

SOUTH AFRICAN NAVAL VESSELS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR¹

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

During the Second World War, South African naval vessels and personnel were deployed in the Mediterranean. Hardly two decades before, South Africa had had no navy and had never before even taken responsibility for her own maritime defence or territorial waters.

For centuries the maritime defence of South Africa was in the hands of first the Dutch and later the British. The latter had wrestled the Cape of Good Hope from the Dutch because of its supreme strategic value as the link with India and a great part of her empire. This meant that for more than a century and a half (from 1806 to the abrogation of the Simon's Town Agreement in 1974) the Royal Navy had a constant presence in South African territorial waters. It also implied that when the first flickers of an indigenous maritime defence organisation appeared, it was British in character. The South African Division of the part-time Royal Naval Voluntary Reserve (RNVR) had indeed come into being long before the country had a navy.

The South African Navy dates back to 1922, when the South African Naval Service was created with the arrival of three small ships from Britain. Unfortunately, as a result of budget cuts during the depression years of 1933-4, these ships and their crews were paid off and only a skeleton staff remained.³ This was still the position at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

1 This article is based on a paper delivered at the International Colloquium on Naval History which was held in Venice, 15 to 18 September 1996. It mainly differs from the original paper in that the latter also contained detailed sections on South Africans serving on Royal Naval ships in the Mediterranean.

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3 TD Potgieter, *Die Geskiedenis van Projek Taurus en die missielbootprojekte*, pp. 14-6.

After South Africa had become involved in the Second World War, a small ocean-going navy was created for the defence of the Union's ports and coastline. This, however, was not to be the limit of South Africa's naval role during the Second World War as South African ships served in the Mediterranean for most of the war. South African vessels participated virtually in all the phases of the Mediterranean sea war including the operations along the North African coast, the invasion of Sicily, the invasion of Southern France and subsequent operations in Greek waters.⁴ Their "little ships" were small and uncomfortable and were built for duties vastly removed from those in which South Africans so distinguished themselves. This paper will consequently focus on South African naval vessels deployed in the Mediterranean during the Second World War.

No comprehensive study has yet been published or completed presenting a scientific analysis of the role of the SA Naval Forces (SANF) during the Second World War or South Africa's naval role in the Mediterranean. This paper does not fill that gap, but nevertheless endeavours to, firstly, give an overview of that role and, secondly, survey the relevant sources available in South Africa.

In an effort to "tell the story" it was necessary to rely on archival and published sources. Archival sources are chiefly in the custody of the South African Military Archives Depot, Documentation Service Directorate, Pretoria. Their Second World War naval archives are generally speaking well-sorted and are easily accessible. Another source of primary documents is held by the South African Naval Museum, Simon's Town Naval Base. These include a number of unique, often personal, documents and the museum library, which probably contains most of the books or manuscripts, published and unpublished, dealing with South Africa's naval role during the Second World War.

The published works and manuscripts, however, yield a poor harvest. A number of works were completed, but in general they contain no annotations and some of them are just autobiographical recollections of interesting events. One of these works, the unpublished official history by HC Gordon-Cumming, is remarkable for its completeness but is, in essence, no more than a list of events. Many of the other manuscripts and published works contain errors and in most cases they are but a rework or summary of Gordon-Cumming.

4 The South African Military Archives Depot, Pretoria (hereafter MAD), Seaward Defence (SD), Box 59. SD10/10/14. South African Naval Forces (SANF) Historical Records.

SOUTH AFRICA IS DRAWN INTO THE NAVAL WAR IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Parliament of the Union of South Africa was, quite coincidentally, in session when the German offensive into Poland commenced on 1 September 1939. The Government knew it would finally have to decide on South Africa's position with regard to the war - a decision that could have a drastic influence on national unity. On 2 September, the Prime Minister, General JBM Hertzog, summoned the other 12 members of his cabinet to his residence to discuss the crisis. While Hertzog and five ministers wanted South Africa to stay neutral, General JC (Jan) Smuts, supported by six ministers, felt that it would be in South Africa's best interest to enter the war as Britain's ally. The matter thus had to be decided by Parliament.

After a drawn-out parliamentary debate the house decided (by 80 votes to 67) that South Africa would declare war on Germany. The following day Hertzog resigned his premiership and requested the Governor-General, Sir Patrick Duncan, to call a general election. Duncan refused and on 6 September asked Smuts to form a new Government.⁵ South Africa was now at war and the new Government had to prepare the country for it.

As was pointed out earlier, the South African Naval Service was virtually non-existent at the outbreak of the war. It had no ships and comprised of only two officers (Lieutenant-Commanders) and three ratings. In comparison the SA Division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, RNVR (SA), consisting of part-time volunteers, was a thriving organisation and was still under the control of the British Admiral in Simon's Town. After the outbreak of the war the recruitment of personnel for local seaward defence, the protection of harbours, and overseas service, had to be addressed.⁶

As no purpose-built warships could be found, ships had to be requisitioned from trade and converted for maritime defence purposes.⁷ To make this task easier in the case of an emergency numerous surveys were done during the late 1930s. These surveys established the type and number of vessels available in trade, fishing and whaling and selected vessels that could be used for

5 T Cameron (ed.), *Nuwe Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika*, pp. 260-1.

6 Potgieter, p. 16.

7 MAD, *Secretary for Defence, Group 2. Vol 9, Boxes 3204-7*. See also E Pienaar, *Enkele ekonomiese aspekte van die voorsiening van krygsvoorrade aan die Unieverdedigingstaf*, p. 12.

anti-submarine and minesweeping duties.⁸ The most suitable vessels available were found to be trawlers and whalers; and a comprehensive list was compiled early in 1939.⁹

Following the declaration of war, mobilization immediately started with the requisitioning of vessels for conversion to anti-submarine (AS) vessels and minesweepers.¹⁰ Although the conversion and fitting out of the first minesweepers progressed well, sufficient equipment for AS vessels was initially a problem and *Asdic* sets had to be urgently requested from the Admiralty.¹¹ Furthermore, local training facilities had to be established and here anti-submarine training was regarded as specifically important.¹²

The structure and nature of SA maritime defence changed drastically during the war. The South African Seaward Defence Force (SDF) came into being after the Prime Minister had informed the British High Commissioner on 25 October 1939 that "the Union Forces should accept full responsibility for certain services in connection with the defence of Union ports and coast line. It has therefore been decided to form a new force ... the South African Seaward Defence Force".¹³ Authority for the creation of the SDF was granted on 15 December 1939 and on 15 January 1940 this force, with 15 vessels in service, a few onshore establishments and a total strength of 428 (47 officers) was formally constituted.¹⁴ As the Union Government had for some time been in favour of amalgamating the SDF with the RNVR (SA), consultation with the Admiralty took place and this was agreed upon. A notice to this effect was published in the *Government Gazette* of 1 August 1942 and from that date onward the new force was known as the South African Naval Forces (SANF).¹⁵

These then were the important local developments regarding the creation of a war-time navy for South Africa. But, how did vessels from a small and young South African naval establishment, which was responsible "for certain

8 MAD, SANF, Box 10. Reports on vessels registered at South African ports.

9 JC Goosen, *Oms Vloot*, p. 25.

10 *Militaria*, 22/2, pp. 3-5.

