966 were British-built, the origins of the later 24 units (in 1989) were - as a result of arms embargoes - diverse: five were British, three French, three Israeli, two German, one Danish; and no fewer than ten were locally built.

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<sup>69</sup> See full-load displacements provided in Moore (ed.), pp. 228-30; Sharpe (ed.), pp. 474-7.

The SAN stayed a 24-major-hull navy until 1998, when the first of the strike craft was withdrawn from service (SAS **Jan Smuts**, 20 March 1998<sup>70</sup>). Towards the end of that year (18 November 1998) it was at long last announced that the SAN would in due course receive three new submarines and four patrol corvettes (in practice: frigates), as part of an arms deal.<sup>71</sup> By the time the first new submarine (**S101**, later renamed SAS **Manthatisi**) and the first new frigate (SAS **Amatola**) were commissioned on 3 November 2005 and 16 February 2006 respectively,<sup>72</sup> only nine of 1989's 24 hulls were still left.

Shortly after the war in SWA/Namibia had ended in 1989, the SA Army and SAAF were drastically rationalised, with several units and bases closing down, and a large number of aircraft and helicopters being withdrawn from service.<sup>73</sup> Although the SAN also had to make additional sacrifices with regard to personnel, the Navy adjusted much more easily to the post-war situation; but then, of course, it must be kept in mind that the SAN's involvement in the conflict "up north" and elsewhere, was much more limited than that of its land and air force counterparts. Nevertheless, its contribution with regard to the RSA's war effort in SWA/Namibia, in Angola and in other areas in southern Africa, was still of great importance, and forms part of the SAN's (and the new SANDF's) military track record, a track record of which all South Africans can be proud - irrespective of whether one agrees with the political policies and ideology that underpinned South Africa's actions from 1966 to 1989. In the 23 years of conflict, the SAN controlled the seas around southern Africa, deterred superpowers from intervening from the sea, and enabled the SA Army (supported by the SAAF) to project its power in areas such as the north of SWA/Namibia and in Angola.

In the years 1966 to 1989 the SAN underwent far-reaching changes, as did the other branches of the SADF, and indeed the RSA as a whole. If 1989 was a watershed year for SWA/Namibia, then 1990 would herald a new era in the history of the RSA. Within a few years (by 1994) the RSA would have an ANC (and thus predominantly black) government, and a new South African **National** Defence Force (SANDF) - comprised of the old SADF, the defence forces of the previously so-called independent homelands (Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei), the military wings of the ANC (namely MK) and the PAC (namely the Azanian People's Liberation Army, APLA), as well as certain KwaZulu-Natal Self-

<sup>70</sup> **Cape Argus**, 9 March 1998, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> **Beeld**, 19 November 1998, pp. 1-2; **The Mercury**, 19 November 1998, p. 1; **Salut** 6(1), January 1999, pp. 14-9.

<sup>72</sup> **The Mercury**, 9 November 2005, p. 6, 22 February 2006, p. 6 and 12 April 2006, p. 6; **The Citizen**, 10 April 2006, p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Compare the SADF's force strength and inventory of 1989 with the force strength and inventory of 1994 as supplied in **The military balance 1989-90** (London, 1989), pp. 139-40 and **The military balance 1993-94** (London, 1993), pp. 217-9.

Protection Forces (KZNSPF). And further afield, the Soviet Union was no more (having been broken up into 15 independent states), and the Cold War was also something of the past. Unfortunately the world has not necessarily become a safer place; as a matter of fact, inter- and intrastate conflicts, and accordingly also the role of navies, might have changed (at least to some extent) in character, but the SAN is today just as important for the safety and future of the RSA, as was the case in the years 1966 to 1989, when the RSA was facing revolt on the home front and when the country became embroiled in several other conflicts, in SWA/Namibia as well as in other neighbouring states.