

"THE NAVY THAT ALTERED COURSE"

By Captain (SAN) Ivor C. Little*

Introduction

The Republic of South Africa is continually in the news for one reason or another and most members of the world's naval fraternity have a very good idea of where it is even if their judgement as to what sort of a place it is may differ. Very few of them however have a clear picture of what sort of a navy it has and why. The South African Navy is in fact a most unusual one, having in recent years literally turned its back on its former blue water navy image and voluntarily scaled itself down to a coastal defence role – quite the opposite to what most navies aspire to and a dramatic change of attitude with far-reaching effects on naval strategy for the West. In case there are those who doubt that this last statement is in fact so, let us consider a few background facts.

Origin

The South African Navy of today had its origins in the Natal Naval Volunteers who were formed in Durban in the then British colony of Natal on April 30th 1885. They were surprisingly enough in view of their title a land-based organisation but wore naval uniform and saw action in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 and the Zulu Rebellion of 1906. In the Cape of Good Hope, or Cape Colony, a sister colony further to the South, a similar unit known as the Naval Volunteer Corps was formed in Cape Town on February 7, 1905. With the forming of the Union of South Africa in 1910 these two units were amalgamated into the South African Division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. In 1914 this Division was able to make 12 officers and 267 men available to the British Admiralty at the outbreak of World War I, and South Africans served at sea with the Royal Navy in all theatres of action.

The Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, or RNVR as it was always known, continued in being after the war and in 1934 consisted of 800 officers and men based in various coastal cities. When World War II broke out there were sufficient men in the RNVR to meet the Admiralty War Plan and South Africans once again

fought world-wide and with distinction in the Royal Navy.

In the interim however one of those strangely British colonial situations had arisen in that even though she was still training men for the Royal Navy, South Africa felt the need for her own separate navy and on Wednesday, January 11th, 1922, the South African Naval Services was born. This is today taken as the South African Navy's birthday and makes it 63 years old.

The first three ships obtained were delivered in a bunch. The largest was HM Surveying Ship CROZIER, at that time comparatively new having being built in 1919. She was of 800 tons and her 2 200 hp gave her a speed of 16 knots. She was accompanied by two 300 ton Admiralty trawlers named EDEN and FOYLE. These three ships were renamed after flowers, becoming respectively PROTEA, IMMORTELLE and SONNEBLOM (sunflower). These names are still in use in the SA Navy. The fledgling service was employed mainly in surveying the 2 500 nm of South Africa's coastline and in training the RNVR to fight in someone else's Navy!

