

# NEW LIGHT ON SOUTH AFRICA'S NAVAL HERITAGE

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The South African Navy celebrated its 55th Birthday on 1 April 1977. In the five years which have elapsed since the Navy celebrated its 50th Birthday much valuable historical material has been discovered. At the same time gaps in our knowledge of the past have been exposed. In the hope of arousing the interest of those who may be able to provide the information which we lack or have time to devote to such research, the following offering has been compiled.

1 April is the birthday of the South African Naval Service, which was the South African Navy's Permanent Force predecessor. However, the South African Navy has an unbroken link with the Naval Volunteers (now SAS *Inkonkoni*) which were raised in Durban in 1885. An even earlier predecessor of the South African Navy was the Port Elizabeth Naval Volunteer Brigade which was raised by Captain Chapman, who had commanded a naval brigade in India, on 27 July 1861. By late August that year the strength of the unit had risen to close on one hundred all ranks. The brigade was subsequently inspected by the Lieutenant-Governor who undertook to approve the formation of the unit and arrange for the issue of 'small arms and heavy guns'<sup>1</sup> However the unit soon suffered two serious setbacks: Rear Admiral Sir Baldwin Walker, the Commander-in-Chief, Africa Station, declined to become Commodore and attempts were made to remove Captain Chapman. The corps was subsequently attached to the Port Elizabeth Volunteer Artillery with which it may have been amalgamated during the following year. Commander Hulme considers that the 'existence (of the unit) was probably never officially recognised.'<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless this early attempt to form a volunteer naval unit should not be forgotten. It was not until 1973 that the British Royal Naval Artillery Volunteers were established in England.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Cape Naval Volunteers were only raised in Cape Town in 1905, it is im-

portant to record that the Mother City, like Port Elizabeth, also had a short-lived volunteer naval predecessor, the Sailors' Company of the Cape Town Guard, which was raised in the latter stages of the South African War of 1899—1902.

The unit was commanded by Captain Gustav von Zweigbergk who was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. The Gunnery Instructor was G. Smith from *HMS Monarch* and the unit was blessed with a chaplain, the Reverend Alan Williams. It is indeed fortunate that an excellent group photograph of these men survives.<sup>4</sup> Both these early volunteer units merit further research.

Relatively few South African regimental histories appeared before 1920, so the South African Navy is deeply indebted to Commander the Honourable Sereld Hay, OBE, RN (a younger son of the 19th Earl of Erroll), who was instructor to the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (South African Division) from its inception until 1920, for his *History of the RNVR South African Division*, published by Juta & Company in 1920. This rare book is packed with valuable information and is illustrated with what are probably the only surviving photographic records of our early Naval Volunteers. The book traces the history of these men from 1885 until the end of the Great War and is particularly valuable because it was written by an executive branch officer who was intimately concerned with most of the events he has described. But this is not a dry account. Thus we learn that the first Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve's victim of the Great War was the Admiral's cat, which was killed by an excessively zealous sentry in the latter's garden.

