

## ANGLO-SOUTH AFRICAN RELATIONS AND THE *EREBUS* SCHEME, 1936-1939

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### **Abstract**

As a member of the Commonwealth, South Africa aligned its defence policy closely with that of Great Britain in the years between the two World Wars. Apart from taking responsibility for its own defence, the Union of South Africa was also expected, at its discretion, to support Britain in the case of a European war. By the mid-1930s South Africa faced a possible external threat as the aggressive, imperialist policies of Germany, Italy and Japan began to take shape. South African Defence Minister, Oswald Pirow, endeavoured to obtain 15-inch guns from Britain to bolster Cape Town's defences against sea-raiders. Despite her strategic interest in safeguarding the Cape sea route, Britain's own efforts at rearmament, however, made her unwilling to part with guns of that calibre. Instead, in June 1936, the British government agreed to lend the monitor HMS *Erebus*, carrying two 15-inch guns, to the Union of South Africa. Redesignated *Erebus* Heavy Battery, South African Garrison Artillery, it was to serve as a floating artillery battery in Cape Town harbour. Two detachments of South Africans were trained in Britain to man the *Erebus*, but war broke out before the *Erebus* could sail for the Cape. Some of the South African crew on the *Erebus* allegedly 'refused duty' and were put ashore. The *Erebus* scheme was subsequently cancelled and the South Africans sent home. The aim of this article is to determine the origins of the *Erebus* scheme and the reasons for its demise against the background of Anglo-South African relations immediately before and after the commencement of the Second World War. This entails an investigation of Anglo-South African relations both at interstate and popular level. The article outlines the birth of the scheme amidst the diverging views of the British Admiralty and the South African Minister for Defence, Oswald Pirow, on Cape Town's defence needs. It highlights the political division in South African society over participation in a 'British' war on the eve of the Second World War and investigates the relationship between the South Africans and Britons on the *Erebus*. It concludes with a brief assessment of the role of the removal of some of the South

African crew from the Erebus and the change of government in South Africa in the cancellation of the Erebus scheme.

## Introduction

By the end of the nineteenth century, British imperial federation, as Wilcox observes, was 'a powerful dream'. Imperialists had a vision that self-governing British colonies in northern America, Australia and southern Africa would become nations within the empire and "commit themselves to joining the imperial metropole in developing and defending the empire's vast Asian and African estates".<sup>1</sup> When Commonwealth troops were employed for the first time in a British war, the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902,<sup>2</sup> it was neither in defence of the empire, nor for their military contribution; it was for political reasons to "impress all foreign nations" and to draw the colonies "closer to the mother Country by creating a new bond of union between all parts of our Empire".<sup>3</sup> This notion of accepting military contributions from the Commonwealth merely for political propaganda evaporated soon after the Anglo-Boer War. During the First World War Britain relied on India, South Africa, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to augment her forces.<sup>4</sup> By 1921 British military commitments across the globe were seriously overextending Britain's financial and human resources. Britain subsequently alleviated her burden by delegating some of her military responsibilities to the dominions, who were not only expected to take primary responsibility for their own defence, but also, at their discretion, for colonial policing and support (expeditionary forces) to Britain in the case of a European war.<sup>5</sup> The dominions in turn, would enjoy British support in terms of equipment and training, and, most importantly, in the protection of the Royal Navy. The ideal of military cooperation in the Commonwealth had changed dramatically from merely fostering internal cohesion

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1. C. Wilcox, 'The New South Wales Lancers in England and South Africa, 1899: an episode in imperial federation', *London Papers in Australian Studies No. 1* (London, 2000), 2.
  2. F. Hickling, 'Introduction', in P. Dennis and J. Grey (eds.), *The Boer War: Army, Nation and Empire* (Canberra, 2000), viii.
  3. Quoted in S. Clarke, "'Manufacturing Spontaneity'?: The role of the Commandants in the Colonial Offers of Troops to the South African War", in P. Dennis and J. Grey (eds.), *The Boer War: Army, Nation and Empire* (Army History Unit, Canberra, 2000), 143.
  4. J. Terraine, *White Heat: The New Warfare 1914 - 18* (London, 1982), 136-8.
  5. I.J. van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940', *Scientia Militaria*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2000, 192, 194, 196, 200-202, 210.

and demonstrating a united front to Britain's rivalries by the end of the nineteenth century, to a quest for optimal pooling of military resources by the first half of the twentieth century. The prerequisite for military cooperation in the Commonwealth, however, remained the same: sound Anglo-dominions relations with due consideration for the security interests of the individual dominions. As Kitchen observes, nationalism was on the rise within the British Empire and "Britain needed the Empire more than the Empire needed Britain".<sup>6</sup>

It was against this background of defence cooperation for mutual security that the South African government in 1936 accepted, on loan, the British monitor *HMS Erebus* to bolster the defences of Cape Town. Two detachments of South Africans were recruited and then trained in the United Kingdom to man the *Erebus*, but war broke out before the *Erebus* could sail for the Cape. Some of the South African crew on the *Erebus* allegedly 'refused duty' and were put ashore. The new South African Prime Minister, General J.C. Smuts, subsequently cancelled the *Erebus* scheme and the South African crew returned to the Union.

The aim of this article is to determine the origins of the *Erebus* scheme and the reasons for its demise against the background of Anglo-South African relations immediately before and after the commencement of the Second World War. This entails an investigation of Anglo-South African relations both at interstate and popular level. The article outlines the birth of the scheme amidst the diverging views of the British Admiralty and the South African Minister for Defence, Oswald Pirow, on Cape Town's defence needs. It highlights the political division in South African society over participation in a 'British' war on the eve of the Second World War and investigates the relationship between the South Africans and Britons on the *Erebus*. It concludes with an analysis of the role of the removal of some of the South African crew from the *Erebus* and the change of government in South Africa in the cancellation of the *Erebus* scheme.

### **Oswald Pirow and the origin of the *Erebus* scheme**

The defence policy that Oswald Pirow inherited when he became Minister for Defence in the Hertzog Cabinet in 1933 had been worked out by the Committee of Imperial Defence in 1928.<sup>7</sup> However, the international politico-military

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6. M. Kitchen, *The British Empire and Commonwealth: A Short History* (Macmillan: Basingstoke and London, 1996), 52.

7. O. Pirow, Speech in Parliament, 23 March 1939, Union of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly*, Vol. 33, 1939, 2273-74, 2279-80; A.

landscape had changed significantly by the early 1930s. An aggressive, expansionist Japan had overrun Manchuria and Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany, vowing to redress the humiliation of Versailles. South Africa thus had to deal with the possibility of an external threat. In May 1934 Pirow announced a five-year defence plan, drafted by the Chief of the General Staff, Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, to meet the new challenges. This plan focussed mainly on expanding the army and air force, with no significant emphasis on coastal defences. Pirow was not too concerned about a large-scale threat from the sea and thought that some mobile artillery (6-inch guns) together with field batteries and other deterrents would be able to take care of the occasional surface-raider or submarine.<sup>8</sup>

The possibility of an external threat against South Africa soon became more serious. Mussolini had led Italy into a war of conquest against Abyssinia in 1935 and Hitler, openly defying the Versailles restrictions, was rearming and expanding the German armed forces on a massive scale. Moreover, Germany had already commissioned three 'pocket' battleships by 1934, each boasting a main armament of six 11-inch guns, making them "potential sea-raiders of formidable power".<sup>9</sup> In the subsequent updating of South Africa's defence policy, Pirow paid special attention to coastal defence. The Union's coast defence policy assumed that the Royal Navy would command the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans in any conflict. South Africa thus only had to defend its ports against the odd raider that might slip through the British patrols.<sup>10</sup> Safeguarding South Africa's ports, particularly Cape Town and Simon's Town, was naturally also of great importance to Britain, as the Cape sea route was crucial in any war involving the closure of the Suez Canal.<sup>11</sup> As Hyam and Henshaw state, South Africa "stands at the intersection of major global sea-routes, providing a vital link in 'the routes to the east' – which is

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du Toit, *South Africa's Fighting Ships Past and Present* (Rivonia, 1992), 19.