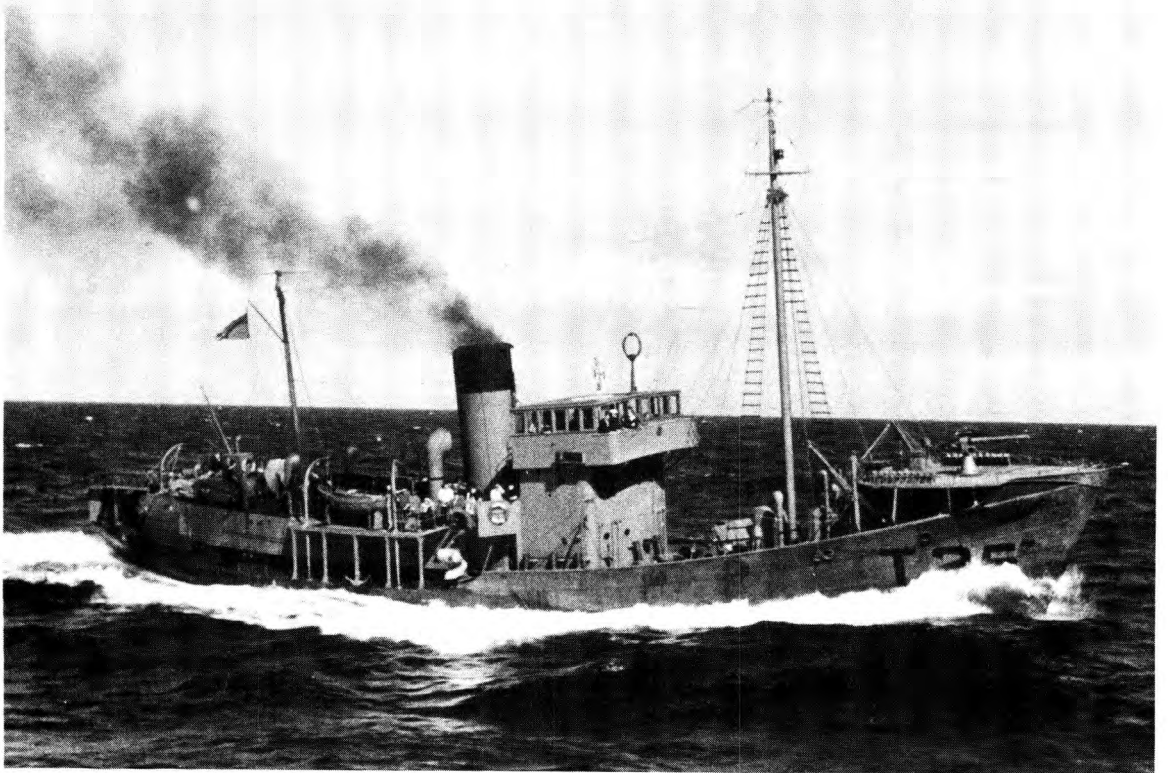
World War II

When World War II broke out and the RNVR went off to war with the British, South Africa declared war on Nazi Germany on September 6th, 1939. The SA Naval Service had lost its original three ships by now but had two whale catchers in commission, the SWARTBERG and OOSTEWAL. Nine days later the trawlers BLUFF and DISA were commissioned as mine-sweepers and before the year ended another dozen were commissioned.

On the 15th January 1940 the South African Naval Service changed its name to the Seaward Defence Force with 15 ships, 47 officers and 475 men. They went off to war in a motley collection of little ships and soon found that they were fighting in a worldwide conflict. On 1 August 1942 logic prevailed and the Seaward Defence Force amalgamated with the South African RNVR to form the South African Naval



HMSAS Protea – credited with sinking an Italian submarine in the Mediterranean in World War II



HMSAS Odberg – World War II converted whale catcher used in anti-submarine role – South Atlantic Theatre



HMSAS Standerton – World War II convoy escort – converted whale catcher – South Atlantic Theatre

Forces with 64 anti-submarine and mine sweeping vessels. After 1942 the SANF grew by leaps and bounds and consisted of anything from frigates to motor launches.

They ranged far and wide. Ships of the SANF successfully intercepted Vichy French convoys rounding the Cape to the then Madagascar and took prizes. They swept up mines laid on the Agulhas Bank by the German minelayer DOGGERBANK. (One of these mines after having been sunk by gunfire was trawled up again in 1984 and caused a furore when landed by a trawler in the small town of Hermanus). German, Japanese and Italian submarines operated to within 100 kms of Durban and a merchant ship was sunk only 4,6 kms off the South African coast. All-in-all 132 ships were sunk in South African waters even though convoys were formed and escorted. In the Mediterranean they took an active part in mine-sweeping out of Alexandria, and in the Tobruk run and Gibraltar convoys. During one of the latter HMSA ships PROTEA and SOUTHERN MAID sank the Italian submarine ONDINA by depth charge and surface gunnery. HMSAS PARKTOWN was the last ship out of Tobruk as the town surrendered to the Germans, fighting a running battle with E-Boats on the way out

before being crippled and sunk. A short while later HMSAS GAMTOOS was the first allied ship into Tripoli after its capture by the allies. By nature of her role as a salvage ship she was also first into Marseilles and La Ciotat.

Moving up into the North Atlantic, HMSAS NATAL sunk the German submarine U714 off St Abbs Head only fourteen days after her commissioning and whilst still on trials. At the war's end there were South African ships at Singapore and in the Aegean where they promptly got involved in the Greek civil war. The last ships finally came home three months after the end of the war. Eighty-nine ships had been involved and gained 128 battle honours. Some 10 332 men had gone to the war at sea (1436 officers and 8896 ratings) of whom 3000 served with the Royal Navy. Five ships had been lost, four in action and one by grounding and 223 British awards and decorations had been gained by the men.

Aftermath

Now, one may ask, why this encapsulated history in an article of this sort purporting to say the the West has lost a strategic ally? The

answer is simple. The SANF at the end of World War II was a battle tried, combat tested, blue water navy capable of all fields of naval endeavour anywhere in the world. At the end of that conflict it was, like all other Allied navies, wound down to 17 ships as men were demobilised and countries reverted to peace-time naval routine. However the force that remained was a highly professional one. The Allies, as they were then called, had therefore a highly Westernised and motivated NATO type Navy sitting astride one of the Worlds great trading links, the Cape Sea Route. The value of this force was emphasised when in 1948 it made several forays down into the sub-Antarctic and annexed the unclaimed

island in the roaring forties to prevent intrusion into the area by other governments not friendly to the West. But let us follow the story further.