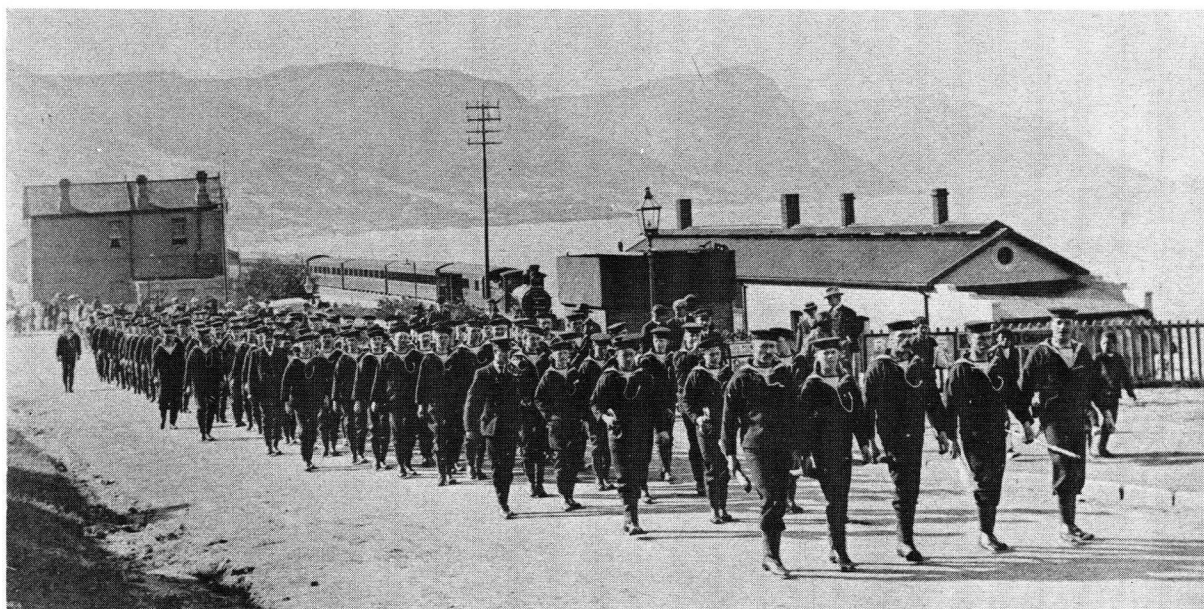
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1. *Military History Journal*, Volume 2, Number 5, June 1973 (J.J. Hulme: Cape Colonial Volunteer Corps, Part 2), p 178.
2. *Ibid*, p 182.
3. J. Lennox-Kerr and W. Granville: *The RNVR — A record of achievement* (London, 1957), p 21.
4. L. Creswicke: *South Africa and the Transvaal War*, Vol 7 (Cape Town, 1903) opposite p 108.
5. S. Hay: *History of the RNVR. South African Division* (Johannesburg, 1920), p 109.

Information about South Africans who served in the Royal Navy or other navies during the Great War is difficult to trace. Captain V.B. Molteno, son of the onetime Cape Premier, Sir John Molteno, was decorated for his memorable exploits as captain of *HMS Warrior* at Jutland. He was subsequently created a CB, appointed an ADC to the King and promoted Vice-Admiral on the Retired List.<sup>6</sup> Statistics of war casualties contained in the South African Official History include some 35 South Africans who served in the Royal Navy.<sup>7</sup> At least one Cape Coloured assisted Commander Spicer-Simpson, DSO by driving one of the traction engines which conveyed his 'Phantom Flotilla' for part of its epic journey from Cape Town to Lake Tanganyika.<sup>8</sup>

that South African Naval Service Officers and ratings wore distinctive South African Naval Service over *Suid-Afrikaanse Vlootdiens* badges on their sleeves. (Abbreviation: SA Naval Service over SA *Vlootdiens*.) Officers wore these badges where their modern counterparts wear the South African Navy lion — above the gold lace rings on their sleeves in winter uniform.<sup>9</sup>

Much has been written about the South African sailors who served during World War II. Nonetheless, there are a number of episodes about which one would like to learn more. Not enough is known about the South Africans who served in the Royal Navy and other navies. The best known South African to serve in the Royal



*South African Royal Naval Volunteer Reserves marching through Simonstown after the outbreak of World War I.*

Until recently very few photographs of the ships of the South African Naval Service and the men who sailed in them were known, so the Maritime Museum at the Castle was highly delighted to receive a small collection of photographs of *HMSAS Protea* and her crew from Mrs O.S. Scheepers (widow of Commander O.S. Scheepers, South African Naval Forces, who served in this ship and was South African Naval Forces Liaison Officer at the Defence Headquarters during World War II.)

The group photograph of the officers is particularly interesting because it reveals

Navy during this war was Admiral Sir Neville Syfret, GCB, KBE, a member of an old Cape family who was educated at the Diocesan College, Rondebosch. He had served

6. *Who's Who 1940* (London, 1940), p 2229.
7. *Official History: The Union of South Africa and The Great War 1914—18* (Pretoria, 1924), p 230.
8. P. Shankland: *The Phantom Flotilla* (London, 1969), p 50.
9. During World War II fulltime volunteers wore the red diamond. The South African Navy lion is the crest of our National Coat of Arms. The lion is a combination of the heraldic beast of Holland and England and the adoption of the badge was suggested to the Minister (the Hon F.C. Erasmus) by Commodore F.J. Dean, OBE, who has kindly presented the prototype to the Maritime Museum where it is now on display.