11 MAD, SD, Box 3: A/S vessels and equipment. Office of Senior Naval Officer Simon's Town to Secretary for Defence, 29 December 1939.

12 MAD, SD, Box 3, SD3, Batch II, A/S Vessels. Director of Seaward Defence to Secretary of Defence, 6 February 1940.

13 Goosen, p. 38.

14 MAD, SD, Box 59. SD10/10/14. SANF Historical Records. See also *Jaarboek van die Unie van Suid-Afrika 1948: Die Unie van Suid-Afrika en die Oorlog*, hoofstuk XXIX, p. 18.

15 *Government Gazette*, Union of South Africa, 1 August 1942.

services in connection with the defence of Union ports and coastline" become involved in the Mediterranean? The answer to this question lies in an urgent request from the British Admiralty handed to the South African Government by the Senior Naval Officer in Simon's Town on 20 November 1940.¹⁶ The Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral AB Cunningham, was urgently in need of AS patrol vessels. The Admiralty also specified ships that were currently in use in South Africa. Rear Admiral GW Halifax, the Director of the SDF, however, suggested that four newer and larger vessels than those specified by the Admiralty, be sent. These vessels (called the *Southerns* and consisting of the *HMSAS Southern Floe*, *HMSAS Southern Isles*, *HMSAS Southern Maid*, and *HMSAS Southern Sea*) were at the time being converted and would soon be ready for commissioning.¹⁷ Jan Smuts, the South African Prime Minister, granted approval and the Admiralty was notified on 22 November that the Union Government would instead send four *Southerns*, as they were superior both in speed and seaworthiness.¹⁸ This the C-in-C Mediterranean appreciated and, as they were a welcome addition, requested that they sail for Alexandria as soon as possible.¹⁹

But first, something about these ships. Just after their arrival in South Africa in 1936, the South African Naval Service surveyed the "*Southerns*" and established that, in an emergency, they could be used as AS vessels. Built by Bremen Vulkan, Vegesack, Germany, they were described as the "most modern type of whaling vessels afloat". They were fine sea boats with a very high bow (which was said to be an ideal gun position) and of fine workmanship.²⁰ The *Southerns* had a maximum speed of 14 knots, burned oil (not coal) and had an endurance of 4300 miles at 10 knots.²¹ They were regarded as excellent ships, reckoned to be far better fitted and armed and better steaming ships than other ships in their class in the Mediterranean.²² The most important shortcoming of the *Southerns* was their lack of AA armament, but, this was fitted to them in Alexandria.²³

16 Goosen, p. 51.

17 MAD, SD, Box 3. SD3/13 and 16.

18 MAD, SD, Box 3. SD3/15. Signal message Operations Centre Cape Town to Admiralty, 22 November 1940.

19 MAD, SD, Box 3. SD3/15. Signal SNO to Dechief. 25 November 1940.

20 MAD, SANF, Box 10. Inspection of vessels for service in Emergency, 22 December 1936.

21 South African Naval Museum (SANM), File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Trew to Halifax, 25 February 1941.

22 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Trew to Dalgleish, 28 April 1941.

23 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Trew to Halifax, 25 February 1941.

Probably because of their appearance, after their arrival in Alexandria officers serving aboard the *Southerns* were at pains to explain that these ships were *not* trawlers, that their men were *not* trawlermen, and that these ships were organised and disciplined along the lines of service customs and tradition. As the *Southerns* were small ships with quite a low freeboard, they were constantly under water in rough weather; hence the *Southern Sea* even once received a signal from a larger Royal Navy vessel that "(i)f you constantly hide yourself in spray, we shall come and depth charge you".²⁴

This small flotilla consisting of the four converted whalers was called the 22nd South African Anti-Submarine Group, with Lieutenant-Commander (Lieut.-Cdr.) AF Trew being appointed the Senior Officer South African Ships in the Mediterranean.²⁵ Trew was informed that his vessels were to sail for the Mediterranean,²⁶ but the officers and crews, who were all volunteers, were not to know their destination and every care had to be taken that no knowledge of their destination leaked out.²⁷ On 5 December 1940, Halifax notified Cunningham that the four South African auxiliary AS vessels, ordered to report to him, would be under the command of Lieut.-Cdr. Trew and mentioned that, though the vessels were fitted with Asdics, the crews had little experience because of "the absence of any training apparatus to provide any opportunities for exercises [and] owing to shortage of ammunition supplies, very few firing practices have been carried out".²⁸

The 22nd Anti-Submarine Group left Durban and sailed for the Mediterranean on 15 December 1940 at 09:00.²⁹ They arrived in Alexandria on 11 January 1941 when the ships were placed under the command of the C-in-C Mediterranean. Admiral (Adm.) Cunningham regarded their arrival as "most welcome".³⁰ Soon after their arrival, Trew met Cunningham, who enquired about the age of the officers and men. After he had been informed that they

24 Cape Times: 29 December 1944.

25 MAD. Personnel Files. P1/4869 AF Trew. History Sheet Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew. See also SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Biographical details.

26 MAD, SD, Box 4. SD3/15 Batch II. A/S Vessels detached for General Duty. Director SDF to AF Trew, 5 December 1940.

27 MAD, SD, Box 3. SD3/15. A/S Vessels detached for general duty. Director SDF to Cdr. Gordon-Cumming, 22 November 1940.

28 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Halifax to C-in-C Mediterranean, 5 December 1940.

29 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Sailing Orders, 14 December 1940.