8. J. Ellis, 'Oswald Pirow's Five-Year Plan for the reorganisation of the Union Defence Force, 1933 - 1939', *Scientia Militaria*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2000, 222-7; A. Davey, 'Robben Island and the Military 1931-1960', in H. Deacon (ed.), *The Island: A History of Robben Island 1488-1990* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1996), 79.
9. A. Davey, 'Robben Island and the Military 1931-1960', 80.
10. O. Pirow, Speech in Parliament, 23 March 1939, 2273-74, 2279-80; A. du Toit, *South Africa's Fighting Ships*, 19.
11. T.D. Potgieter, 'Maritime Defence and the South African Navy to the cancellation of the Simon's Town agreement', *Scientia Militaria*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2000, 164-5, 173-4; G.D. Moodie, Letter to Editor, *Scientia Militaria*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2003, 127-8.

why the British went there in the first place – and it commands access to two oceans, the Atlantic and the Indian, with an unrivalled surveillance of both ...”<sup>12</sup>

As far as the fixed coastal defences of the Union were concerned, Simon’s Town enjoyed the first priority in terms of a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ with Great Britain. However, in Pirow’s mind, where the fear of an attack by Japan apparently loomed large,<sup>13</sup> Cape Town’s fixed defences were uppermost. Whereas the 1928 policy made provision for safeguarding Cape Town against cruiser attack, Pirow aimed to make the city ‘virtually battleship proof’.<sup>14</sup> To that end, the upgrading of Cape Town’s main defences had to include the installation of a 15-inch gun battery on Robben Island and 9.2-inch high angle guns near Duiker Point as the city’s main defences.<sup>15</sup> The Admiralty and the War Office, however, saw no need for 15-inch guns at the Cape. They were of the opinion that as far as could be foreseen, “the scale of attack at the Cape does not warrant any Coast Defence armament heavier than the modern 9.2-inch gun”.<sup>16</sup> This opinion was based, firstly, on the assumption that under existing treaty arrangements no state had sufficient battleships to employ for its own purposes and it was therefore unlikely that any ships with guns larger than 8 inches would be detailed to execute raids at the Cape. Secondly, the Cape was so far removed from any likely enemy base that the 9.2-inch gun was a sufficient deterrent to even a heavily armoured battleship. A hit by a 9.2-inch shell could easily damage the enemy ship to the extent that it would make the long homeward voyage, with the risk of being attacked *en route* always present, an extremely difficult, if not impossible, undertaking. Thirdly, the intended use of

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12. R. Hyam and P. Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (Cambridge, 2003), 8.
  13. Public Record Office, London (hereafter PRO), ADM 1/9832, W.S. Churchill - J.C. Smuts, n.d. [20 September 1939]; (Copies of this document are also to be found in the South African National Archives, Pretoria (hereafter SANA), Smuts Papers 131, Vol. CXXXI, and W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. I, 4th ed: *The Gathering Storm* (London, etc, 1955), 667-8. The PRO register incorrectly indicates the date of Churchill’s telegram to Smuts as 29 October 1939, an error that is repeated on p 667 of Churchill’s *The Second World War*, Vol. I.)
  14. O. Pirow, Speech in Parliament, 23 March 1939, 2279.
  15. O. Pirow, Speech in Parliament, 23 March 1939, 2279.
  16. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, 'General report on the scheme for the employment of the Monitor Erebus as part of the Cape Peninsula defences...', n.d. [circa October 1936].

spotting and bombing aircraft as an integral part of coastal defence would greatly enhance the deterrent value of the 9.2-inch gun.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these British arguments, Pirow, whose “sentimental attachment to the British Empire was slight”,<sup>18</sup> insisted on having 15-inch guns to protect Cape Town harbour.<sup>19</sup> As politicians do,<sup>20</sup> Pirow placed South Africa’s security interests, as he saw them, first, knowing that Britain’s first concern was naturally her own security needs. This hesitancy to accept British assurances with regard to national defence at face value was not unique to Pirow. There were some suspicions in Australia, for instance, that Britain would not be able to fulfil the Singapore guarantee and that Australia therefore had to take its own precautions against possible Japanese aggression in the Pacific.<sup>21</sup> Australian prime minister, Sir Robert Gordon Menzies, on several occasions reiterated that “Britain’s ‘Far East’ was Australia’s ‘near North’”.<sup>22</sup>

Van der Waag<sup>23</sup> remarks that the British High Commissioner in Pretoria had warned the Secretary of State in July 1935 that London should not ‘appear to belittle South Africa’s place’ in the Imperial defence scheme and that ‘the big thing rather than the adequate but unspectacular’ appealed to Pirow. Therefore the British government agreed to let him have his 15-inch guns.<sup>24</sup> The agreement was thus not based upon a mutual Anglo-South African appreciation of the defence needs of Table Bay and the Cape sea route, but on London’s estimate of Pirow’s mindset and the maintenance of good diplomatic relations in the interest of imperial cooperation.

The main defences of Cape Town would take several years to complete. Firstly, there was, as always, the financial side that demanded an incremental approach and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Britain had to ensure her

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17. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, ‘General report on the scheme for the employment of the Monitor Erebus as part of the Cape Peninsula defences...., n.d. [circa October 1936].
  18. A. Davey, ‘Robben Island and the Military 1931-1960’, 79.
  19. A. du Toit, *South Africa’s Fighting Ships*, 19.
  20. R. Hyam and P. Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War*, 5.
  21. J. Grey, *A Military History of Australia* (Cambridge, 1999), 140-1.
  22. J. Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, 141.
  23. Quoted in I.J. van der Waag, *The Union Defence Force between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, 209.
  24. O. Pirow, Speech in Parliament, 23 March 1939, 2273-74, 2279-80; A. du Toit, *South Africa’s Fighting Ships*, 19.

own defence before it could satisfy the needs of the Union, or any other dominion, for that matter.<sup>25</sup> With a view to the time it would take the 15-inch guns to become available, the British Admiralty in June 1936 offered the loan of the monitor *HMS Erebus*, armed with two 15-inch guns, to the Union government to augment the defences of Cape Town as a short-term measure.<sup>26</sup> The Admiralty advised the Union Defence Force (UDF) strongly to view the proposed utilisation of the *Erebus* for coastal defence as a very temporary measure indeed while the fixed land defences were being modernised and expanded.<sup>27</sup>

The *Erebus*, first commissioned in September 1916, was originally designed to outrange and bombard the German garrison artillery on the Belgian coast; hence her principal strength was her gunnery, making her quite suitable for coastal defence.<sup>28</sup> Pirow consequently gladly accepted the offer.<sup>29</sup> However, the *Erebus* needed considerable revamping for her passage to the Cape and the fulfilment of her new role,<sup>30</sup> while the Admiralty was unable to fit the project into its dockyard programmes before December 1938.<sup>31</sup>

The Admiralty recommended that the publication of the loan should come from the Union Government and the British High Commissioner subsequently suggested that the *Erebus* scheme be announced in the South African and British

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25. O. Pirow, Speech in Parliament, 23 March 1939, 2273-74, 2279-80; A. du Toit, *South Africa's Fighting Ships*, 19.
  26. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, British Admiralty memorandum, June 1936.
  27. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, 'General report on the scheme for the employment of the Monitor *Erebus* as part of the Cape Peninsula defences...', n.d. [circa October 1936].
  28. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 263, unnumbered file '*Erebus* 1936', Staff Officer, SA Naval Service - Director Military Operations and Training, 27 September 1936; SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 263, unnumbered file '*Erebus* 1936', B. Wakes (?) - Col. De Waal, 18 November 1936; A. du Toit, *South Africa's Fighting Ships*, 19.
  29. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, Ministry of Defence - S.J.G. Hoare, 12 August 1936.
  30. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, British Admiralty memorandum, June 1936.
  31. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 244, unnumbered file '*Erebus* Acceptance, Conditions of Loan, Indemnity against all risks', C.T. Te Water - M. MacDonald, 22 November 1938; PRO, ADM1/9832, C.B. Coxwell - Treasury (?), 19 December 1939; SANDFA, DCS-CGS 23, unnumbered file, EREBUS, Secretary for Defence - Secretary, Office of the High Commissioner, 20 January 1939.

press on 2 November 1936,<sup>32</sup> but Pirow apparently declined and kept the news under the lid for a very long time. Eventually information about the *Erebus* scheme leaked out before the Government could announce it. The opposition spokesperson on defence matters, F.C. Erasmus, asked Pirow in Parliament on 7 February 1939 what arrangements the government had made with the Admiralty in connection with the *Erebus*.<sup>33</sup> The matter was obviously still wrapped in secrecy at that late stage, for Pirow merely replied that it was “not in public interest to disclose particulars in that respect”, but invited Erasmus to visit his office to “obtain particulars ... for his personal information”.<sup>34</sup> On 23 March 1939 Pirow, with great fanfare, eventually announced in Parliament that ‘from September 1st [1939]... Cape Town with Parliament and members in it, will enjoy the protection of the monitor *Erebus*... with [her] 15-inch guns lent to us by the British Government... for so long as she holds together’.<sup>35</sup>

