

THE HARBOUR DEFENCE MOTOR LAUNCHES

Cdr W. H. Rice

One of the handiest small craft to emerge from the Second World War was the 72 fet Harbour Defence Motor Launch. It's purpose was to patrol harbours and their approaches and to guard against attack by swimmers or underwater vehicles such as 'chariots' or even submarines. For this task the craft was fitted with a small ASD/C outfit and carried eight depth charges. Surface armament comprised a three-pounder gun on the foredeck, twin Lewis guns on the bridge and a 20 mm Oerlikon aft.

From 1941 onwards approximately 430 of these launches were built. They were originally called Local Defence Patrol Launches but later redesignated either Seaward Defence or Harbour Defence Motor Launches. All had numbers instead of names. The first group ran from 1001 onwards and

the second group from 1300.

They were built in many countries, to the same basic design and were employed on Harbour Defence work in every theatre of war. Surprisingly enough only seventeen were lost as a result of enemy action.

After the war many were retained as local defence or survey vessels and some were acquired for similar duties by countries which had not been involved in the hostilities. They were the 'capital ships' of the navies of some of the smaller emergent nations.

South Africa's involvement with harbour launches began when the Dockyard authorities at Simonstown received an Admiralty Letter dated 28 September 1940 covering specifications and



*(Photo: Courtesy of Cdr J. Bennet, Officer Commanding the SAS Unitie)
HDML 1331 at Congella, Durban during the closing months of the Second World War.*

drawings for a 72 ft Local Defence Patrol Launch. Armed with these, a Naval Team approached South African boatbuilders with a view to having a number of the new motor launches built locally. Messrs Louw and Halvorsen in Cape Town were fully committed to a programme of building 112 ft Fairmile launches and 65 ft Motor Fishing Vessels but yards farther up the coast expressed interest. Eventually orders were placed with Fred Nichols and Herby Spradbrow in Durban and Thesens at Knysna. The prototype for the South African boats was *HDML 1031* and copies of her constructional drawings were issued to the builders.

The motor launches were of timber construction. Hull planking consisted of two skins of mahogany laid on Canadian Rock Elm timbers. The keel and stem were of English Oak and the deck was of double skin construction with teak on top and mahogany below. Special non-magnetic steel armour was fitted all around the wheel house and armoured screens with small apertures could be flapped down to cover the windows.

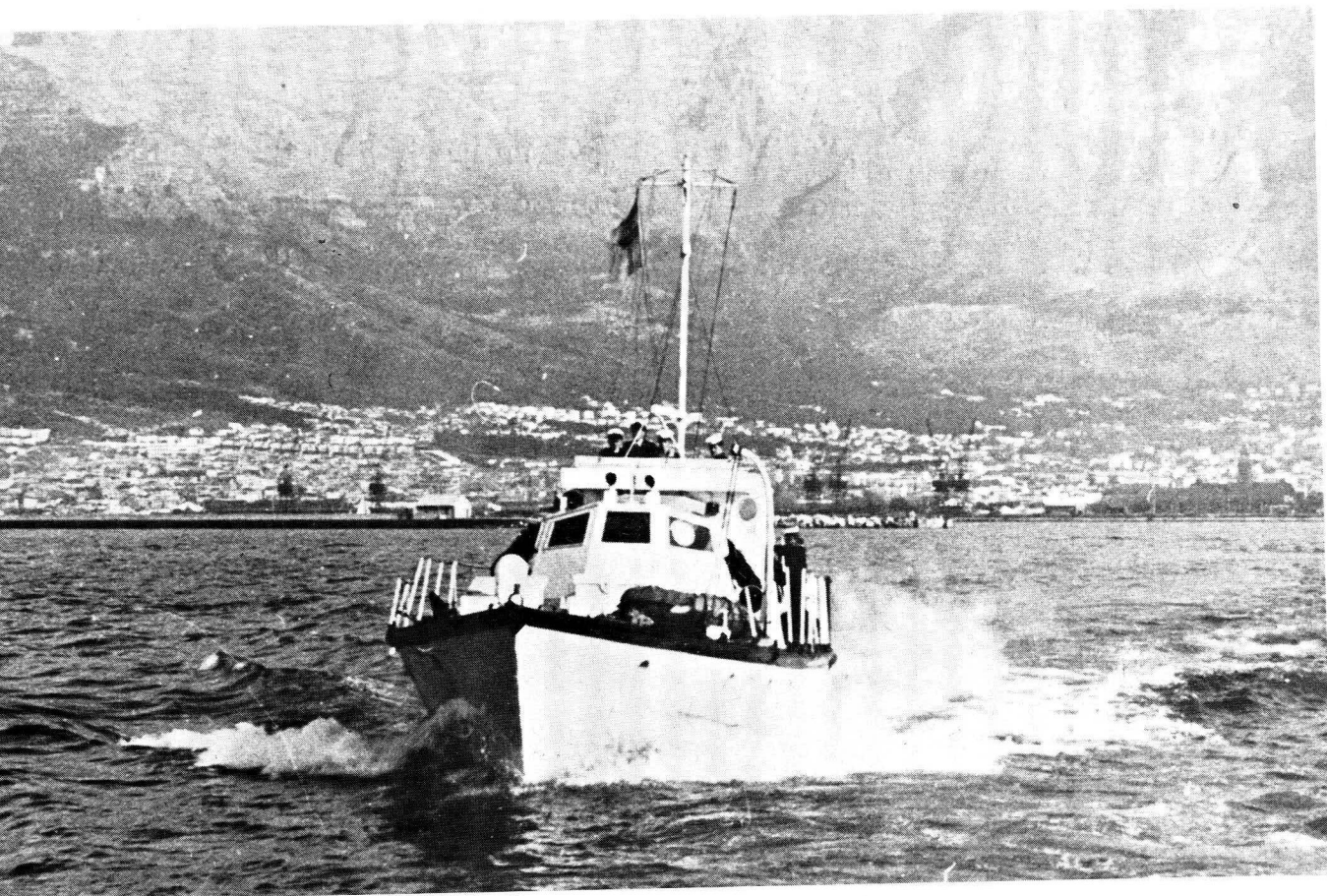
For manoeuvrability within harbours or in crowded