30 MAD, SD, Box 3. SD3/15. Releasing of vessels for service with RN and Box 4. SD3/15. Batch II, Signal message C-in-C Med, 22 January 1941.

were mostly in their early twenties, Cunningham responded: "Good - that's what you want in small ships. Young men, hard work, hard fighting!"³¹ Trew quickly realised that this, indeed, was the case.

SOUTH AFRICAN VESSELS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN : TYPE OF VESSELS, OPERATIONS, DUTIES AND CASUALTIES

The discussions of the operations in which South African vessels participated in the Mediterranean and duties they performed, are in the form of short narratives. As the focus cannot fall on all events, certain of the more interesting incidents and the tasks of more important vessels are discussed in some detail. Some of the other occurrences are merely mentioned. Attention is also briefly paid to South African vessels that sank in the Mediterranean during the war.

The Southernns and the HMSAS Protea

Shortly after the four vessels of the 22nd Anti-Submarine Group arrived in Alexandria on 11 January 1941, their first escorting duty was assigned to two of the ships, the *Southern Maid* and the *Southern Isles*, namely the escorting of a troopship to Tobruk.³² This was just the beginning and these ships soon participated in several spirited exploits, carrying out a variety of tasks such as AS patrols, escort duties, the repelling of enemy aircraft (often as the sole escort of a ship or small convoy), towing disabled ships, and the ferrying of prisoners of war and stores.³³ On the Tobruk run, their duty principally involved the escorting of small convoys of one or two ships carrying supplies to Tobruk. They would then spend four or five days in Tobruk on local patrols, often experiencing heavy air attacks. Thereafter they returned to Alexandria as escorts, sometimes taking back prisoners-of-war and experiencing air attacks at sea.³⁴

The first South African casualty in the Mediterranean war at sea, was the *Southern Floe* under the command of Lieutenant (Lieut.) JEJ Lewis. She had probably hit a mine off Tobruk, in the early hours (about 04:00) of 11 February 1941.³⁵ The explosion broke the ship in two and she immediately sank, leaving

31 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Trew to Halifax, 25 February 1941.

32 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Trew to Halifax, 25 February 1941.

33 G Stitt, *Under Cunningham's Command, 1940-43*, p. 241.

34 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Trew to Dalgleish, 28 April 1941.

35 MAD, Personnel Files. 70019 SANP JEJ Lewis. Application for campaign medals and statement of service. Killed due to enemy action.

no time to lower the boats.³⁶ After the ship had sunk, about nine surviving crew members, including the Commanding Officer (CO), Lieut. Lewis, were floundering in the water. Lewis called the swimmers together, said a prayer, they all sang a hymn; and then, as they drifted apart, he told them that it was now every man for himself.³⁷ The following day an Australian destroyer picked up the sole survivor, Stoker CJ Jones, who had spent more than fourteen hours in the water.³⁸ Jones, incidently, was a South African rating serving aboard the *HMS Gloucester*, who had been "loaned" to the *Southern Floe* for the trip. The loss of this ship, although a trivial incident in the war, was the first the SDF suffered and was a grievous blow. The ship spent less than a month on station and few people in South Africa were aware of the fact that they had arrived in the Mediterranean or had been in action.³⁹

By April, the *Southerns* always operated alone and, as a rule, they were the sole escort to their convoys, "a true reflection of the difficult times the Navy [were] having".⁴⁰ On these convoys the *Southerns*, as mainly anti-aircraft (AA) escorts, regularly and heavily engaged the enemy. For their crews life was very strenuous: the AA guncrews were kept closed up throughout the day and still had to keep their usual watches at night. Trew informed the South African naval authorities that the *Southerns* were the only ships of their type doing ocean escort-work on the northern supply route, where they had practically alone shouldered the burden of that difficult task; and that the ships' engines and the men had suffered. Despite very good morale, the officers and men were "beginning to feel the strain" and they badly needed rest after three weeks away. The rest period was normally one week, after three weeks of escorting and patrolling. During this period, boilers had to be cleaned, many defects had to be attended to and since the officers and men usually went "on a spree" at night, they were not getting real rest.⁴¹

The South African ships took no part in the evacuation of Greece and Crete in April and May 1941, but were nonetheless affected by the reduced number of ships and aircraft available off the Libyan coast, where an Axis

36 MAD, SD, Box 4. SD3/15/1. Casualties 22 A/S Flotilla. Signal C-in-C Med to SNO Simon's Town, 12 February 1941 and Signal DIRSEA to DEWAREC, 15 February 1941.

37 CJ Harris, *War at Sea*, p. 38.

38 MAD, Personnel Files. 67437 SANF/RN. CJ Jones. Application for campaign medals.

39 HR Gordon-Cumming, *History of the South African Naval Forces, 1939-45. Mediterranean Section I*, p. 12.

40 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Trew to Dalgleish, 28 April 1941.

41 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Trew to Dalgleish, 28 April 1941.

offensive was driving east. This offensive by-passed Tobruk and captured Bardia; and, from April, Tobruk was cut off and could only be supplied by sea.⁴² Mr Winston Churchill (British Prime Minister) was adamant that Tobruk should be held since, as it could be reinforced by sea, it would pose a threat to enemy communications and to him it was "unthinkable that the fortress of Tobruk should be abandoned".⁴³ Allied land forces, under the command of Gen. A Wavell, having accumulated some months' supplies at Tobruk, were also anxious to hold it, despite the fact that the situation in the Western Desert was rapidly growing worse. A beleaguered Tobruk came under constant attack and the town, which suffered heavily from consistent bombardment, was essentially in ruins. No building, other than the Roman Catholic church, appeared to be intact.⁴⁴

Following the decision to hold Tobruk, the supply of the town by sea became a major responsibility for the Navy. Convoys were heavily bombed at sea and in the harbour; and later the Navy was forced to send a single ship at a time as ships had "no fighter protection at all"⁴⁵ in the approach to Tobruk. The problems were the extensive Allied commitments in this theatre of operations, the poor resources available, the lack of long range fighters to give air cover to convoys, and the limited range of Allied fighters which did not extend as far as Tobruk. This meant that the approach towards Tobruk was without protection of fighter aircraft and became known as "bomb alley". Tobruk became a "long tale of ships lost and damaged in supplying the fortress ... all ships approaching it, were mercilessly bombed".⁴⁶ The *Southerns* often sailed for Tobruk and were soon running the gauntlet of air attacks in "bomb alley".