as a gunnery officer afloat during the Great War and in 1939 he was appointed Naval Secretary to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr Churchill. In 1942 he was given command of Force 'H' in the Western Mediterranean and from 1943 to 1945 he was Vice-Chief of Naval Staff. His final appointment was



*Lt Cmdr L. de Villiers, RN, who went down with his destroyer **Hunter**, sunk in action at Narvik.*

Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet from 1945—48.<sup>10</sup> Another South African who served in the Royal Navy was Lieutenant Commander L. de Villiers, who commanded *HMS Hunter* in the engagement at Narvik on 10 April 1940. Many other names spring to mind. Those in our submarine branch will be fascinated to discover that Lieutenants P.H. Philip and J.V. Terry-Lloyd were both decorated with the MBE for their part in the Altenfjord attack which put the German battle-cruiser *Tirpitz* out of action for months. The usually undemonstrative Admiral Sir Max Horton in an exceptionally long signal described the gallantry of all involved in 'this magnificent feat of arms' as 'unsurpassed in the history of the Submarine Service.'<sup>11</sup> (Lieutenants D. Cameron and B.C.G.P. Place were awarded the Victoria Cross.)

The valuable work done by the SWANS from 1943—1948 has never received the attention it deserves. This important branch of our Naval Forces was established at rather a late stage, only numbered 280 (with two officers — the second commission was only granted when Second Officer B. Skyrme married and resigned), and never served outside the Union. Could it have amounted to much? Certainly one is left with the impression that the branch could have been established sooner and that the SWANS often did not receive the promotion which would have been theirs in the Women's Auxiliary Army Service and Women's Auxiliary Air Force. It is especially heartening that such considerations never impaired the fine contribution to the War effort which the SWANS unquestionably made. The most memorable SWAN exploit was the firing of certain Controlled Mine Loops at Saldanha Bay by Leading Swan Sue Labuschagne on June 1944 after an unidentified crossing. Despite the absence of evidence Commander Gordon-Cumming considered that a submarine might have been sunk or damaged.<sup>12</sup> In a secret signal to Commander-in-Chief South Atlantic dated 15 August 1944, the Director of Torpedoes and Mining recorded that 'this is the first time



*A line-up of three SWANS at Saldanha Bay — in the centre is Leading Swan Labuschagne.*

10. *Who's Who 1950* (London, 1950), p 2 722.
11. C.E.T. Warren and G.C. Benson: *Above us the waves* (London, 1953), p 137.
12. Lt A.P. Burgers, SAN (Ed) *A short history of the South African Navy* (revised)(Simonstown, 1967), p 60.

when a Controlled Minefield has been fired in anger by female watchkeepers and DTM feels that they should be congratulated on the efficient manner in which they carried out their duties.'

Aside from a brief mention in the statistical records of the Union's War effort, it would seem that nothing has been written about our sailors who served in a part-time capacity during World War II. Unlike other part-time Active Citizen Force men, who were very much on the home front, these South African Naval Forces (Reserve) sailors relieved fulltime volunteers by undertaking short periods of duty at sea in minesweepers and other South African Naval Forces vessels.<sup>13</sup> The South African Naval Forces (Reserve) was largely composed of Cape Town yachtsmen who in addition to their service afloat attended parades and guarded Cape Town Docks.<sup>14</sup> General Van der Spuy has argued that the war never really 'hit South Africa.'<sup>15</sup> This cannot be said about South African Waters and the good work of the South African Naval Forces (Reserve) should not be forgotten.

Although much valuable information on the Seaward Defence Force and South African Naval Forces has appeared in print, it is understood that only half the draft of *War in the*

*Southern Oceans* could be used. (Lieutenant Colonel Agar-Hamilton, Editor-in-Chief of the Union War Histories refers to 'the compression necessary to meet the publisher's requirements' in the preface to this important work, which was limited to 1 000 copies and is now a keenly sought after collector's item.<sup>16</sup>) An unpublished manuscript by Commander Gordon-Cumming, on the work of Seaward Defence Force and South African Naval Forces during World War II was included in toto in Lieutenant (now Commander) A.P. Burgers' Directorate of Personnel at Naval Headquarters in December 1967.