In the end, South Africa never acquired a single 15-inch gun during the Second World War. By 1945, three 9.2-inch guns were deployed on Robben Island to bolster Cape Town’s defences, while more guns of the same calibre were stationed at Scala Battery, Simon’s Town and Apostle Battery, Llandudno, to form the main armament of the Cape Peninsula. The benefit of hindsight makes it possible to argue that Pirow’s insistence on 15-inch guns was, perhaps, not so far-fetched. When Italy entered the war on 10 June 1940, the Mediterranean became so risky to Allied shipping, that large convoys of ships carrying men and war materials were diverted to the Cape sea route. Table Bay and other South African ports became an important strategic link in the Allied war effort. A large percentage of the convoys routed around the Cape had to refuel and replenish at the Cape, bringing, inter alia, some of Britain’s largest ocean liners, adapted as troop-carriers, to anchor in Table Bay in July 1940. The protection of such precious war resources, human and material, placed an enormous responsibility on the Union Defence Force and made adequate coastal defences imperative. The situation became even more serious when Japan joined the German-Italian alliance on 7 December 1941 and penetrated the Indian Ocean westwards to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in April 1942.

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32. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, R.H.A. Carter - High Commissioner, 14 October 1936; SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, anon. memorandum, 30 October 1936.
  33. F.C. Erasmus, Question in Parliament, 7 February 1939, Union of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly*, Vol 33, 1939, 20.
  34. O. Pirow, Answer to question in Parliament by F.C. Erasmus, 7 February 1939, Union of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly*, Vol 33, 1939, 20.
  35. O. Pirow, Speech in Parliament, 23 March 1939, 2280.

Continued Japanese penetration to the west, beyond Ceylon, could have exposed South African harbours to seaward attack and even sever the important Cape sea route.<sup>36</sup>

### Implementing the *Erebus* scheme

Given the additional cost and practical problems associated with operating the *Erebus* as a sea-going ship or anchoring her outside protective breakwaters, South Africa's defence planners decided to employ her as a floating artillery battery inside the Cape Town docks.<sup>37</sup> Smuts, who was not in favour of deploying the *Erebus* in Cape Town harbour, later ridiculed its deployment in the docks stating that firing its huge 15-inch guns "would not only cause great destruction in the docks themselves, but ... would cause half of Cape Town to collapse".<sup>38</sup>

In terms of the agreement with the British government, the Admiralty would train a detachment of South African gunnery personnel and such other technical personnel as could be provided before the departure of the *Erebus* from the United Kingdom. This personnel would return to the Union on the *Erebus* as part of her crew, thereby reducing the number of British personnel required and consequently also the cost to the Union.<sup>39</sup> An officer from the Royal Navy would command the *Erebus* until she was officially handed over to the South African government in Cape Town.<sup>40</sup>

A new unit, *Erebus* Heavy Battery, 1st Division, South African Garrison Artillery (Cape Garrison Artillery), was established on 1 April 1939 to incorporate the *Erebus* into the South African coastal defence organisation.<sup>41</sup> Though some ex-

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36. A. Davey, 'Robben Island and the Military 1931-1960', 83-4, 81.
  37. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, 'Memorandum on S.A. Artillery policy arising out of the acquisition from the Royal Navy of the monitor *Erebus*, 21 August 1936. (See also SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, Secretary for Defence - Commander-in-Chief Africa Station, 23 February 1939.)
  38. J.C. Smuts, Speech in Parliament, 14 March 1940, Union of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly*, Vol 38, 1940, 3433-4.
  39. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 244, unnumbered file '*Erebus* Acceptance, Conditions of Loan, Indemnity against all risks', C.T. Te Water - M. MacDonald, 22 November 1938; SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, Admiralty - Commander-in-Chief [Africa Station], 9 December 1938.
  40. SANDFA, AG(4) 189, AG(4)420/15 Vol. 2, anon., oppositely London - anon., 5 August 1939; SANDFA, AG(4) 189, AG(4)420/15 Vol. 2, Adjutant General - Assistant Secretary (Admin.), 9 August 1939.
  41. SANDFA, *Union Defence Forces Routine Orders*, RO 422, 30 June 1939.

naval ratings were to be recruited to fulfil certain naval services on the *Erebus*, the unit was organised entirely as an army unit and the naval personnel would all be attached to the artillery corps and wear army uniforms and ranks. The commander of the unit would be recruited from the Royal Naval Reserve, but commissioned as a major in the South African Artillery.<sup>42</sup>

By 1 July 1939 the UDF had recruited a total of 25 ex-Royal Navy ratings in the Union to serve as seamen on the *Erebus*. Three officers were also recruited from the same source. These men were to be sent to the UK on refresher courses in time to return to South Africa on the *Erebus*.<sup>43</sup> In addition to these seamen, the commander of the Coast Artillery Brigade, Lt. Col. H.E. Cilliers, detailed two officers and 25 other ranks to proceed to the UK on a three-month gunnery course on the training ship *Marshal Soult*<sup>44</sup> at the Naval Gunnery School, Chatham to prepare them for the manning of the guns of the *Erebus*. All these men were selected on a voluntary basis with the understanding that they would return on the *Erebus*, leaving the United Kingdom by 15 August 1939.<sup>45</sup> An ex-Royal Navy officer, Cdr. W.S. Finlayson was selected to command *Erebus* Heavy Battery at the recommendation of the Commander-in-Chief, Africa Station, V.Adm. G.H.D'O. Lyon. Finlayson, 47 years old and a South African by birth, had had considerable training and experience in the Royal Naval Reserve since 1909 and had, inter alia,

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42. SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, Admiralty - Commander-in-Chief [Africa Station], 9 December 1938; SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, Secretary for Defence - Chief of the General Staff, etc., 11 March 1939; SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, Van Ryneveld - Adjutant-General, 25 May 1939; AG(4) 188, AG(4)420/15 Vol 1, anon. - Defence, Pretoria, 19 July 1939.
  43. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, Secretary [Office of the High Commissioner] - Secretary for Defence, 30 November 1938; SANDFA, AG(4) 188, AG(4)420/15 Vol 1, Adjutant-General - Quartermaster-General, 16 May 1939; SANDFA, AG(4) 189, AG(4)420/15/5, Adjutant-General - Assistant Secretary (Adm.), 22 May 1939; SANDFA, DC 3271, DC2008 Vol 1, *Erebus* name list, n.d. [circa June 1939]; SANDFA, AG(4) 189, AG(4)420/15/5, Adjutant-General - Quartermaster-General, 12 June 1939; SANDFA, AG(4) 189, AG(4)420/15 Vol. 2, Officer Commanding Coast Artillery Brigade - Officer Commanding Cape Command, 8 August 1939.
  44. SANDFA, CAB (Gp2) 157, G79/5, Director of Training and Operations - Assistant Secretary (Adm.), 11 May 1939.
  45. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings of Court of Enquiry: *Erebus* Personnel, 29 November - 4 December 1939 & 7 March 1940 (hereafter: Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry), 1-4, 5, evidence by Lt. Col. H.E. Cilliers.

commanded the destroyer *Racehorse* during the First World War. He was duly appointed to a short service commission in the SA Artillery (Permanent Force) with the rank of major with effect from 1 July 1939. He would assume command of the *Erebus* only after her Royal Navy captain had delivered her in Cape Town.<sup>46</sup>

When first interviewed by Lyon, the latter brought Finlayson under the impression that he was to retain his naval rank and would take command of the *Erebus* at Portsmouth to bring her out to South Africa. On learning that he would hold an army appointment and would be in command of the artillery battery only until the *Erebus* was handed over at the Cape, Finlayson appealed, through Lyon, to the Admiralty to retain his navy rank and be appointed captain of the ship with a view to taking her out to South Africa. His appeal was unsuccessful, since the Admiralty had already decided to appoint Cdr. I.W. Whitehorn<sup>47</sup> to command the *Erebus* on her voyage to South Africa. Whitehorn, recalled from the Royal Navy's retired list, had previous experience on *HMS Terror*,<sup>48</sup> sister ship of the *Erebus*.