Despite these pressing air attacks, the supply line to Tobruk was maintained, largely due to the courage of the small escorting craft and minesweepers which were hard put to keep the channel clear and run in the necessary supplies. The South African whalers, *Southern Maid*, *Southern Isles* and *Southern Sea* were "among the smaller vessels which distinguished themselves in these hazardous escorting duties".⁴⁷ Soon the South African ships received considerable praise for their service and commitment to duty. The CO of the First

42 Stitt, p. 211.

43 BH Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War*, pp. 179-80.

44 SANM. File: Lieut.-Cdr. AF Trew, DSC. Task for Royal Naval Staff College, 10 August 1944.

45 AB Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, p. 350.

46 Cunningham, p. 339.

47 Stitt, p. 211.

Submarine Flotilla was of the opinion that these ships have "shown their mettle under fire on many occasions. They normally operate without the support of other ships and it says much for the leadership of their CO's that the spirit of ships companies is so excellent throughout."⁴⁸

Tobruk was relieved on 8 December 1941, after 242 days of siege, during which time a total of 27 ships were sunk and 27 damaged.⁴⁹ The losses in small ships and minesweepers were, according to Adm. Cunningham, the price they had to pay for "the almost complete lack of air cover"⁵⁰ as Tobruk was out of range for fighter protection. The Tobruk episode also accentuates the oft-learned lesson of the Second World War, namely that surface ships are extremely vulnerable to enemy air attacks if they have no air cover.

In a speech on the supplies at Tobruk in the House of Commons, the British Prime Minister made no mention of how the supplies reached Tobruk, or the hard time small ships had in carrying out this obligation. As a result Cunningham wrote to Sir Dudley Pound (First Sea Lord) stating that the Prime Minister's speech had annoyed everybody concerned and that the men in the small ships were "a bit sore-hearted at receiving no official recognition of what has been gallant work as has ever been done..."⁵¹ Cunningham also sent a signal to the Government of the Union of South Africa in which he stated that he had noted with great admiration the work South African warships had performed under the most arduous conditions and that although "they are rather out of the limelight, their excellent work and seamanlike handling coupled with the courage and determination shown in the face of continual air attack reflects the greatest credit on officers and men".⁵²

The *Southerns* were to return to South Africa at the end of May 1941, but the situation in the Mediterranean theatre of war was so pressing that the Admiralty not only requested the ships to stay for another six months, but also asked for a replacement of the *Southern Floe*. The replacement vessel, the *HMSAS Protea*, was an up-to-date whaling ship, of a very similar design to the *Southerns*,⁵³ and she received a full mechanical overall during her conversion.⁵⁴

48 Weekend Argus Magazine, 21 March 1942, Signal Captain (S) First Submarine Flotilla to C-in-C Mediterranean.

49 Cunningham, p. 427. See also Cape Argus, 16 November 1944.

50 Cunningham, p. 359.

51 Cunningham, p. 428.

52 SANM. File SANF. Signal Message, 1150C/6.

53 MAD, SD, Box 4. SD3/15/10. Replacement of *HMSAS Southern Floe*. Signal DECHIEF to

She sailed from Durban during August, joined the 22nd Anti-Submarine Group in November and was soon in the thick of the fighting in the Mediterranean.

At the end of 1941 the South African flotilla of four ships had already received the following awards: six DSO's, ten DSM's, one CGM, one DSM and five crew members were mentioned in despatches.⁵⁵ Trew, the first Senior Officer South African Ships was, later in the war, also awarded the DSM for "courage and devotion to duty while in command of a SANF whaler carrying supplies to Tobruk".⁵⁶

The South African 22nd Anti-Submarine Group was to return to the Union at the end of 1941. Once again Adm Cunningham "was reluctant to see these ships go particularly as they had done such good work on the Tobruk Run". He signalled the Admiralty asking for an extension of their stay, saying: "The loss of these efficient little ships and experienced crews will be deeply felt. I beg that a request be made to the Union Government, asking that they be allowed to remain in their essential work, which is hand in hand with the fine exploits of the troops of their Dominion ashore."⁵⁷ As a result of the request from the British Admiralty the Union Government again in November decided to extend the loan period - eventually until the end of the war.⁵⁸

The extension of their services in the Mediterranean implied only one thing for the 22nd Anti-Submarine Group: active duty and a continuation of bitter fighting. A glance at the frantic scribbling on many a logbook page confirms this, with uneventful voyages being the exception. Reports from the Mediterranean also tell of constant active duty, varying from convoy duty and submarine contacts to continuous subjection to air attack.⁵⁹ According to a war-time author the crews of these ships were always manning their guns at an instant, and he states that, "by their readiness to beat off air attacks, the *Southerns* undoubtedly earned respect".⁶⁰ This busy schedule and the considerable time these ships spent at sea, were having an effect on the crews and the ships. The Senior South African Officer as a result warned that more

FOIC Simon's Town, 7 July 1941.

54 MAD, SD, Box 8. SD3/27. *HMSAS Protea* - Ex Terje 7.

55 *Cape Times*, 17 May 1945.

56 MAD, Personnel Files. P1/4869 AF Trew. SANF AF Trew: Distinguished Service Cross.

57 Cunningham, p. 427.

58 Gordon-Cumming, Mediterranean Section II, p. 5.

59 MAD, SD, Box 5. SD3/15/16. SANF Monthly reports Mediterranean Station. Report March-April 1943.

60 Stitt, p. 243.

time were needed for maintenance and if this did not materialise "the efficiency of the these ships will suffer considerably".⁶¹

One of the more notable exploits in which a South African ship took part, occurred in May 1942. A small convoy consisting of three ships (*SS Hecla*, the sloop *HMS Grimsby* and the *Southern Maid*) approached Tobruk on Saturday 24 May. With a sand storm over the coast, conditions were very unpleasant. This meant that the convoy had to enter Tobruk the following day. But, before entering Tobruk, they came under insistent air attacks, with at least twenty-seven Ju87's with fighter escorts participating in one attack. The *Southern Maid* was hit several times, suffering four wounded and one dead, but zig-zagged and maintained a continuous fire, expending 1750 20mm rounds in 20 minutes. As a result, several planes were observed to be hit and one was downed.⁶² Both the other ships (*Hecla* and *Grimsby*), were badly hit and later sank. The *Southern Maid* picked up 160 survivors, with some wounded amongst them, altogether six times more than the ship's normal complement. She then sailed for Mersa Matruh, where she arrived the following morning. Less than a week later she was performing similar duties. Other South African vessels had the same experiences, with the *Southern Isles* for example suffering four casualties and shooting down a Ju87 on the Tobruk Run.⁶³