anchorages, a twin screw arrangement was essential. The craft were powered by two eight cylinder Gardner in-line diesels giving them a speed of around 12 knots.

When they were delivered by their builders they were allocated to the major ports from Durban to Walvis Bay. Their task was to patrol the roadstead and harbour approaches to prevent attack by enemy submarines, which were extremely active off the coast in the early years of the war. Until the arrival of the Harbour Defence Motor Launches these patrols were undertaken by anti-submarine whalers and trawlers, vessels which were desperately needed for deep sea patrols.

When hostilities ceased in 1946 the South African Navy had eleven harbour defence motor launches, most of which were lying at the Reserve Base at Salisbury Island in Durban.

When peacetime activities were resumed, most of these were allocated to the Citizen Force bases at the coastal cities and, as they reached the stage



*(Photo: Courtesy of Cdr. J. Bennet)
HDML 1197 in Table Bay.*

where repairs were no longer economical, were disposed of. By 1962 only six remained and one of those was considered to be not worth repairing. All were showing signs of their age and coastal passages became somewhat hazardous operations. On one notable voyage the coxwain literally 'dropped in' on the engineer when the wheelhouse deck gave way under his feet. The five boats still in reasonable condition were kept repaired and maintained to serve the CF bases until the steel hulled Seaward Defence Boats became available in the early 1960's.

By the end of the decade only two were left and in 1969 *HDML 1200* was sold out of the service leaving only *HDML 1204* which was then attached to the Minesweeping Base at Simonstown with the designation 'Limited Capability Port Standby Launch and Range Clearance Vessel'.

After a refit she was transferred to the Military Academy at Saldanha under the command and care of Commander I.C. Little. Old age caught up with her in 1974 when, with waterlogged keel and bottom planking, she was considered to be in danger of sinking at her moorings. A Board of Survey was convened and the launch was sold to Mr Charles Bates who stripped her down in Simon's Bay and took her round to Cape Town for rebuilding.

Although the Service has no further use for them, some motor launches are still in use as yachts or fishing vessels. A good example, which still remains something like its original configuration, is the *Windward II*, formerly *HDML 1197*, which operates from Hout Bay.

The histories and fates of the eleven South African Harbour Defence Motor Launches are briefly as follows:

HDML 1201 Attached to Naval Dockyard, Simonstown. Board of Survey convened 3 September 1957. Sold 1959.

HDML 1202 Attached to *SAS PORT REX*, East London. 1959 Damaged in collision with hopper barge. 1962 Considered to be beyond economical repair and boarded.

HDML 1203 Transferred from East London to Durban in 1956 and attached to *SAS INKONKONI*. Repaired and re-engined at Salisbury Island. Board of Survey convened 14 December 1966.

HDML 1204 Attached to *SAS Robbeneiland* for ferry service between Cape Town and Murray's Harbour. 1961 Repaired and re-engined by contractors in Cape Town in 1969. Attached to Minesweeping Base, Simonstown. Refitted at Simonstown in 1969. Transferred to Military Academy, Saldanha in 1971. Sold and rebuilt at Cape Town for commercial use in 1976.

HDML 1330 Written off and broken up at Salisbury Island in 1953.

HDML 1331 Sold at Salisbury Island in the 1950's.

HDML 1332 Attached to *SAS UNITIE*. Sold in 1958 to Mr Hart of Knysna.

HDML 1197 Attached to *SAS UNITIE* and later *SAS SALDANHA*. Withdrawn from service and sold 1966. At present the boat is owned by Mr B.W. Kuttel and is named *WINDWARD II*.

HDML 1198 Attached to Salisbury Island, Durban. Sold Nov 1956 to Mr Harting of Pine-town.

HDML 1199 Withdrawn from Durban Reserve Base and used as a ferry from 1948—1950. Beached and sold at Salisbury Island.

HDML 1200 Attached to *SAS DONKIN*, Port Elizabeth. Sold 8 September 1969 to Mr B.W. Kuttel. Rebuilt and renamed *Venture*. At present owned by Mr Chas Bates and operated from Hout Bay.