On January 1st, 1951 the South African Naval Forces became the South African Navy in the wake of political changes in what later became the Republic of South Africa. At the same time Harold Mc Millan's "Winds of Change" began blowing through Africa and, one by one, the colonial governors of Africa hauled down their flags and left for Europe. The tide of independence moved steadily south, each new nation gaining a seat in the United Nations and throwing its lot in eagerly

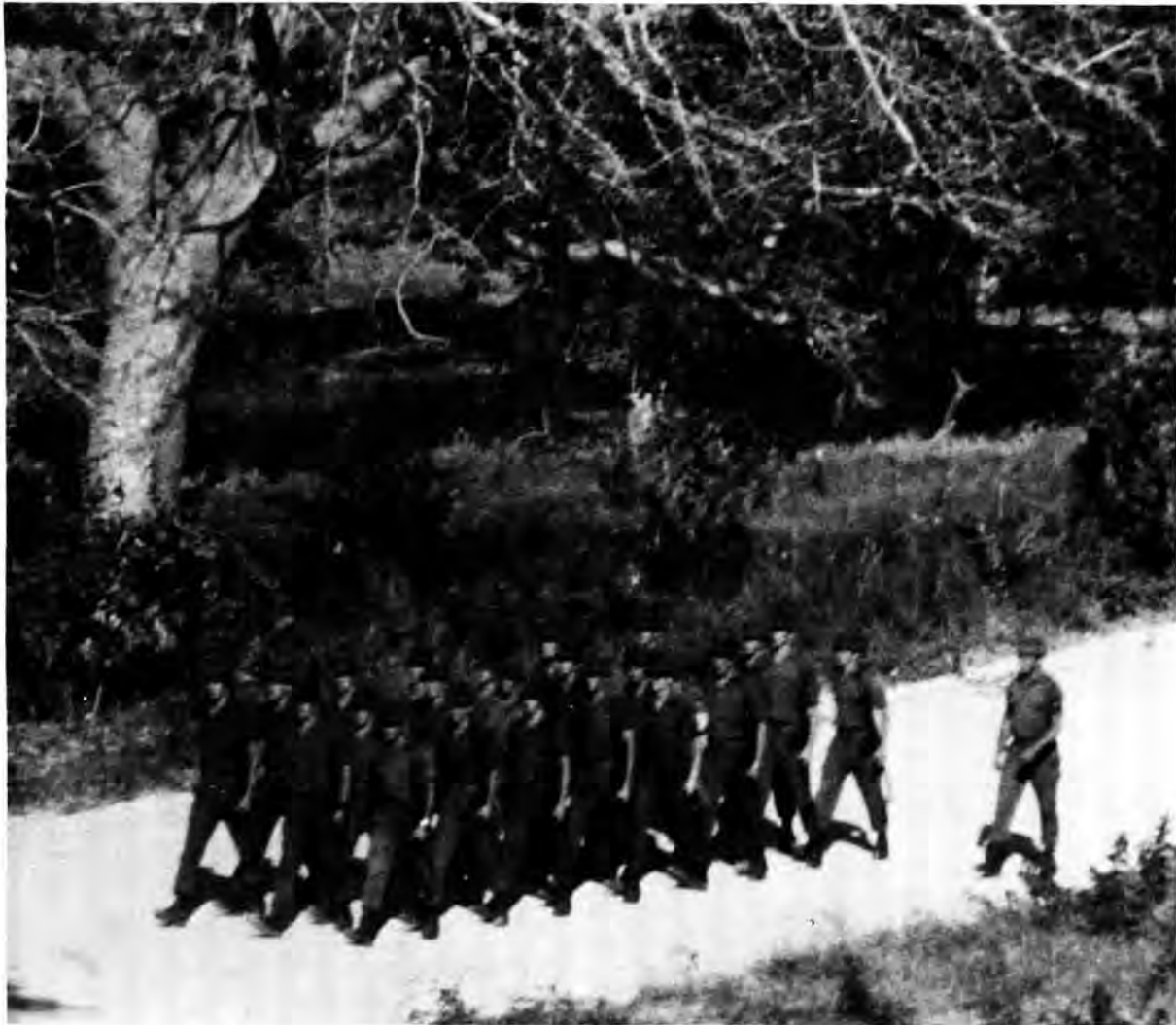


A Naval detachment parades through the streets of Durban

with the "struggle" to "free" the next one. The ultimate prize was the treasure house in the south. This was also called "the bastion of the South", the "last redoubt" etc., and this last redoubt also possessed a valuable pearl in the treasure house – Simon's Town.