### **Strained relations on board the *Erebus***

The legacy of colonial rule left the Union of South Africa ostensibly very British on the eve of the Second World War. The Union had inherited many of its socio-political and military structures from Britain and the Union still shared the British monarch as official head of state with the rest of the British Empire. The Union Jack was still one of the Union's national flags and God save the King was still sung as one of the national anthems. The equipment, uniforms, ranks, insignia, customs and traditions of the Union Defence Force were unmistakably British. English was, furthermore, apart from being one of the Union's two official languages (next to Afrikaans), the lingua franca of the Defence Force.<sup>49</sup> Yet many Afrikaans-speaking South Africans felt no strong bond with Britain, because more than a century of British domination and two bitter Anglo-Boer wars were still fresh in their memories. The question as to what stance South Africa should take if Great Britain entered another war in Europe was a hotly debated issue in South Africa

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46. AG(4) 188, AG(4)420/15 Vol. 1, anon. - Defence, Pretoria, 19 July 1939; SANDFA, DC 3271, DC2008 Vol. 1, Secretary for Defence - Secretary, Office of the High Commissioner, 31 July 1939.
47. PRO, ADM1/9832, Admiralty - Brig. Gen. Van der Spuy, 18 August 1939.
48. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 377, evidence by Lt. R. White, RN.
49. R. Hyam and P. Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War*, 275-6.

during the 1930s. The Prime Minister, Gen. J.B.M. Hertzog, firmly believed that the Statute of Westminster (1934) assured South Africa's autonomy and he tied the Cabinet to 'a position of firm neutrality'<sup>50</sup> in 1938, should Britain enter a war against Germany. His argument, and that of many other Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans, was: "Why should Britain (the only power ever to have attacked South Africa) be supported against Germany (who had shown only friendship)?"<sup>51</sup>

Gen. J.C. Smuts agreed with Hertzog's view initially, but changed his mind when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia in March 1939 in defiance of the Munich Agreement. He now believed that Nazi-Germany threatened the future of Western civilisation and consequently the freedom of South Africa. The Union was thus, in his view, morally compelled to join Britain in putting a stop to Hitler's aggression. This division amongst the political leadership was by and large reflected along cultural (Afrikaans-English) lines among whites, with a large portion of the 60 percent of Afrikaans-speaking section of the population strongly against participation in a war on the side of Great Britain.<sup>52</sup>

The first South African detachment (artillerymen), Capt. R.H.H. Stubbs and Lt. P.F. van der Hoven with (eventually) 26 other ranks, arrived at Southampton on 19 May 1939 and completed their course at the Naval Gunnery School, Chatham on 11 August 1939.<sup>53</sup> They boarded the *Erebus* at Southampton on 14 August<sup>54</sup> and were integrated with the rest of the ship's company, i.e. some 150 to 200 Royal Navy ratings<sup>55</sup>, whereupon the *Erebus* sailed to Portsmouth the next morning. The South African artillerymen assumed responsibility for the duties normally performed by the Royal Marine detachment on board. These duties included, apart from caring for the 15-inch turret and the 3-inch anti-aircraft guns, cleaning the officers' quarters and scrubbing the decks, stairways, bathrooms and toilets.<sup>56</sup> The second South

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50. H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town, 2003), 439.
  51. R. Hyam and P. Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War*, 19.
  52. H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, 409, 439-40.
  53. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 2-3 & Appendix A, evidence by Lt. Col. H.E. Cilliers.
  54. PRO, ADM53/112164, Ship's Log HMS *Erebus*, 14 August 1939.
  55. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 11, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt.
  56. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 42, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands; PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939.

African detachment, namely Maj. W.S. Finlayson, Capt. W.G. Burt and Capt. W. Wyatt, with 25 other ranks, all seamen and stokers, arrived at Southampton on 18 August 1939 and immediately joined their compatriots on the *Erebus* at Portsmouth.<sup>57</sup>

The South African officers generally got along fine with the Royal Navy officers of the *Erebus* and cooperated effectively with them. The notable exception was Maj. Finlayson, who did not get along with the captain of the *Erebus*, Cdr. Whitehorn, Royal Navy.<sup>58</sup> With his arrival in the United Kingdom Finlayson, it seems, had still secretly hoped that the Admiralty would restore him to his naval rank and let him take the *Erebus* out to South Africa. When this did not happen, he lost all interest in his unit and left it to the two detachment commanders, Stubbs and Burt, to exercise command and control over the men.<sup>59</sup> Finlayson's sulkiness and inactivity eventually led to him and Lt. Van der Hoven (on whose part there was no wrong-doing) being recalled to South Africa to be employed otherwise until the arrival of the *Erebus* on the grounds of there being too many officers on board the *Erebus*.<sup>60</sup> The strained Anglo-South African relations at command level on the *Erebus* was thus the result of personal disappointment and jealousy on the part of Finlayson and was not rooted in any political or cultural conflict.

Judging by their surnames, more than 70 percent of the second South African detachment, the seamen and stokers, were English-speaking and thus

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57. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 9, 124, 126, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt and Maj. W.S. Finlayson; SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, Battery Commander, *Erebus* Heavy Battery - Commanding Officer, Coast Artillery Brigade, 18 August 1939.
58. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. Wyatt - Officer Commanding South African Detachment, *Erebus* Heavy Battery, 2 October 1939. See also SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. G. Burt - High Commissioner, 3 October 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 373, 375, 378, evidence by Lt. R. White, RN.
59. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 126-9, 140-6, 155-9, 169, evidence by Maj. W.S. Finlayson.
60. SANDFA, AG(4) 189, AG(4)420/15 Vol. 2, anon., oppositely London - anon., 11 September 1939; SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, Kennie [Brig. Gen. K.R. van der Spuy] anon, 15 September 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, statement by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands, 2 October 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 47-48, 79, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.

culturally akin to their British counterparts.<sup>61</sup> They were also all ex-naval ratings, accustomed to life on board a ship and they consequently blended in easily with the Royal Naval ratings. They were quite happy and content in their new surroundings.<sup>62</sup> In sharp contrast to the seamen and stokers, about 70 percent of the first South African detachment, the artillerymen, again judging from their surnames, were Afrikaans-speaking.<sup>63</sup> They got along well with the Marines while they were accommodated in the Royal Marine Barracks at Chatham for the duration of their gunnery course,<sup>64</sup> but their relationship with their British partners in arms took a turn for the worse when they boarded the *Erebus*.

According to Stubbs, “the attitude taken up by some of the Royal Naval personnel of and below the equivalent rank of Chief Petty Officer was such that continual friction arose as they goaded the South African troops into a state of extreme dissatisfaction”.<sup>65</sup> At the bottom of the conflict, Stubbs claimed, was the Royal Naval ratings’ attitude that “the ship did not belong to the Union of South Africa and was a British man-of-war flying the British flag, and as such should only be manned by British sailors”.<sup>66</sup> The South Africans for their part regarded the naval ratings as being “not up to the detachment type of man”, if not “of a lower type”<sup>67</sup> and were not keen to mix with them socially. They did not like eating and sleeping with them and “segregated themselves from the remainder of the ship’s company”.<sup>68</sup> But though most of the South Africans were billeted in their own messes, the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and some of the men were

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61. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 2-3 & Appendix A, evidence by Lt. Col. H.E. Cilliers.
  62. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 17, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt.
  63. SANDFA, AG(4) 189, AG(4)420/15 Vol. 2, *EREBUS* Heavy Battery: S.A.A. personnel on gunnery course in England, n.d. [August 1939].
  64. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 42, 72, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands; SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, Lt F. van der Hoven - anon., 15 August 1939.
  65. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939.
  66. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939.
  67. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 45, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.
  68. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. Wyatt - Officer Commanding South African Detachment, *Erebus* Heavy Battery, 2 October 1939. See also SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. G. Burt - High Commissioner, 3 October 1939.

accommodated with the naval personnel in the same mess due to shortage of space on board.<sup>69</sup> The net result of it all was that, although they got along well enough to work together, there was no ‘chumming up’ between the predominantly Afrikaans-speaking gunners and the British sailors.<sup>70</sup> Though restricted to the predominantly Afrikaans-speaking Second Detachment, or some portion of it, Anglo-South African relations at rank-and-file level were thus somewhat less than satisfactory for cultural-political reasons.

