

Book Review

President Mandela's Admiral: The South African Navy's Story of the 1990s: Challenging Politics, Radical Transformation, Ambitious Voyages and the Quest for New Ships and Submarines

Robert C Simpson-Anderson

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The 1st of April 2022 marked the centenary of the South African Navy. Compared to other dominion navies, the early history of the Navy remains complex and often contested in terms of its lineage and date(s) of establishment. The 'hundred years of the Navy' include the establishment of the SA Naval Service in 1922, the formation of the Seaward Defence Force in 1939, its amalgamation with the South African division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in 1942 to establish the SA Naval Forces (SANF), the constitution of the SANF after the war in 1946 as a permanent component of the Union Defence Force, its ultimate renaming in 1951 to the South African Navy, and finally, its rebirth in 1994 as part of the democratic South African National Defence Force (SANDF), as we know it today.¹

With the above in mind, South African naval historiography shows a varied range of coverage, themes and focus, but autobiographies and biographies do not feature prominently, even though this form of writing has long been a respected source for historical inquiry.² The absence of biographical works that feature the careers of our naval flag officers is most notable. South African military leaders have written about themselves. Rudolph Hiemstra,³ Magnus Malan,⁴ Constand Viljoen,⁵ Jannie Geldenhuys⁶ and George Meiring⁷ have all added their voices after retirement, but the most prominent

¹ See A du Toit. "A navy for the nation". *Naval Digest* 33 (2022), pp. 1-165; A Wessels. *A century of South African naval history: The South African Navy and its predecessors 1922–2022*. Gansbaai: Naledi, 2022.

² See B Caine. *Biography and history*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

³ R Hiemstra. *Die wilde haf*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2001.

⁴ M Malan. *My life with the SA Defence Force*: Pretoria: Pretoria Boekhuis, 2006.

⁵ D Cruywagen. *Brothers in war and peace: Constand and Abraham Viljoen and the rebirth of the new South Africa*. Cape Town: Penguin Random House, 2014.

⁶ J Geldenhuys. *Ons was daar: Wenners van die oorlog om Suider-Afrika*. Pretoria: Kraal, 2011.

⁷ G Meiring. *Soldaat en mens*. Pretoria: STN Printers, 2020.

South African naval figure, Hugo Biermann,⁸ is conspicuously absent from the list. The important work done by the Naval Heritage Trust (NHT) offered some retort in 2003 when a Naval Digest of (only) 35 pages on Biermann's career appeared.⁹ Louise Jooste,¹⁰ Roger Boulter¹¹ and Rodney Warwick¹² offered valuable insight, but a dedicated biography about the life and times of Admiral HH Biermann (1913–2003) would indeed make a welcome addition to South African naval historiography.

In the light of the Biermann anomaly, the publication of *President Mandela's Admiral* therefore comes as a welcome surprise and is a gem in our naval historiography. The author was no Biermann, but nevertheless widely regarded to be the 'right man at the right time'. Vice-Admiral Robert Simpson-Anderson served as chief of the Navy between 1992 and 2000 – a time that can be regarded as one of the most significant in South African history. The book is however more than just an autobiography about Simpson-Anderson's naval career; it is a history of the South African Navy of the 1990s. In fact, only half a page in the preface is dedicated to his own curriculum vitae and thereafter the work is devoid of any focus on the 30-year naval career that led up to his appointment as chief of the Navy on 1 September 1992.

In Chapter one, Simpson-Anderson acknowledges that his appointment – less than two years after his promotion to rear admiral – came as a complete surprise. His predecessor, the popular Vice-Admiral Lambert 'Woody' Woodburne had retired early, after only two years as chief of the Navy.¹³ Simpson-Anderson inherited a navy that had transitioned from its traditional blue-water design of the 1960s to one that had to adapt to the broader national (total) strategy, mostly in support of South African Defence Force operations during the 1980s. The Navy had been hard hit by the long-term effects of arms embargoes and was still reeling following the retrenchment of 22% of its personnel in 1990 at the conclusion of the Border War.

⁸ Biermann served as chief of the Navy for an unprecedented 19 years and remains the only naval flag officer to serve as CSADF. The Naval Heritage Trust has similarly published short biographies of SAN flag officers in their series of Naval Digests (ND). See, for example, ND no. 32 – R Adm CH Bennett; ND no. 29 – Cmdre EW Jupp; ND no. 20 – Cmdre AC McMurray; ND no. 17 – Cmdre B Hogg; ND no. 13 – Cmdre J Dalgleish; ND no. 10 – R Adm MR Terry-Lloyd; ND no. 7 – Cmdre RP Dryden Dymond. (For a complete list of Naval Digests, see < <https://navalheritagetrust.co.za/digests/>>.)

⁹ R Williams. "Admiral H.H. Biermann". *Naval Digest* 9 (2003), pp. 1-35.