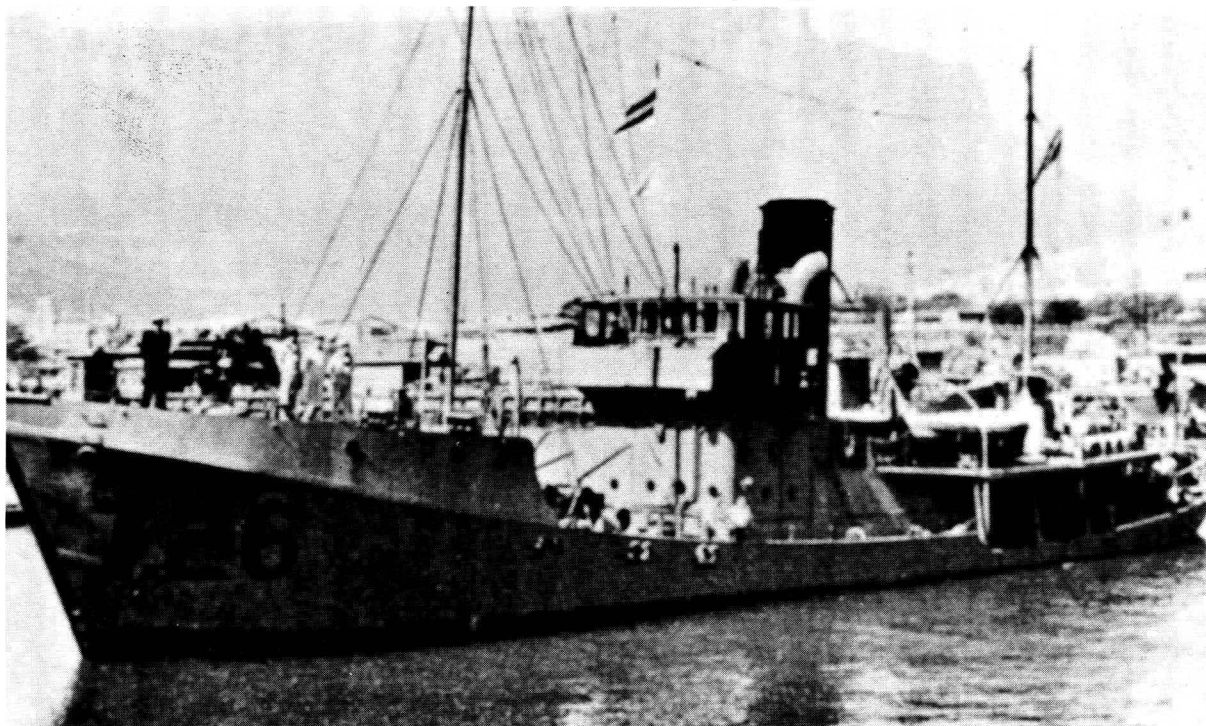
Commander Gordon-Cumming's account contains details of the numbers of awards conferred on members of the Seaward Defence Force and South African Naval Forces, but this impressive roll has never been published. The South African Navy recalls with pride the gallantry and distinguished service of these sailors, whose names are listed below.

13. *Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa*, Number 23, 1946 (Pretoria, 1946), p 20.

14. *Ibid.*

15. K.R. van der Spuy: *Chasing the Wind* (Cape Town, 1966), p 230.

16. L.C.F. Turner, H.R. Gordon-Cumming and J.E. Betzler: *War in the Southern Oceans 1939—45* (Cape Town, 1961), p 5.



*The A/S whaler, HMSAS Southern Floe, in Table Bay harbour. She was lost in the Mediterranean on 11 February 1941.*

Keith Luden, a Robben Islander who was lost in *HMSAS Southern Floe* on 11 February 1941 has left the following description of life in a minesweeper. Much similar valuable information must still be in private hands and it is hoped that this will also be saved.