Their unsatisfactory relationship with the Royal Navy ratings affected the morale of the First Detachment negatively, but was by no means the only factor in that regard. As artillerymen they felt somewhat awkward serving on a ship and they were, furthermore, not used to cleaning cabins and scrubbing bathrooms and toilets. To make it worse, there were not enough gunners to cope with all the work and some of the junior NCOs had to join in to get the work done. Though the South Africans, particularly the NCOs, did not like this, such duties were all in a days work for leading seaman, their peers in naval rank.<sup>71</sup> A further source of great anger and frustration was that a special daily allowance (10/- per day in the case of married men and 5/- per day in the case of bachelors<sup>72</sup>) they had received since their arrival in the United Kingdom had been stopped when they boarded the *Erebus*.<sup>73</sup> Together these grievances created an unpleasant atmosphere for the South African detachment aboard the *Erebus*, which was aggravated by the fact that Stubbs and Finlayson allegedly took very little interest in their subordinates and neglected matters of discipline on board.<sup>74</sup> Stubbs, the next senior officer to Finlayson, was

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69. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 12-3, 44-5, 67, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt and Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.
70. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 11, 44-5, 67, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt and Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.
71. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 42-5, 52, 139 evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands and Maj. W.S. Finlayson; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. Wyatt - Officer Commanding South African Detachment, *Erebus* Heavy Battery, 2 October 1939.
72. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, L. Beyers - Adjutant General, 4 December 1939.
73. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 11, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt. See also SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. Wyatt - Officer Commanding South African Detachment, *Erebus* Heavy Battery, 2 October 1939.
74. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. G. Burt - High Commissioner, 3 October 1939; see also PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. Wyatt - Officer Commanding South African Detachment, *Erebus* Heavy

unaccustomed to the ship's routine and fell victim to severe stress, which eventually developed into psychoneurosis,<sup>75</sup> with the result that he “seemed to lose that very necessary contact and understanding with the NCOs and men under his control”.<sup>76</sup>

### **Increased tension at the outbreak of World War II**

On 29 August 1939 Maj. Finlayson reported to the Commanding Officer, Coast Artillery Brigade, Cape Town that “definite dates and plans for the sailing of the *Erebus* have been in abeyance since my arrival, owing to the very acute tension of the European situation ... I gather from the Admiralty [the proposed sailing dates] will be approved if the crisis at present becomes normal ... [we] should be ready to sail ... before or on 7 September”.<sup>77</sup> But when Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September, the departure of the *Erebus* was suspended indefinitely. The consequent uncertainty of their date of departure added much to the existing dissatisfaction amongst the men of the First Detachment and influenced their morale negatively.<sup>78</sup>

The commencement of the Second World War saw an abrupt deterioration in the relationship between the members of the First Detachment and the Royal Naval ratings.<sup>79</sup> The trouble started when a news bulletin was broadcasted stating incorrectly that the Hertzog government had declared South Africa's neutrality in the war. Discussions now ‘arose below decks as to whether the South African personnel would be landed as’ the South African Defence Act did not compel South

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Battery, 2 October 1939 and SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 30-2, evidence by Capt. W. Wyatt; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 126-9, 140-6, 155-9, 169, evidence by Maj. W.S. Finlayson; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 373, 377, evidence by Lt. R. White, RN.

75. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 274-6, evidence by Capt. J.S. Enslin.
76. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. Wyatt - Officer Commanding South African Detachment, *Erebus* Heavy Battery, 2 October 1939.
77. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, Annexure L, Officer Commanding SA Artillery Detachment: HMS *Erebus* - Officer Commanding Coast Artillery Brigade, 29 August 1939.
78. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 14-8, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt.
79. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 11-2, 45-6, 58-61, 64, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt and Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.

African citizens to render military service outside the borders of the Union.<sup>80</sup> According to Stubbs, the men “generally felt that their position on a British man-of-war during war-time should be clarified as they were South Africans and at present on a ship of war outside South African waters. They would not volunteer for service here if asked to do so”.<sup>81</sup> According to the Executive Officer of the *Erebus*, Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, Royal Navy, he “could sense that the South Africans were uneasy’ and he found it necessary to inform Whitehorn that he was ‘uneasy’ in his mind ‘as to the loyalty of the first S.A. detachment’”.<sup>82</sup>

Britain’s appeal to the dominions to “answer the call of collective security against Hitler’s transgressions”,<sup>83</sup> did not elicit the same response throughout the Commonwealth. The two homogeneous Anglocentric dominions, Australia and New Zealand, rallied to Britain’s side immediately.<sup>84</sup> Australian prime minister, Sir Robert Gordon Menzies declared war against Germany on 3 September 1939 “without debate in the parliament or recourse to cabinet”.<sup>85</sup> The Australian parliament, when it met on 6 September, did not dispute the proposition that “the dominions were bound to follow the United Kingdom automatically in a state of war” at all.<sup>86</sup> Canada, with its unpredictable French-speaking minority, insisted on its right to debate the issue in the House of Commons first, but when the vote was taken a week later, it was almost unanimous for war.<sup>87</sup> When the issue of participation was brought before the House of Assembly in South Africa on 4 September, Smuts obtained the green light for the Union’s entry into the war with a tiny majority of just 13 votes (80 to 67).<sup>88</sup>

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80. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939; see also PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939.
81. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939.
82. PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939.
83. D. Shackleton, ‘South Africa and the High Commission Territories during the Second World War: Politics and Policies Affecting War Mobilisation’, *Scientia Militaria*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2000, 237.
84. M. Kitchen, *The British Empire and Commonwealth*, 84.
85. J. Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, 140.
86. J. Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, 140.
87. M. Kitchen, *The British Empire and Commonwealth*, 84.
88. T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History*, 4th ed (Basingstoke and London, 1991), 297.

In 1939, the rift in South Africa's white community was as sharp as the parliamentary divide. English-speaking whites generally regarded it their duty to aid Britain,<sup>89</sup> while most of their Afrikaans-speaking compatriots were against participation, and "some even vociferously pro-Nazi".<sup>90</sup> Given the predominantly Afrikaans-speaking composition of the First Detachment, politics might certainly have played a role in the attitude of some detachment members. But, as Giliomee points out, "Afrikaners did not boycott the war as a group", and about half of the white South Africans that fought in the war were indeed Afrikaans-speaking, though many joined up for financial rather than idealistic reasons.<sup>91</sup> It is unclear exactly how many members of the artillerymen on the *Erebus* really opposed the war effort, but this matter will be raised later in this article.

The NCOs of the First Detachment later claimed that the South Africans would not have adopted this anti-war attitude, was it not for the conduct of the Royal Naval ratings on the *Erebus*. Some of the naval ratings who 'had been prominent in goading the South African personnel previously' now caused further tension by "calling them pro-Nazis and treating them accordingly, especially during meal hours when the South African personnel were together and conversed among themselves in Afrikaans".<sup>92</sup> Feelings were very 'intense' and 'a lot' of unfavourable remarks were made towards the First Detachment. They were "repeatedly ... asked, sometimes in a nasty manner by lower ratings ashore and on the ship, what they as South Africans were doing on the ship",<sup>93</sup> since they were not fighting for the British.<sup>94</sup> The Regulating Petty Officer on board was allegedly particularly vindictive towards the First Detachment, inter alia remarking "these damn South Africans, they are a dirty lot, and I suppose they have a lot of bugs there in their bunks".<sup>95</sup> The Royal Navy ratings also 'passed a lot of remarks' on the Afrikaans language, such as referring to 'these foreigners who spoke foreign languages' and

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89. H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 441.

90. M. Kitchen, *The British Empire and Commonwealth*, 84.

91. H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 441.

92. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939.

93. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939.

94. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 46, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands. (See also 12, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt.)

95. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 61, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.

asking 'why don't they stop this b[loody] language'.<sup>96</sup> A number of the Royal Navy personnel apparently mistook the Afrikaans that the South Africans spoke amongst themselves for German, which aggravated their attitude.<sup>97</sup> Some of the remarks made by the Royal Navy ratings could have been merely joking and leg-pulling, but a number of the South Africans took them seriously.<sup>98</sup>

It was, however, not the Royal Navy ratings only that contributed to the tension between the artillerymen and the Royal Naval ratings. On 4 September one of the South African NCOs, Bdr. T.L. Dudley, after interpreting a German news broadcast on the radio for the Royal Naval ratings, purportedly stated: "You fellows do not understand Hitler. He is a damn good chap".<sup>99</sup> Dudley was allegedly 'continually talking in a pro-German manner' and a few nights previously his pro-German statements had resulted in a scuffle with two naval ratings who nearly threw him overboard. Before that, he was also involved in a brawl in one of the public houses ashore one evening as a result of his pro-German remarks. The Executive Officer of the *Erebus*, Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, Royal Navy, later reported that Dudley's conduct "annoyed the British part of the Ship's company and also most of the South African personnel".<sup>100</sup> Whitehorn subsequently had Dudley removed from the *Erebus* in the interest of sound discipline.<sup>101</sup>

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96. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 204, evidence by S. Sgt. J.E. Cassidy. See also SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, G.A. Watermeyer - Adjutant General, 30 December 1939; Compare also SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939.
97. PRO, ADM1/10543, Second Sea Lord – First Sea Lord, 20 September 1939.
98. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, statement by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands, 2 October 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 45-6, 58-61, 64, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.
99. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 13, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt; see also PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939.
100. PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939.
101. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 13-14, 373-376, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt and Lt. R. White, RN; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, Annexure P, W.G. Burt - Officer Commanding Coast Artillery Brigade, 20 November 1939; PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939.

The mood on the *Erebus* improved markedly when it became known that Gen. J.C. Smuts had taken over with a new cabinet and that South Africa had declared war on Germany. But the criticism and remarks from the naval ratings did not stop entirely.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, since they were on a British warship with no indication when the ship would leave, some of the South Africans were getting ‘very restless’, as the days passed, especially when “communications stopped from South Africa and we were getting no letters [from our families] or news”.<sup>103</sup> By mid-September they were very upset because the ship was not leaving for South Africa and there was no indication of what was going to happen to them.<sup>104</sup> The First Detachment now allegedly “seemed to want to get off the ship at all costs”.<sup>105</sup> They argued that they were not required to fight overseas according to South African defence policy and ‘very’ often stated “we have not got to fight outside the Union, and we won’t fight”.<sup>106</sup> Some of the unfavourable remarks and criticisms of the naval ratings might in fact have been uttered in response to this attitude amongst and statements by the South Africans.<sup>107</sup>

### **The First Detachment put ashore**

The news of Finlayson and Van der Hoven’s unexpected and unexplained withdrawal to the Union increased the uncertainty and dissatisfaction of some of the artillerymen. On 19 September the NCOs of the First Detachment requested to see Finlayson before he left the ship in order to clarify their position. Finlayson, accompanied by Stubbs, met with them that same morning. A total of three warrant officers and six NCOs attended the meeting. Only one of them was from the

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102. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, statement by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands, 2 October 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 47, 64-5, 70, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.
  103. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 14, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt; See also SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 131-4, 170, evidence by Maj. W.S. Finlayson.
  104. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, statement by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands, 2 October 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 47-8, 79, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.
  105. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 18, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt.
  106. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 18, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt.
  107. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. G. Burt - High Commissioner, 3 October 1939.

predominantly English-speaking Second Detachment.<sup>108</sup> The NCOs tabled all the aforementioned grievances, i.e. the attitude of and verbal abuse by some of the Royal Naval ratings; the discontinuation of their special daily allowances; the uncertainty of their position on a British warship in terms of the South African Defence Act; and the uncertainty of the sailing date and destination of the *Erebus*.<sup>109</sup> Two of the NCOs demanded to leave the ship and return to South Africa by mail steamer, as they did not want to fight on a British ship.<sup>110</sup> They did not 'refuse duty' as Du Toit claims,<sup>111</sup> but just demanded to leave the ship.<sup>112</sup> It is impossible, however, to determine exactly how many men shared this attitude. A 'large proportion' of the First Detachment allegedly "appeared to be satisfied and content to carry out their duties cheerfully"<sup>113</sup> and the Battery Sergeant-Major later testified that the grievances put forward by the NCOs were "not representative of the detachment".<sup>114</sup>

Finlayson and Stubbs decided to report the matter to the commander of the *Erebus*, Cdr. I.W. Whitehorn, Royal Navy, and request him to accompany them to London the next morning to lay the matter before the High Commissioner.<sup>115</sup> According to his own evidence, Finlayson, who was on the point of sailing for South Africa,<sup>116</sup> adopted a rather passive attitude in the whole matter and allowed Stubbs to take the initiative.<sup>117</sup> Stubbs then, through the Executive Officer, requested an

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108. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, statement by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands, 2 October 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 47-8, 79, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands.
109. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, O. Turner - Officer Commanding *Erebus* Heavy Battery, 2 October 1939.
110. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 135, evidence by Maj. W.S. Finlayson.
111. A. du Toit, *South Africa's Fighting Ships*, 22.
112. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 135, evidence by Maj. W.S. Finlayson.
113. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. Wyatt - Officer Commanding South African Detachment, *Erebus* Heavy Battery, 2 October 1939.
114. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, statement by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands, 2 October 1939.
115. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939.
116. SANDFA, AG(4) 189, AG(4)420/15 Vol. 2, anon., oppositely London - anon., 11 September 1939; SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, Kennie [Brig. Gen. K.R. van der Spuy] anon, 15 September 1939.
117. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 136, 157-8, 177-8, evidence by Maj. W.S. Finlayson.

interview with Whitehorn for Finlayson and himself. When Whitehorn asked him what was wrong, Stubbs, a very sick man at that stage since he was suffering from severe stress,<sup>118</sup> bluntly replied, it is alleged: “Mutiny”.<sup>119</sup>

At the meeting with Whitehorn, Stubbs stated “the first detachment of the *Erebus* Heavy Battery, although prepared at all times to carry out orders, now feel that in the circumstances they do not want to return to South Africa on H.M.S. *Erebus*, but wish to leave for South Africa in a liner as soon as possible”.<sup>120</sup> Stubbs thus clearly created the impression that the entire detachment wanted to leave the *Erebus*, though, as indicated before, that was seemingly not the case. The officers and men of the Second Detachment had in the meantime distanced themselves from the desire to leave the ship.<sup>121</sup> That same afternoon Whitehorn, Finlayson and Stubbs saw the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth. Whitehorn, reported that “the S.A. troops were not willing to fight on the *Erebus* or go out in her, that they wanted to leave the ship”<sup>122</sup> and requested, in the interest of his ship,<sup>123</sup> that the First Detachment be put ashore, which appears to have been what Stubbs had suggested.<sup>124</sup> The Commander-in-Chief agreed with a view to the “great dissatisfaction among the 26 South African artillery[men]”<sup>125</sup> and the First Detachment was put ashore that same afternoon and sent to the Eastney Royal

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118. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 274-6, evidence by Capt. J.S. Enslin.
119. PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939; see also SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 19, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt.
120. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939; see also PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939.
121. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 19a-20, evidence by Capt. W.G. Burt; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W.G. Burt - High Commissioner, 20 September 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. Watt - High Commissioner, 20 September 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. Wyatt - Officer Commanding South African Detachment, *Erebus* Heavy Battery, 2 October 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, W. G. Burt - High Commissioner, 3 October 1939.
122. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939.
123. PRO, ADM1/10543, Second Sea Lord – First Sea Lord, 20 September 1939.
124. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 137, 147-9, evidence by Maj. W.S. Finlayson.
125. PRO, ADM1/10543, 1515/19, Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth – Admiralty, 19 September 1939.