Simon's Town is a small suburban sea-side resort at the end of a commuter railway line serving Cape Town thirty kilometres away. By a quirk of geography its small bay, Simon's Bay, offers protection from the South-East Trade Wind whilst the larger bay off which it leads, False Bay, gives protection from the vicious North Wester's which plague Cape Town in winter. It was here, therefore, that the British decided to build a dockyard on the sea-route to India. At the height of the British Empire, from 1885 to 1910 this dockyard was built up into a massive enterprise similar to those of Malta or in India.

In 1957 as the Empire contracted this dockyard was handed over to the SA Navy subject to certain privileges for RN ships and an "Agreement for the Defence of the Sea Routes Around Southern Africa" – the so-called "Simon's Town Agreement" was entered in to. By the terms of this agreement South Africa once again embarked on a naval expansion, as she was now to carry the RN's load in that part of the world as part of the Western Alliance. From 1954 to 1963 she built up a British-type sea-going Navy with frigates, destroyers, mine-sweepers and seaward defence boats, backed up by Shackleton long range maritime patrol aircraft and Wasp helicopters on the larger ships. By 1972 the navy also included auxiliaries and submarines – the latter built in France. International political changes continued apace however and the British Empire, long since the British Commonwealth, had changed dramatically in composition. The traditional dominions of Canada, India,



A detachment of SA Naval Marines in Northern South West Africa (Namibia)

Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were overwhelmed by the former colonies and any remaining vestige of South Africa ever being in the partnership was an embarrassment to a Labour government in the United Kingdom. The Simon's Town Agreement was quietly terminated by mutual agreement in 1972 and the British, but not Western Connection broken. South Africa shrugged off the "perfidy of Albion" and turned to France for her naval supplies.

Arms Boycott

In 1977 with the tide of independence now coloured distinctly red bursting over the Zambezi a jubilant United Nations prepared for the coup-de-grace in Southern Africa and instituted an Arms Boycott against South Africa. If ever there was a self-defeating resolution that was it. It misfired on three counts: Firstly it completely ignored the fact that South Africa is a wealthy and highly developed industrial nation; secondly it did not take into account the South African trait of thriving on adversity and lastly it ignored the strategic implications for the West.

The weapons boycott and its result are outside the scope of this article. It is sufficient to say that South Africa is now not only completely self-sufficient in this field but has also become a competitive arms exporter. The strategic implications are however of interest to us.

The South African Navy was, to put it mildly, "knocked for a loop" by the initial implication of the arms boycott. It was actually in the process of taking delivery of two corvettes from France, with three submarines under construction when the sales were cancelled. The knock however brought it to its senses.

Why was it protecting the Cape Sea Route and Southern Indian and Atlantic Oceans? Who was it doing it for? If the West, why? What was the point of trying to keep an alternative to Suez open for a bunch of countries who were boycotting her? Whose alternative oil life-line is the Cape Sea Route? Not South Africa's! And so, with a tremendous heave and much creaking and groaning of timbers the Navy altered course away from the West and towards the North.

The SA Navy of today

South Africa is part of Africa. She is an African state, whether the other African's like it or not. She is, moreover an independent regional power. Why mess about spending millions on thanklessly protecting somebody else's interests when for the same money you can further your own? It was decided to build a home-built new navy designed to support the concept of regional power. Because of the boycott no spares would be forthcoming for the British and French ships so a shipbuilding programme was set in motion. Ships which did not need to be replaced were refitted using locally produced components, in many cases at a fraction of the cost of the previously imported item. The result was, and is, a steady supply of new ships coming into commission specifically designed to meet and match any threat which may arise from Soviet orientated African countries to the North. This is not with the purpose of aggression but to ensure that South Africa remains a regional power and to discourage sea-borne adventurism from further afield. Launchings and commissionings, and particularly buildings, are kept low key but the SA Navy is slowly but steadily growing into a navy of compact, sophisticated strike craft whilst at the same time keeping its bigger ships for training and search and rescue roles.

Let us not forget the earlier part of this article either. This navy is not manned by a bunch of hayseed's and Johnny-come-lately's! The war-time tradition and knowledge was re-inforced by NATO knowledge and overseas courses and exercises. South African warships have been seen in the Elbe, the Hudson, the Solent, under Sydney Bridge and in the Straits of Magellan to name but a few examples. This knowledge, background, tradition and expertise is now being marshalled towards coastal defence and counter-insurgency, including submarines, a mine countermeasures and an anti-submarine capability.