'The false dawn is just breaking. It is Summer; the time is 5.0 a.m All along the quay, lying four deep are sturdy looking little ships, on board of which pipes are twittering and shrilling; voices sounding raucous and disagreeable at so early an hour are bawling "Turn out below there," "show a leg!", and various other unprintable phrases, all of which mean the same thing — preparations for leaving harbour.

'From each exhaust deafening clouds of steam shriek the fact that at least the "Black Boys" below are read'. The clanging of steam steering and deck winches add to the din and the bustle of checking over. Suddenly the pipes sweep out high clear notes "the still", all hands pace aft while the Ensigns creep up their various staffs.

'By now the ships are casting off and steaming out of harbour. They pass the breakwater and start to buffet their way into a head sea. The flagship in the lead signals her consorts, who make their way ahead at a greater speed than the other half of the flotilla; they reach a specified point and ease down to dead slow. The rest of the flotilla take stations astern, a signal is seen creeping up the flagship's mast, answering pennants flutter and the sweepers once more push ahead, the line spreads out, and eight ships steam along in a fairly straight line for about four hours when a turn is made and they come back sweeping a different section of the channel.

'Boring as it sounds minesweeping has its humorous side as well as its dangers. Laughs and thrills come thick and fast when there is a "wet passage" to be made. The art of being able to keep your feet, and keep them dry, rivals that of a ballet dancer and an acrobat. Picture yourself having to work on a surging, plunging, spray-swept deck, slippery with the grease and water unavoidable in such ships. It is great sport to watch a fellow making his way aft on such occasions and the resultant language when he is swept aft by a sea is sometimes so stunning that it

leaves one gasping more violently than the unfortunate seaman.

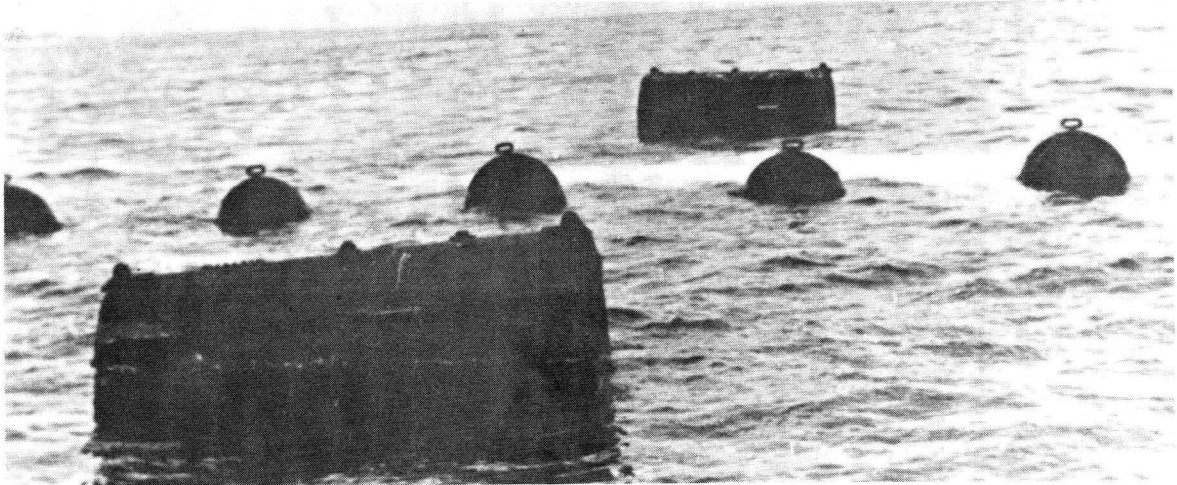
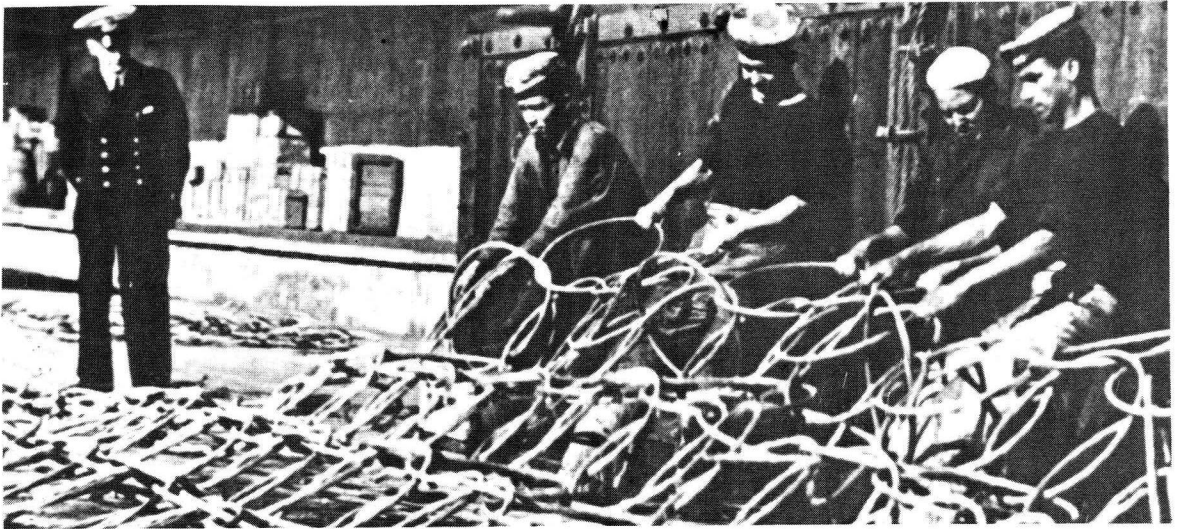
'More amusing still (providing you have no part in it) is watching the valiant efforts of the crew to get an obstinate kite in board. It would come up gracefully to within a few feet and then suddenly leap out of the water a living fury, twist itself around the sweep wire until it is completely 'dogged' and is towing in a smother of boiling foam. I've heard a Bo'sun curse roundly for nearly sixty seconds rarely repeating himself, until every language hardened ear burned, and sympathetic eyes were turned on the faulty kite.