Marine Barracks.<sup>126</sup> In a secret message to the Admiralty that same afternoon, the Commander-in-Chief “urge[d] their repatriation”.<sup>127</sup>

### **Cancellation of the *Erebus* scheme**

Unknown to the men on the *Erebus*, the Admiralty was already in the process of trying to retrieve the vessel for its own purposes when matters were brought to a head on 19 September 1939. When the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, learned about the incident on the *Erebus* the next day, 20 September, he had already dispatched a telegram, “personal and private”,<sup>128</sup> to the South African Prime Minister, Gen. J.C. Smuts, in which he informed him that the *Erebus* was ready to sail for Cape Town, but at the same time appealed to him that since “you are unlikely to have need of this ship ... the Admiralty will be most grateful ... if you can let us have her either by re-loan or re-transfer ... [as] she would be most useful for various purposes in the shallows of the Belgian coast, especially if Holland were attacked”.<sup>129</sup> He pointed out that the British government “never considered 15” guns necessary for defence of Cape Town, but to please Pirow agreed to loan *Erebus* until those defences were modernised in view of his fear of attack by Japan”.<sup>130</sup> Churchill admitted that the defences of Cape Town ‘remains weak’, but, ignoring a possible Japanese threat, assured Smuts that should the German battle cruisers, the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*, the only possible threat to the Cape, break out and try to reach South African waters, the Royal Navy would mount a “major naval operation ... [and] pursue them wherever they go with

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126. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, Appendix G, Battery Commander, *Erebus* Heavy Battery - Secretary, Office of the High Commissioner, 19 September 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 48-9, evidence by Sgt. Maj. C.R. Woollands; PRO, ADM53/112165, Ship's Log HMS *Erebus*, 20 September 1939.
127. PRO, ADM1/10543, 1515/19, Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth – Admiralty, 19 September 1939.
128. PRO, ADM1/10543, W.S. Churchill – Second Sea Lord, 20 September 1939.
129. PRO, ADM 1/9832, W.S. Churchill – J.C. Smuts, n.d. [20 September 1939].
130. PRO, ADM 1/9832, W.S. Churchill – J.C. Smuts, n.d. [20 September 1939]; (Copies of this document also in South African National Archives, Pretoria (hereafter SANA), Smuts Papers 131, Vol. CXXXI and W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. I (4th ed): *The Gathering Storm* (London, etc, 1955), 667-8.)

our most powerful vessels until they are hunted down".<sup>131</sup> Churchill fully realised that the 'question is mainly political' and added "rather than do anything to embarrass you we would do without the ship".<sup>132</sup>

Smuts immediately agreed to the retransfer of the *Erebus* to the Royal Navy.<sup>133</sup> He was not in favour of deploying the *Erebus* in Cape Town harbour since he considered the "Robben Island 15" scheme an extravagant over insurance".<sup>134</sup> The relationship between Churchill and Smuts was obviously better and more direct than that between Churchill and Pirow, which allowed for more realistic rather than diplomatic cooperation and decision-making. Smuts clearly based his decision on his honest assessment of the needs of the Union and those of the United Kingdom. The unrest amongst and removal of the First Detachment played no role in either Churchill's request or Smuts's decision. Churchill launched his appeal before he knew about the unrest on the *Erebus*, and Smuts had definitely not been informed about the events when he received Churchill's telegram or, presumably, when he forwarded his reply.<sup>135</sup> There was some delay before the Admiralty verbally reported the matter to Brig. Gen. K.R. van der Spuy, Military Adviser to the South African High Commissioner in London.<sup>136</sup> On the evening of 19 September, after his meeting with the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, Finlayson compiled a brief letter to the High Commissioner merely stating that "the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, has ordered the transfer of one officer and 27 men to Eastney Royal Marine Barracks to-day [sic]"<sup>137</sup> and supplying a name list of the transferred

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131. PRO, ADM 1/9832, W.S. Churchill – J.C. Smuts, n.d. [20 September 1939].
  132. PRO, ADM 1/9832, W.S. Churchill – J.C. Smuts, n.d. [20 September 1939].
  133. SANA, Smuts Papers 131, Vol. CXXXI, J.C. Smuts – High Commissioner for the UK, 21 September 1939.
  134. SANA, Smuts Papers 131, Vol. CXXXI, J.C. Smuts – High Commissioner for the UK, 21 September 1939.
  135. PRO, ADM 1/10543, W.S. Churchill – Second Sea Lord, 20 September 1939; PRO, ADM 1/10543, Second Sea Lord – First Sea Lord, 20 September 1939; PRO, ADM1/10543, Second Sea Lord – First Sea Lord, 20 September 1939.
  136. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, Military Adviser - High Commissioner, n.d. [circa 26 October 1939]; PRO, ADM1/10543, Second Sea Lord – First Sea Lord, 20 September 1939.
  137. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings of Court of Enquiry: *Erebus* Personnel, 29 November - 4 December 1939 & 7 March 1940, Appendix

personnel. He gave no further explanation of the events to Van der Spuy, before handing over command of the Battery to Capt. Stubbs and embarking for South Africa the very next day.<sup>138</sup> On 20 September Van der Spuy, on receipt of the reports from Finlayson and the Admiralty, immediately tried to contact Capt. Stubbs both by telephone and by telegram. However, Stubbs did not report back until 22 September and only gave a verbal report to the High Commissioner, S.F. Waterson, and Brig. Gen. Van der Spuy on 24 September, before submitting a written report the following day.<sup>139</sup> The whole incident had thus not yet been investigated when Smuts made his decision and it is therefore doubtful whether he had any knowledge of the event at that stage.

Once Smuts had agreed to release the *Erebus* for imperial use the Admiralty insisted that “the sooner those sulky South African artillerymen ... are sent home the better”.<sup>140</sup> The bulk of the South African detachments departed for the Union on the *Windsor Castle* on 12 October 1939. *Erebus* Heavy Battery was only disbanded on 1 April 1940 after all its personnel had been transferred to other units or suitably disposed of.<sup>141</sup>

In the interest of good Anglo-South African relations, also in the public eye, Churchill asked Smuts whether he deemed a public announcement of the re-transfer of the *Erebus* necessary and if so, how this should be done.<sup>142</sup> Smuts informed him that the appropriate course would be for the Admiralty to announce publicly that the *Erebus* had been re-transferred to the Admiralty at the latter’s request and that suitable alternative arrangements were being made for the proper defence of Cape Town harbour. Smuts, of course, added that “a word of

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G, Battery Commander, *Erebus* Heavy Battery - Secretary, Office of the High Commissioner, 19 September 1939.

138. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, Military Adviser - High Commissioner, n.d. [circa 26 October 1939].

139. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, Military Adviser - High Commissioner, n.d. [circa 26 October 1939]; SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, R.H.H. Stubbs - High Commissioner, 25 September 1939.

140. PRO, ADM1/10543, Admiralty – Second Sea Lord and Secretary, 24 September 1939.

141. SANDFA, CAB (Gp1) 29, CA1/1/6, DDCA - DGO, 18 March 1940; SANDFA, AG (Gp4), DAG(O)118/2, Adjutant General - Adjutant General (I), 30 March 1940.

142. SANA, Smuts Papers 131, Vol. CXXXI, High Commissioner for the UK - J.C. Smuts, 25 September 1939.

appreciation for our action will be much appreciated”.<sup>143</sup> The Admiralty duly issued a statement for publication in the London press on 28 September 1939, following the recommendation by Smuts to the letter and concluding, as Smuts requested, with the comment that “the United Kingdom Government warmly appreciates the prompt response of the Union Government to the proposal put to them and their readiness to assist the Admiralty in this matter”.<sup>144</sup>

### **Court of enquiry**

The Union Defence Force was concerned about the damage that the *Erebus* affair might have done to Anglo-South African defence relations and wanted to put matters right. The British High Commissioner in Pretoria informed the Admiralty in mid-November 1939 that the “Union Defence Authorities are greatly concerned over incidents in *H.M.S. Erebus* ... [W]e have been informed in confidence that recommendation has been made to [the] Chief of the General Staff for endorsement by the Prime Minister that [a] Court of Enquiry should be constituted in the Union ... with a view to appropriate disciplinary measures being taken and [the] stigma on [the] good name of [the] Union Defence Force removed. [The] Director of Intelligence has asked that this information may be passed on privately to the Admiralty lest [the] latter should have any impression that [the] incident is being ignored or glossed over.”<sup>145</sup>

On 24 November 1939, the Chief of the General Staff, Maj. Gen. Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, duly ordered that a court of enquiry be convened to “make a full and exhaustive inquiry”<sup>146</sup> into the *Erebus* affair. A total of 23 members of the *Erebus* personnel testified before this court of enquiry, but Beyers, in his summary of ‘facts found proved’, quite correctly, emphasised that “such summary cannot be full and exhaustive” and thus not ‘conclusive’ without the testimony of Capt. R.H.H. Stubbs, Cdr. I.W. Whitehorn, R.N., Lt. Cdr. Whatley, R.N. (Executive Officer, *Erebus*) and Brig. Gen. K.R. van der Spuy (Military Adviser to the South African

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143. SANA, Smuts Papers 131, Vol. CXXXI, J.C. Smuts - High Commissioner for the UK, 26 September 1939.
  144. SANA, Smuts Papers 131, Vol. CXXXI, High Commissioner for the UK - J.C. Smuts, 28 September 1939.
  145. PRO, ADM1/10543, UK High Commissioner, Pretoria – Admiralty, 16 November 1939.
  146. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, B.F. Armstrong - L. Beyers, 24 November 1939.