On 11 July 1942, the *Protea* and the *Southern Maid* succeeded in sinking an Italian submarine, the *Ondina*. After hunting and depth-charging the submarine for about two hours it was forced to the surface "in a sinking condition".⁶⁴ The gun crews of the South African ships "immediately fired" at the submarine, but as it was sinking and its crew had abandoned ship, the *Protea's* boats were used to pick up survivors, taking 29 aboard the *Protea* and 12 aboard the *Southern Maid*.⁶⁵ The CO of the *Protea*, Lieut. G Burn Wood, was afterwards awarded the DSO for his part in this action.⁶⁶

During March 1943, in a "gruelling hunt in heavy seas lasting more than three days",⁶⁷ the *Protea* participated in a hunt for a submarine. Two ships in the

61 MAD, SD, Box 4. SD3/15/2. Report of proceedings to R Adm in Alexandria, 31 July 1942.

62 MAD, SD, Box 4. Reports of proceedings. Mediterranean Fleet Narrative No 2. Tobruk Convoy. 269/41.

63 Stitt, p. 215-6.

64 MAD, Naval Ships Logs, Box 115. *HMSAS Protea*, July 1942.

65 MAD, Naval Ships Logs, Box 150. *HMSAS Southern Maid*, July 1942.

66 MAD, Personnel Files. 70054V SANF G. Burn Wood. Application for campaign medals, 7/1/46.

67 *Cape Times*, 29 March 1943.

convoy (*Deflia* and *Kaiyang*), which the *Protea* and other Royal Naval vessels escorted, were torpedoed and the crews were intermittently at AS stations for days on end.⁶⁸ During the action the ships came under torpedo attack but on the last day, following an AS contact, a considerable amount of diesel and oil bubbled to the surface. This gave reason to presume that the submarine had been badly damaged or destroyed.

Ships of the 22nd Anti-Submarine Group also participated in the invasion of Sicily. In August 1943 during Operation *Husky*, they escorted a convoy which included landing craft. At this time a convoy system, extending over the whole length of the Mediterranean was created, and South African ships escorted convoys from Gibraltar to Port Said, a passage of nearly 2000 miles. En route ships arrived and were detached to numerous destinations such as Malta, Sicily, and about eight North African ports. This meant that the size of the convoys was continuously changing and occasionally convoys were rather large, consisting of as many as 80 ships with about five escort vessels.⁶⁹

These convoys frequently came under attack, on many occasions while South African ships acted as escorts. On 27 October 1943, for example, a convoy came under submarine attack while the *Southern Isles* and the Fleet Minesweeper *HMS Hythe* were on convoy duty. Torpedoes aimed at vessels in the convoy, hit and sank the *Hythe*. The *Southern Isles* immediately counter-attacked with depth charges, and no other vessels in the convoy was sunk. After briefly sighting the submarine's stern and some oil on the surface, she lost contact with the submarine but managed to rescue the 19 survivors of the *Hythe*.⁷⁰ Arduous convoy duty between Alexandria and Gibraltar continued, although, owing to the loss of their Italian bases and other supply difficulties, the German submarine threat was decreasing. A modest air offensive against the convoys, however, continued.⁷¹

While the *Protea*, *Southern Sea* and *Southern Isles* were still involved in escort duties between Port Said and Gibraltar, the *Southern Maid* was performing similar duties in the Levant.⁷² One of *Southern Maid's* more unusual

68 MAD, Naval Ships Logs, Box 117. HMSAS *Protea*, March 1942.

69 Gordon-Cumming, Mediterranean Section V, pp. 3-5.

70 MAD, SD, Box 59. NS10/10/4. Records historical. The sinking of *HMS Hythe* and an attack on the U-boat by *HMSAS Southern Isles*, 5 November 1943.

71 Gordon-Cumming, Mediterranean Section V, p. 7.

72 MAD, SD, Box 150. SD49. SANF part in final phase of Italian and Asiatic Campaigns, 14 June 1945.

experiences was a spirited engagement on 2 October 1944 with a German shore battery on Aegina island.⁷³ After departing from the Island of Poros she came under fire from the shore battery on Aegina for about 30 minutes. She immediately fired back, her gunnery officer utilising the upward role of the ship to try and add extra distance, but the range of her 4" guns was too limited. A number of shots fell quite close to the ship but, with the exception of a bridge window broken by shrapnel, she suffered no damage.⁷⁴ In November 1944, while the *Protea* was busy with escort duties in the Aegean and along the Greek coast, she assisted the evacuation of hard-pressed British and Indian troops from Krioneriin. These troops were encountering ELAS (National People's Liberation Army) opposition to the Allied reoccupation of Greece and had to be evacuated.⁷⁵

In December 1944 the *Southern Sea* and the *Southern Isles* were recalled to South Africa.⁷⁶ They arrived in Durban shortly before Christmas 1944; the end of four years of service in the Mediterranean.⁷⁷ The *Southern Maid* and *Protea* remained in the Mediterranean for an additional year. This was something of an anti-climax, as they were employed in destroying mines and laying dan-buoys. Both arrived back in Durban on 12 December 1945.⁷⁸

Minesweepers and minesweeping

In May 1941, at the time when the extension of the period of service for the AS vessels was agreed upon, the Union Government also agreed to send eight LL Minesweepers for service with the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean.⁷⁹ The South African "LL" or "Double L" minesweepers carried two magnetic or "L" sweeps to deal with magnetic mines; but were not fitted with the minesweeping gear required when dealing with moored mines. As the fitting out of the minesweepers entailed considerable reconstruction and all the equipment was not available in South Africa, four of these ships sailed in July for conversion in the Mediterranean (Haifa and Beirut) while the remainder were fitted out in

73 AK du Toit, *South Africa's fighting ships*, p. 101.

74 MAD, SD, Box 5. SD3/15/16. SANF Monthly Reports Mediterranean Station. CO HMSAS *Southern Maid* to Flag Officer Levant, 4 October 1944.

75 MAD, SD, Box 150. SD49. SANF part in final phase of Italian and Asiatic Campaigns, 14 June 1945.

76 MAD, SD, Box 150. SD49. SANF part in final phase of Italian and Asiatic Campaigns, 14 June 1945.

77 *Cape Times*, 29 December 1944.