The change has not been an easy one to implement. Your dyed-in-the-wool sea-going sailor does not take easily to relinquishing a blue water option for coastal defence and South Africa's Military Establishment, as is normal in a continental land power, had to be convinced of the value of continuing with a navy at all in its new role. These hurdles were overcome, only to be replaced by another one – how does a coastal defence navy fit in



SAS Frans Erasmus in fair weather



Two "Daphne" class SA Navy submarines at sea in False Bay

to a type of war which includes terrorism and insurgency?

The answer to that is easy. You raise from scratch a brigade of naval infantry, call them "marines" in keeping with tradition and use them for harbour protection and ashore on the border. To do this you design your own class of harbour protection boat and build 32 of them, you invent other equipment such as bush-bashing mobile radars for coastal use, and you draw on the knowledge and traditions of land-fighting predecessors from the turn of the century. So easily said, so easily done, and the SA Navy's marines have already been most successful in their appointed role.

All in all then South Africa has a vigorous and dynamic Navy, actively engaged in establishing itself as a force to be reckoned with in an African context. But for how long will this continue?

Although resolutely ignoring apparant Western political strategy to cast her to the wolves in favour of the Third World UN Lobby and

thus also waiving any responsibility for Western life-lines, South Africa's maritime strategy is not static, nor does it depend on her Navy alone. There remains a moral responsibility for the safety of life at sea in a particularly unfriendly area known for a part of its life as "The Cape of Storms". The South African Air Force has for years carried part of this responsibility most effectively with its maritime aircraft. Now that they have been grounded due to age the navy has provided sea-borne helicopters for the role which willy-nilly re-opens the whole question of deep sea ships with long endurance in stormy waters. The Air Force which also has a glorious record including the Warsaw and Berlin Airlifts and a US Presidential Citation for Korea would be only too willing to maintain its maritime presence but the Arms Boycott now effectively means land based air assistance to International shipping in distress is now a thing of the past. Ingenuity has once again triumphed however, and an elderly auxiliary, the SAS TAFELBERG, has been refitted to carry two Super frelon helicopters for off-shore rescue. This, coupled with her remaining frigate and submarines, puts the SA Navy back into a deep-sea posture if she should so wish it.



SAS Jan Smuts at sea

South Africa also possesses a large deep-sea trawling industry with its attendant fleet. There is no need to amplify in an article of this nature the various roles a large deep-sea stern trawler can play in time of war. She also possesses a large and economically active Merchant Navy which includes helicopter carrying research ships, a passenger liner and container ships. Her oldest shipping company has a direct history to 1924 and by amalgamation with other companies, back to 1869, which shows an ability to adapt and stay viable. Merchant Navy training is second to none, and the old "General Botha" which at one time listed itself amongst the pre-war world greats of "Worcester", "Conway", "Dufferin" and "Pangbourne" is still in existence and still turning out cadets.

Conclusion

If one thinks about it then, Western strategists, led by Western politicians are valiantly ignoring a long established minor navy which their own intransigence is causing to grow into an up and coming regional maritime power. Will it stay regional? Africa is almost entirely Marxist or Socialist orientated. Those countries that aren't are in many cases strongly left-leaning. If Suez is closed yet again, or the Red Sea mined again, Western ships would have to run a long guantlet through Soviet areas of influence such as the Mocambique Channel on the East Coast or past Angola, Saô Tome and

even Cuba in the West. Only the Southern tip, the treasure house, will remain free as we know it. Soviet planners are well aware of this. South Africa therefore in its quest for support might have to allow its growing Navy to alter course yet again. Westwards? Probably. But not towards the Western powers that have spurned it. There are other countries across the South Atlantic who are not so blind that they cannot see the Communist threat on their own continent nor so blind that they will continually ignore a hand of friendship stretched out towards them from the powerhouse of Africa.

It is safe to assume that the SA Navy, battle-tried on sea and land, hardened to heavy weather, Antarctic and world-wide operations will reach the stage where facing North will no longer present a challenge and be superseded by the famous old nautical phrase of "Westward Ho!" Should that happen her fleet, merchant fleet, ASW and MCM capabilities, her training facilities and counter insurgency capability, and above all, her outstanding naval bases and industrial infrastructure, could make this Navy a valued partner in any South Atlantic Alliance. In the light of not so distant events in the South Atlantic this could be a jolt to at least one Western power where political expediency sometimes tends to cloud strategic common-sense. Will this navy alter course yet again and, if it does, what consequences will that hold for the South Atlantic?