'When mines are located there is a slight tension and show of bravado. The order "All hands to wear life jackets" gives every man a very real thrill of apprehension. A real zest is unquestionably unconsciously put into watching the wire. One soon learns to recognise the warning vibration when a mine gets in the sweep. All eyes are trained astern; up bobs a sinister shiny black mine; machine guns chatter and rifles bark as if the mine were Adolf in person. A deafening roar and the fun is over. The tension is eased — not so bad as we thought and we eagerly look forward to the next one.

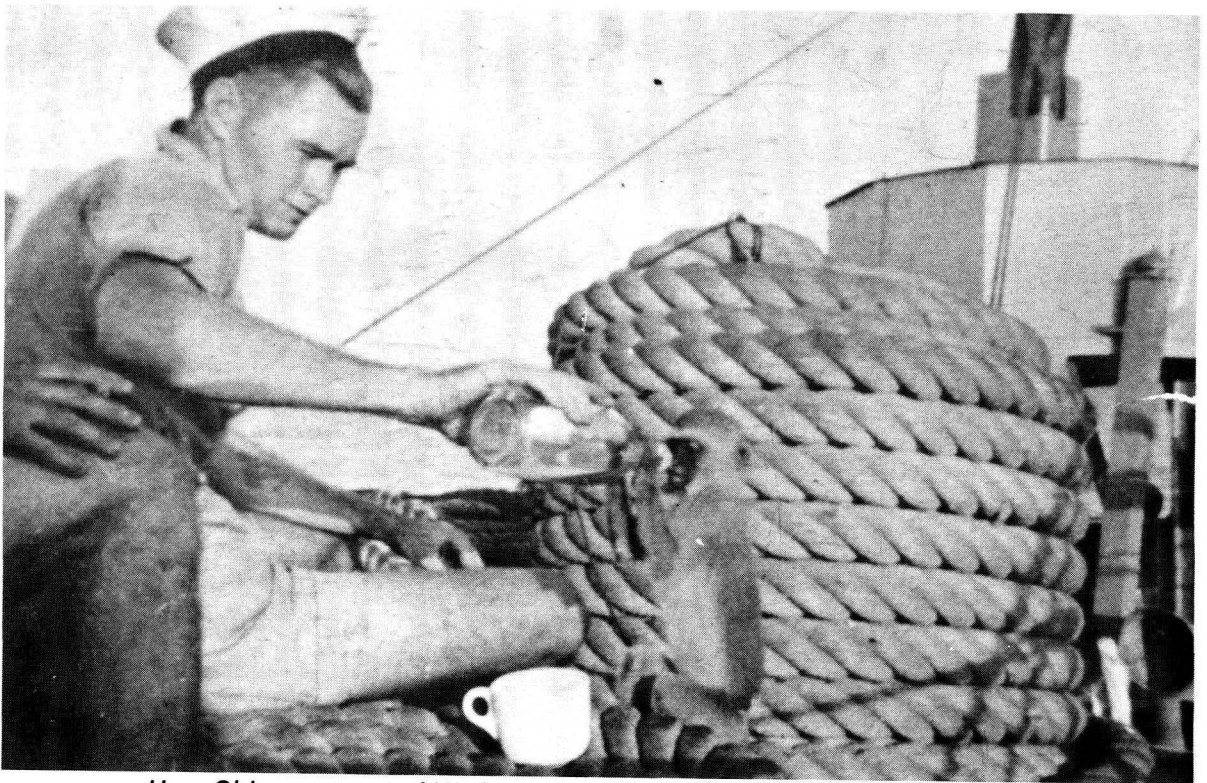
'Then there are somewhat more serious incidents. The time evening, the scene — the Forecastle. With a very serious countenance a young seaman is sewing his treasures and money into his lifebelt. Identification discs are strapped round the chest and various other sombre death preparations are made. A certain Chief Engineer was heard to reply when asked "why don't you wear a life jacket, Chief? What will you do if we get one now?" "That's a'right, Lad, if we go up noo a'would na' require it until tomorrow", which when pondered over is very good logic!<sup>17</sup>