High Commissioner in London), whom he regarded as ‘material witnesses’.<sup>147</sup> Capt. Stubbs was medically unfit at the time to appear before the Court of Enquiry,<sup>148</sup> but no reasons were given for the absence of the other key stakeholders; the cost and inconvenience of bringing them over from the UK was probably to blame.

The court of enquiry found that a ‘feeling of dissatisfaction and unrest’<sup>149</sup> had indeed existed amongst the members of the First Detachment since their arrival on the *Erebus* as a result of:

- the strange and unfamiliar conditions – messing, sleeping accommodation and naval routine – they as artillerymen experienced on board the *Erebus*;
- the discontinuance of their special daily allowance;
- the friction between individual members of the First Detachment and some of the Royal Navy ratings;
- the uncertainty between the declaration of war by Great Britain and the declaration of war by South Africa regarding the status and function of the South African personnel on board a British warship;
- the lack of information on and the frequent postponement of the sailing date of the *Erebus*;
- the lack of interest shown by certain South African officers in their men and their failure to exercise proper command and control (military discipline) over them; and
- the unexpected and unexplained recall of two South African officers to the Union when the unrest was at a very critical stage.<sup>150</sup>

The court of enquiry concluded that there was no threat of mutiny amongst the South Africans and that the unrest was not due to ‘any organised political movement or activities’.<sup>151</sup> The court thus in effect found that there was no real breakdown of Anglo-South African relations on the *Erebus*.

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147. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, L. Beyers - Adjutant General, 4 December 1939.

148. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 274-6, evidence by Capt. J.S. Enslin.

149. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, L. Beyers - Adjutant General, 4 December 1939.

150. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, L. Beyers - Adjutant General, 4 December 1939.

151. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, L. Beyers - Adjutant General, 4 December 1939.

On the same day that the Court of Enquiry commenced its investigation in Cape Town, 29 November 1939, the Admiralty had called for a report from the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth “with the intention of placing the [UK] High Commissioner in possession of the facts as we saw them”<sup>152</sup> and to “report any facts within your knowledge, in support or otherwise of the men, so that they may be communicated to the South African authorities”.<sup>153</sup> This led to a report by the First Lieutenant of the *Erebus*, Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, on 4 December 1939<sup>154</sup> in which he denied any wrongdoing on the part of the Royal Navy personnel on board *HMS Erebus*. In his opinion the allegations that the British Naval personnel caused part of the trouble was “totally untrue and very unfair” as the British Naval ratings ‘had done all in their power to help the South Africans and make them comfortable’.<sup>155</sup> The Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth later remarked to the Admiralty that some of the South African officers were ‘totally unfitted to hold military rank’ and described the whole ‘incident’ as ‘a deplorable story of jealousy, incompetence and disloyalty’.<sup>156</sup> He clearly based his opinion solely on Whatley’s report; in fact, he states himself that in view of “the full particulars given in ... Whatley’s [report], I am not calling for reports from [other] officers”.<sup>157</sup> The British authorities thus maintained a stiff upper lip and accepted no responsibility for any aspect of the *Erebus* affair; as far as they were concerned, the ‘sulky’ South Africans alone were to blame.

It seems as if the South African military authorities, and perhaps also their British counterparts, were looking for a more satisfactory, politically correct closure of the *Erebus* affair in the interest of sound Anglo-South African defence relations. On 7 March 1940, three months after the original court of enquiry and six months after the *Erebus* drama itself, Beyers, on instructions of the Adjutant General, reopened the court of enquiry to hear evidence from Lt. R. White, Royal Navy, who

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152. PRO, ADM1/10543, Admiralty - First Lord, 13 December 1939.

153. PRO, ADM1/10543, S. Gilmour (Admiralty) - Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth, 29 November 1939.

154. PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939.

155. PRO, ADM1/10543, report by Lt. Cdr. N.H. Whatley, R.N., 4 December 1939.

156. PRO, ADM1/10543, Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth - Admiralty, 9 December 1939.

157. PRO, ADM1/10543, Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth - Admiralty, 9 December 1939.

joined *HMS Erebus* at Portsmouth early in September 1939.<sup>158</sup> White testified that all the South African officers cooperated very well with the Royal Navy officers of the *Erebus*, except that “Major Finlayson and Commander Whitehorn were not working together”.<sup>159</sup> White was of the opinion that this ‘unfortunate friction’ between Finlayson and Whitehorn was ‘the original reason for the subsequent’ In the close confines of the ship it was inevitable that the bad feeling between the two senior officers was “sensed on the mess deck and would have contributed to any unrest existin’”.<sup>160</sup> It was thus, in his estimation, bad personal relations between the two senior officers that had caused the trouble and not any flaw in Anglo-South African relations at popular level.

White reckoned that the doubt about the Union's attitude towards the war played no part in the unrest amongst the South Africans, but conceded that there was “a certain amount of good natured chaffing ... [and] banter peculiar to the naval mind which might not have been understood by the S.A. detachment”. In his opinion the men were disturbed by the considerable delay in the departure of the *Erebus* and the uncertainty about her eventual role.<sup>161</sup> In White's judgment the report made by Stubbs to Whitehorn directly led to the transfer of the South African detachment ashore. He emphasised strongly that:

the S.A. detachment troops were to all appearances very smart, keen and efficient and ... we, that is the R.N. personnel, regretted very much their removal from the ship ... there was unrest due to inaction and uncertainty but no suggestion of mutiny. The S.A. detachment left on the best of terms ...<sup>162</sup>

Beyers was of the opinion that White's evidence ‘directly affect[ed]’ the report he had submitted to the Adjutant General in December 1939.<sup>163</sup> As a matter

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158. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, L. Beyers - Adjutant General, 8 March 1940.
159. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 373, 375, 378, evidence by Lt. R. White, RN.
160. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 373, 376, evidence by Lt. R. White, RN.
161. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 374-375, evidence by Lt. R. White, RN.
162. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, 196/322, Proceedings *Erebus* Enquiry, 374, 380, evidence by Lt. R. White, RN.
163. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, L. Beyers - Adjutant General, 8 March 1940.

of fact, it seems as if White's testimony was just what Defence Headquarters had been waiting for to sweep the whole uncomfortable affair under the carpet. It was a convenient, 'politically correct' report of the event that made it look insignificant, with no real transgression or failure on anybody's (except Finlayson's) part. Consequently nobody was prosecuted<sup>164</sup> and the possibility of domestic or British-South African political embarrassment nicely avoided.

## Conclusion

The *Erebus* scheme was born from close Anglo-South African relations within the Commonwealth defence system, but it was not grounded in a common appreciation of Cape Town harbour's defence requirements. The scheme was conceived militarily through Pirow's desire to make Cape Town harbour 'battleship proof' in the face of a possible Japanese threat, and politically through Great Britain's caution not to antagonise the Union government – even though she regarded the employment of 15-inch guns at the Cape an over-insurance. Strained British-South African relations at the lowest level (ship's company) clearly contributed to the removal of the First Detachment from the *Erebus*, but it was by no means the only cause; pay problems, uncertainty about their legal position and their date of departure perhaps played an equally important role in the whole affair. Moreover, the unrest and low morale did not affect the entire First Detachment, nor did it approach a state of mutiny and there was no need for them to have been put ashore. That radical step resulted from a complete mishandling of the situation by the South African officers, particularly Stubbs.

The removal of the First Detachment from the *Erebus* played no role in the decision to abort the *Erebus* scheme; the reason for its termination lies at the higher political level. When Churchill cabled Smuts on 20 September 1939 that Britain would be grateful if the Royal Navy could retain the *Erebus*, the events of 19 September had not yet been investigated and there is no indication that Smuts had been informed about it yet. The change of government in the Union brought a different view of Cape Town harbour's defence needs. Unlike Pirow, Smuts agreed with the British on the practical irrelevance of 15-inch guns for the Cape defences and consequently readily agreed to re-transfer the *Erebus* to the Admiralty. Getting rid of a perceived white elephant also offered Smuts the additional spin-off of

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164. SANDFA, AG(2) 66, AG196/322, L. Beyers - Adjutant General, 4 December 1939.

enhancing British-South African relations by the Union's readiness to assist the Admiralty'.<sup>165</sup>

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165. SANA, Smuts Papers 131, Vol. CXXXI, High Commissioner for UK - J.C. Smuts, 28 September 1939.