78 Du Toit, pp. 102-3 and 107.

79 Gordon-Cumming, *Mediterranean Section II*, p. 5.

Durban and Cape Town.

These ships were inferior to the *Southerns* and, as their minesweeping equipment added a considerable amount of top weight, they carried only light-gun armament. Being small ships, they were rather uncomfortable, especially in the often "choppy" Mediterranean sea conditions. Add to this the constant danger from mines and air attacks which their crews sometimes had to endure for long periods, it is evident that the crews had a very strenuous time when operationally deployed.⁸⁰ Nevertheless these ships became "maids of all work" and did many extraneous tasks, which could be attributed to the staunchness of the small complements.⁸¹

The South African minesweepers in the Mediterranean were soon in action and on 20 June 1942, under heavy fire, the *Bever* and the *Parktown* distinguished themselves in the evacuation of Allied personnel in Tobruk. Shelling of Tobruk started at 07:00 and during the course of the morning, the South African minesweepers swept the channel entrance to the harbour. After receiving orders to pick up evacuation parties, the two vessels went alongside at 16:00, while heavy enemy shelling occurred. By 20:00 the Axis forces were already in the town and both ships came under heavy fire, with tanks, motorised troops and armoured cars firing from all sides. While embarking their evacuation parties and with most of their allocated men already on board, they received a signal to leave.⁸² The *Bever* received two direct hits from a German tank, suffering one dead and having four wounded on board, but with the aid of a smoke screen from a motor torpedo boat, she managed to pass through the harbour entrance under heavy fire.

The *Parktown* came under heavy machine-gun fire from motorised troops and despite her small size, managed to embark 60 troops. As she was casting off, men kept arriving and several attempted to swim to the ship. A member of the ship's company (Able Seaman PJ Smithers) swam to the assistance of some men in the water and eventually, in the confusion and rush to get out of the harbour, he had to be left behind.⁸³ To her honour, the *Parktown* was the last

80 In his novel, *The Red Diamond Navy*, J Tennant (a South African Mediterranean service veteran) presents a vivid account of the conditions under which these men served as well as the stress they experienced.

81 Gordon-Cumming, *Mediterranean Section III*, p. 8.

82 MAD, *Naval Ships Logs*, Box 14. *HMSAS Bever*, June 1942.

83 MAD, *Naval Ships Logs*, Box 216. Reports of proceedings. *Loss of the HMSAS Parktown*, 24 June 1942.

Allied ship to leave Tobruk before its capture and thus attracted tremendous fire. Although she was hit several times, only one man was killed. At sea the *Parktown* took a disabled tug, crowded with men, in tow. This reduced her speed to only five knots and she fell behind the *Bever* and the other ships which were proceeding independently to Mersa Matruh and Alexandria.⁸⁴

At about 07:15 the following morning, the *Parktown* was attacked by four or five E-boats, considered to be Italian. Both sides immediately opened fire: *Parktown* with her 20mm *Oerlikon* and the other side with what appeared to be three-pounder guns. Outgunned and outmanoeuvred, the *Parktown* was no match for her agile opponents, attacking her from all sides. Shells hit the engine and boiler room, while another hit the bridge killing her CO Lieut. LJ Jagger⁸⁵ and several others. The crew fought valiantly and her First Lieutenant, Sub-Lieut. ER Francis, though severely wounded, manned a gun and took charge until all ammunition were expended.⁸⁶ As they were abandoning their burning ship the crew of the E-boats fired on the men in the water. However, an aircraft, considered to be Allied (but possibly German) appeared, opened fire on the E-boats and drove them off.⁸⁷ Out of a total complement of 21 the *Parktown* suffered 13 casualties, the survivors being rescued towards the evening. Sub Lieut Francis, wounded in both legs, was subsequently awarded the DSO,⁸⁸ while the CO of the *Bever*, Lieut. PA North, was awarded the DSM.⁸⁹

With the Axis forces in possession of Tobruk, conditions in Alexandria became more perilous. The Axis forces parachuted mines from aircraft and this kept the South African LL sweepers quite busy. Following the stabilization of the land front at the Alamein Line and the ensuing Allied advance, a number of the South African sweepers assisted in minesweeping operations as the Allied forces advanced westward across North Africa.⁹⁰ At the same time, some vessels were also involved in the laying of dan-buoys, and the marking of areas swept or about to be swept. These vessels completed tasks ranging from the ferrying of

84 Du Toit, p. 78.

85 MAD, Personnel Files. 70016 SDF LJ Jagger. Statements of service. Killed in action, 21/6/1942.

86 MAD, Naval Ships Logs, Box 216. Reports of proceedings. *HMSAS Parktown*. Lost by enemy action, 21 June 1942. Loss of the *HMSAS Parktown*, dated 24 June 1942.

87 Sources differ considerably on the identity of the aircraft. See for example Gordon-Cumming, Mediterranean Section III, p. 15.; Du Toit, p. 79; Goosen, p. 61 and MAD, Naval Ships Logs, Box 216. Reports of proceedings. Loss of the *HMSAS Parktown*, 24 June 1942.

88 MAD, Personnel Files. 70101 SANF ER Francis. Records of service and details of service.

89 MAD, Personnel Files. 71634 SANF PA North. Details of service.

90 Gordon-Cumming, Mediterranean Section IV, pp. 1-2 and 7.

troops to the towing of disabled ships.⁹¹ These duties were varied by occasional convoy protection, and South African minesweepers were sometimes on the spot when ships were torpedoed. This was the case when the tanker *SS Crista* was torpedoed and subsequently exploded, and the *Boksburg* had to pick up 31 survivors out of the inferno.⁹²

During 1944 South African minesweepers were primarily involved in minesweeping operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and also served as convoy escorts between Alexandria and Port Said. On 15 October 1944 five minesweepers (*Boksburg*, *Gribb*, *Treem*, *Seksem* and *Bever*) sailed to participate in the liberation of Greece and became heavily involved in extensive minesweeping operations off the Greek coast. Minesweeping operations were hectic and in December 1944 the *Seksem* destroyed 97 mines in the Aegean in three days.⁹³ But minesweepers sometimes had to pay the price and on 30 November 1944, after striking a mine the *Bever* was lost in the Gulf of Nauplia, off Crete.⁹⁴ The explosion had an inevitable effect on such a small ship: with fragments flying in all directions, she disintegrated and sank within seconds. Considering the rapidity of the *Bever's* destruction, it is remarkable that seven survivors, out of a crew of 23, were rescued.⁹⁵

The *Treem* was the next South African loss. She sank in the Trikeri channel, in the Aegean, after striking a mine at 09:00, on 12 January 1945.⁹⁶ This happened while the ship was towing a small vessel carrying high octane spirit and only one crew member survived.⁹⁷ In order to make up the losses, two other South African minesweepers stationed at Alexandria, the *Langlaagte* and the *Imhoff*, were ordered to the Aegean.