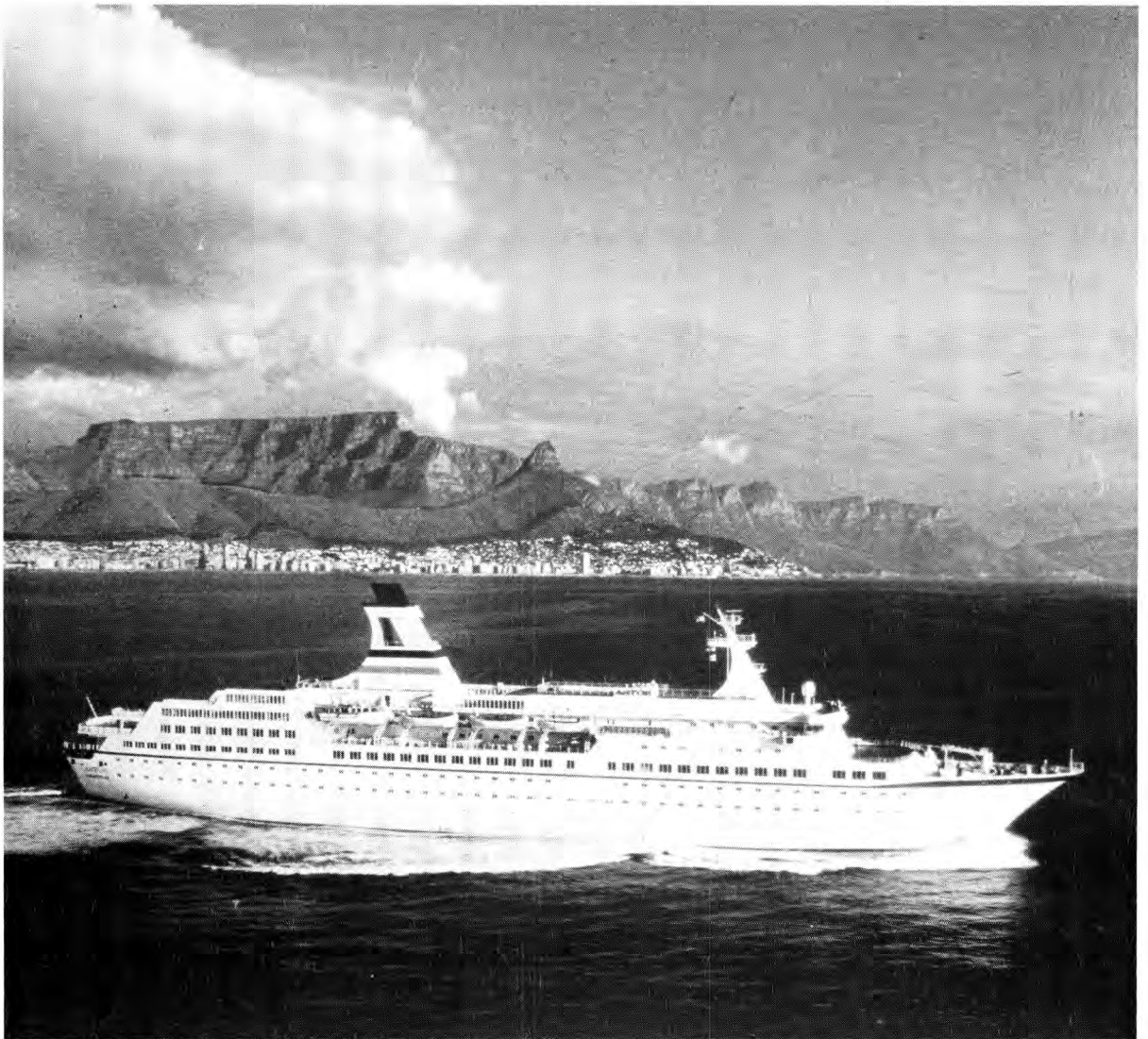
*Capt (SAN) Ivor C Little is attached to Naval Headquarters Pretoria.



The SAS Frans Erasmus at sea in a heavy swell



SAS Oswald Pirow – All these ships are known as the MOD class and are named after former Ministers of Defence



MV Astor – a modern unit of the S. African Merchant Navy (Photo by SA Marine Corporation)