Whilst *Just Nuisance* needs no introduction to those interested in our Naval History, most of the mascots in South African ships are remembered only by a small group of war veterans. Chico, one of the mascots in *HMSAS Gamtoos* is shown below. (The Maritime Museum also has photographs of the mascots, both dogs, in *HMSAS Protea* (1922—33) and *HMSAS Imhoff*. A pig was

17. Mrs L. Witt's collection of Robben Island documents and letters.



*Mine-laying activities: top — Laying out nets prior to attachment to boom baulks; centre — section of Saldanha Bay boom; bottom — boom maintenance party at work.*



*Here Chico, mascot of HMSAS Gamtoos, takes a little light refreshment.*

a popular mascot in British minesweepers but it is not known whether any South African ships adopted one.) The history of the development of the submarine-proof alternative harbour at Saldanha Bay in 1941—42 by Lieutenant Commander J.W. Holmes, Royal Navy Reserve and his South African Naval personnel and their tedious and hazardous work then and later could probably be written from the detailed progress reports which he submitted. Fortunately an excellent collection of official photographs has survived. Although Blacks did not serve in the South African Naval Forces, they did make an important contribution to the war effort at Saldanha where they proved particularly adept at making and repairing the vital anti-submarine nets there.

The outstanding private war medal collection assembled by Dr F.K. Mitchell reveals a surprising variety of Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Long Service and Good Conduct Medal types named to South African recipients. Research on this topic has yet to be undertaken. Commodore R.P. Dryden-Dymond, SM was awarded the Efficiency Decoration and it would be interesting to learn how many other members of the South

African Naval Forces were awarded this decoration or the Efficiency Medal, to which it presumed that they became eligible after the Royal Naval Volunteer Research (SA) had merged with the Seaward Defence Force in 1942 to become the South African Naval Forces (Volunteers).

Mr Wayne Mitchell, a Canadian, has compiled a useful catalogue of cap tallies. Volumes I and II of this work have been published and the latter includes some South African cap tallies. Much information on this subject has been gleaned from old photographs.

Although the South African Defence Force has two directorates entrusted with the vital task of preserving our Naval archives and relics: the Documentation Service, South African Defence Force and the Naval Museums (Mothball) Branch, which is part of the Directorate Military Museums, the success of this work depends upon the Navy as a whole. The amount of care lavished on an historical return or the decision to consult the Mothball branch before ditching relics could both add appreciably to our proud Naval heritage.