Throughout 1945 South African minesweepers were involved in a considerable amount of work including dan-laying and mine destruction. It was not until 12 December 1945 that the last South African minesweeper, the

91 Cape Times, 29 December 1944.

92 MAD, SD, Box 5. SD3/15/16. SANF Monthly reports Mediterranean Station. Lieut. Fraser to Cdr. Dean, 16 June 1943.

93 MAD, SD, Box 150. SD49. SANF part in final phase of Italian and Asiatic Campaigns, 14 June 1945. See also Cape Times, 17 May 1945.

94 MAD, SD, Box 59. SD10/10/14. SANF Historical records. See also Cape Argus, 28 December 1944.

95 Goosen, p. 68.

96 MAD, SD, Box 150. SD49. SANF part in final phase of Italian and Asiatic Campaigns, 14 June 1945 and Box 59. SD10/10/14. SANF Historical records.

97 Goosen, p. 69. See also Cape Times, 17 February 1945.

Langlaagte, arrived in Durban from the Mediterranean.⁹⁸

HMSAS Gamtoos and salvage work

During the war in the Mediterranean and particularly during the first few years, salvage vessels were urgently needed to clear captured harbours. Adm. Cunningham sent a personal signal to the South African Prime Minister, Smuts, asking him to provide a salvage vessel and equipment for urgent service in the Mediterranean. Cunningham further stated that he would be pleased if such a ship could be manned by South Africans as they had done excellent work in the Mediterranean and he had "always been able to place complete reliance in them".⁹⁹ Smuts agreed in April 1942 and the *Gamtoos*, a "rugged little coalburning" coaster with good seaworthiness, displacing 794-gross ton, was surveyed and found suitable for conversion to a salvage vessel. After having been requisitioned from a sugar magnate, she was immediately converted and on 19 November 1942, the *HMSAS Gamtoos* sailed from Durban for the Mediterranean. On her way to Alexandria she participated in the raising of *HMS Antwerp* and *HMS Malines* in Port Said.¹⁰⁰

After arriving in Alexandria, the *Gamtoos* was assigned the task of clearing the entrance to the Tripoli harbour. The retreating Axis armies had effectively blocked this harbour with seven blockships, filled with submerged obstructions. The *Gamtoos* arrived off Tripoli on 23 January 1943 but as there was a heavy swell alongside the outside wreck, it was at times impossible to do any salvage work at all. However, with the aid of pumps, air compressors and charges set by divers, the *Gamtoos* scraped into the harbour on 30 January and distinguished herself by becoming the first Allied ship to enter Tripoli harbour after the Axis evacuation.¹⁰¹ Work went ahead and within a week it was possible for the first two merchant vessels to berth alongside with supplies for the Eighth Army, which was advancing against the retreating Axis forces in North Africa. The Admiralty regarded the work of the *Gamtoos* as "admirable"¹⁰² and congratulations were received from Churchill and General Montgomery - Churchill later coming aboard, when he visited Tripoli.¹⁰³ The *Gamtoos* added to the "already

98 Du Toit, p. 80-81.

99 P Keeble, *Ordeal by water*, p. 15.

100 MAD, SD, Box 59. SD10/10/14. SANF Historical records. See also *Cape Times*, 17 May 1945.

101 MAD, *Naval Ships Logs*, Box 50. *HMSAS Gamtoos*, January 1943.

102 ISO Playfair et al., *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, pp. 255-6.

103 Du Toit, p. 131.

considerable reputation" of South African ships in the Mediterranean by clearing Tripoli harbour ahead of schedule and so enabling supplies by sea to reach the Eighth Army.¹⁰⁴

During February, the *Gamtoos* continued salvage and clearance work at Tripoli despite an average of two air attacks per day and the mines which made work dangerous. She even assisted vessels in distress and had a narrow escape when the *Ocean Voyager*, fully laden with ammunition, blew up close to her.¹⁰⁵ Divers from the *Gamtoos* performed a particularly nerve-racking task on 26 March, when they succeeded in salvaging a circling torpedo and took it ashore.¹⁰⁶ At Tripoli, the *Gamtoos* also successfully salvaged numerous ships and during September and October she performed another unusual job, that of patching up the bomb damaged Italian battleship *Italia* which had fallen into Allied hands.¹⁰⁷

Initially nineteen of the 41 crew members of the *Gamtoos* were, according to the official documents, "non-European". One of them, Stoker M Greeves, was awarded a British Empire Medal at Tobruk. With time, however, they were replaced by "European" members.¹⁰⁸ By the war's end, very few black SANF members were serving at sea in the Mediterranean, while some black South Africans served on land with South African Army and Air Force units.

From Tripoli, the *Gamtoos* proceeded to Alexandria for a much needed refit and then to Tobruk, where she floated the wreck of the sunken *SS Corona*, on 21 December 1943. Following salvage work on wrecks on the North African shore she was transferred to Naples after the start of the Italian campaign. At the time (from June 1944 to December 1945) the CO of the *Gamtoos* was Lieut. HH Biermann, a legendary figure in South African Naval History. Under his command the ship mainly performed salvage work on the Mediterranean coast of Europe and was also involved in the Italian Campaign and the invasion of southern France.