¹⁰ L Jooste. "FC Erasmus as Minister van Verdediging, 1948–1959". MA thesis. University of South Africa, 1995.

¹¹ RS Boulter. "FC Erasmus and the politics of South African Defence 1948–1959". PhD dissertation. Rhodes University, 1997.

¹² R Warwick. "White South Africa and defence, 1960–1968: Militarization, threat perceptions, and counter strategies". PhD dissertation. University of Cape Town, 2009.

¹³ The preceding 15 years (1977–1992) saw the appointment of no less than six different chiefs of the Navy. They were JC Walters (1977–1980), RA Edwards (1980–1982), AP Putter (1982–1985), G Syndercombe (1985–1989), AP Putter (1989–1990) and L Woodburne (1990–1992). This stood in stark contrast to the continuity that was offered by the appointments of HH Biermann (1952–1972) and J Johnson (1972–1977).

Simpson-Anderson's appointment as chief of the Navy came eighteen months after FW de Klerk's landmark speech at a time when negotiations for a new political order were gaining momentum. Chapter two offers insightful reading into the first 'behind the scenes' talks with senior members of Umkhonto we Sizwe. The Navy took the initiative to meet with Joe Modise and Ronnie Kasrils before their respective appointments as Minister of Defence and Deputy Minister of Defence. This early initiative was aimed to introduce the future political leaders to the Navy and to ensure "a mutual agreement that South Africa needed a capable navy and that political support would be needed to ensure [its] survival as an important arm of the Defence Force".¹⁴ Forging good relationships with the new Ministry of Defence paid off handsomely in the long run, and Kasrils developed a liking and a "passion for the Navy's case".¹⁵

After 1990 and in stark contrast to many years of isolation, the world literally opened up to South Africa. The Navy took on an important role to fly the new South African flag in foreign ports, in operational, diplomatic, humanitarian roles, and often in support of other state departments. During the course of his eight years at the helm, Simpson-Anderson paid official visits to nineteen countries to re-establish naval partnerships. In Chapter three, he proudly shares the numerous accolades and compliments bestowed on the Navy after such visits abroad.

One of the greatest public events ever put together by the Navy is recounted in Chapter seven. Simpson-Anderson had assembled a talented team of flag officers and Navy personnel that organised a memorable Navy 75 anniversary in April 1997. The Navy hosted an International Fleet Review on 5 April 1997 in which no fewer than 22 foreign warships from 13 countries participated. President Nelson Mandela, the commander-in-chief, was present on 5 April 1997 to take the salute at the fleet review, alongside Simpson-Anderson on board the review vessel SAS *Protea*. The president clearly enjoyed the event, and the amicable relationship that developed between himself and the chief of the Navy was of great future importance to the Navy. President Mandela provided vital support to the Navy in the long and drawn-out process to re-equip its fleet. Simpson-Anderson later admitted that "had we not had his backing it is quite possible that the eventual renewal of the Navy's combat fleet would not have materialised".¹⁶

The most appealing aspect of this book is the view the reader gets 'from behind the scenes' or should one say 'from behind C Navy's desk'. The author admits:

The book is a record of my experiences, good and bad, happy and unhappy, during my term of office, and I dare not skip unpleasant incidents lest the impression I left that my story deals with the sunny days of my term of office only.¹⁷

¹⁴ R Simpson-Anderson. *President Mandela's admiral: The South African Navy's story of the 1990s*. Muizenberg: Naval Heritage Trust, 2020, 9.

¹⁵ R Kasrils. *Armed and dangerous: From undercover struggle to freedom*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2013, 295.

¹⁶ Simpson-Anderson *op. cit.*, p. 160.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Simpson-Anderson dedicates Chapter nine to a number of more ‘amusing incidents’ reflecting on the lighter side of his term of office, but in Chapter ten also sombrely reflects on the tragic events that had to be dealt with.

The catchy title of the book and Simpson-Anderson’s claim that he was “President Mandela’s Admiral” is revealed in Chapter eight (p. 166). Here he describes, in the most humble terms, how it happened in 1995 that he was accorded the honorary title by President Mandela himself “through circumstances well beyond my control”.¹⁸

Simpson-Anderson blames (or thanks) his wife Geesje for being the main impetus to write his story. She had devotedly compiled no fewer than twenty-five scrapbooks filled with newspaper cuttings, reports and photographs of her husband from 1992 to 2000. He makes it clear that the book was written to be readable and enjoyable. It is therefore devoid of statistics, dates, fine detail or even references. The glossy book is adequately complemented by good quality colour photos, illustrations, extracts from speeches, letters, signals as well as a list of acronyms and abbreviations. *President Mandela’s Admiral* is an insightful and revealing read from start to finish, and is highly recommended. The book is a welcome addition and reference to an important era in our naval history.

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¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.