104 Cape Argus, 2 March 1943.

105 MAD, SD, Box 5. SD3/15/16. SANF Monthly reports Mediterranean Station. Report March-April 1943.

106 MAD, Naval Ships Logs, Box 50. *HMSAS Gamtoos*, March 1943.

107 MAD, SD, Box 5. SD3/15/16. SANF Monthly reports Mediterranean Station. Report 18 September-14 October 1943.

108 MAD, SD, Box 59. SD10/10/14. NS148. Non-European Personnel serving in SANF, 19 November 1943.

As in the case of Tripoli, the *Gamtoos* was the first allied ship to enter the harbour of Marseilles. On her arrival off Marseilles in a heavy sea on 3 September 1943, shortly after the Allied landings in southern France and the liberation of Marseilles, she was greeted by a scene of destruction. Wreckage was everywhere. Dock cranes were tipped into the water. The wharfs were blasted to rubble and even the locks between the different sections of the harbour were filled with sunken barges and other wreckage.¹⁰⁹ The inner entrance of the main harbour was completely blocked by a large sunken liner, the SS *Cape Corse*, which had been filled with rubble from wrecked buildings and towed across the entrance at Vieux Port where her bottom was blown off, thereby sealing the channel. As the clearing of the entrance to Marseilles was vital to the Allies,¹¹⁰ the crew of the *Gamtoos* immediately proceeded with demolition and salvage work, working seven days a week. There was the ever-present and considerable risk of mines and on 7 September the *Gamtoos* had a narrow brush with a mine when she quickly "had to put about".¹¹¹ Demolition charges removed the stern of the *Cape Corse*, and on 12 September the *Gamtoos* literally scraped through the gap into the inner harbour: apart from light-draught vessels, the first ship to do so. She continued salvage work and after a record eighteen days work, ships could enter the inner harbour.¹¹²

With her reputation established beyond doubt, the *Gamtoos* was called to clear other harbours. At the neighbouring port of La Ciotât, important for her graving-dock,¹¹³ the *Gamtoos* were put to work on the wreck of the *Sidi Cussa* which had been scuttled in the harbour entrance and filled with gravel. Despite the presence of magnetic mines, the wreck was pumped empty, floated, and towed clear; and on 14 December 1944 the port of La Ciotât was opened.¹¹⁴ The *Gamtoos* received numerous messages of congratulations, while Biermann received an OBE.¹¹⁵

For the duration of the war, the *Gamtoos* continued her active career and

109 Du Toit, p. 132.

110 MAD, SD, Box 150. SD49. SANF part in final phase of Italian and Asiatic Campaigns, 14 June 1945.

111 MAD, Naval Ships Logs, Box 52. HMSAS *Gamtoos*, September 1943.

112 MAD, SD, Box 150. SD49. SANF part in final phase of Italian and Asiatic Campaigns, 14 June 1945.

113 Gordon-Cumming, Mediterranean Section V, p. 15.

114 MAD, Naval Ships Logs, Box 52. HMSAS *Gamtoos*, December 1943 and SD. Box 5. SD3/15/16. SANF Monthly reports Mediterranean Station. Report of proceedings December 1944.

115 MAD, Personnel Files. 70008 SDF. HH Biermann. Statement of service.

did salvage duties in ports ranging from Ajaccio to Naples, Malta and Genoa. At Genoa, during May-June 1945 she removed the blockship, the tanker *Sterope*, from the harbour entrance and after considerable work inside the harbour, Genoa was likewise opened.¹¹⁶ Rich in laurels and with abundant complements for her intrepid performance, the *Gamtoos* arrived back in Durban on 11 December 1945.¹¹⁷

In order to further meet the increasing need for salvage ships, the SANF agreed to man the *HMS Salvestor* for the RN. It was commissioned at Naples on 31 August 1944.¹¹⁸ The CO was Lieut.-Cdr. CF O'Brien, formerly CO of the *Gamtoos*. The *Salvestor* also did valuable salvage work in the Aegean until she was sent to Hong Kong in March 1945.¹¹⁹

CONCLUSION

It is clear from this brief survey that, since 1941, South African vessels and their crews participated in most phases of the Mediterranean sea war, from operations along the North African coast to the invasion of southern Europe and the subsequent operations in Greek waters.

The tasks that most of the South Africans ships performed in the Mediterranean, was on par with the day to day war-fighting in that theatre. The South African ships, small as they were and with their limited combat application, effectively contributed to the achievement of several Allied operational aims in the Eastern Mediterranean. But these vessels played a minor role in the greater scheme of things. The exception, however, is the contribution made by the *Gamtoos*. Despite her unglamorous appearance, humble origin and the fact that she was not a combat vessel, her achievements were important. Strategically, she performed the vital task of clearing blocked and booby-trapped harbours. In North Africa her clearance of the Tripoli harbour entrance was of the utmost importance to the Allied Forces, as it enabled badly needed supplies to reach the army when they needed it most. She completed a considerable amount of salvage work and was also the first Allied ship to enter Marseilles. For her remarkable achievements she won several laurels and the praise of many.

116 Gordon-Cumming, *Mediterranean Section V*, p. 15.

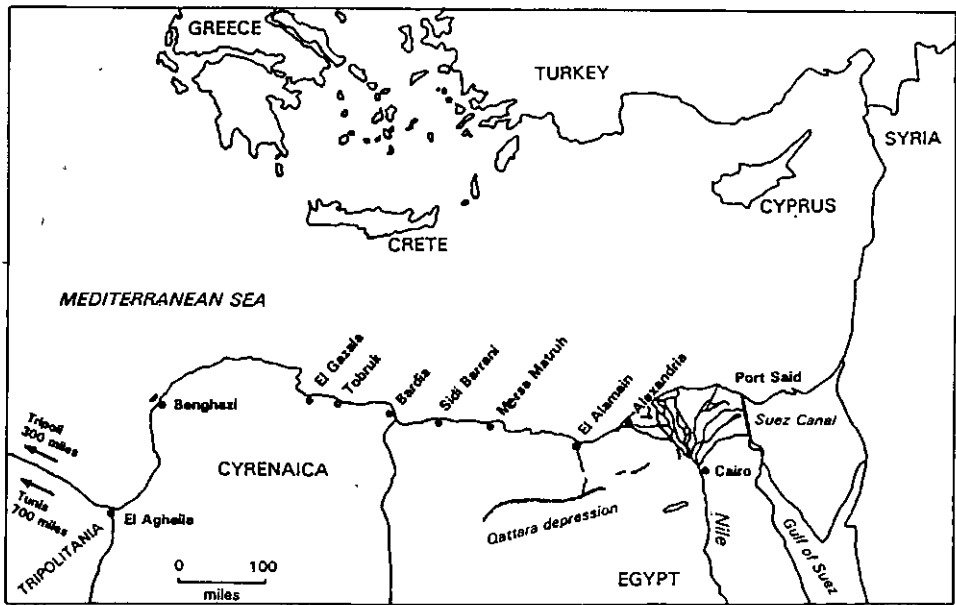
117 Du Toit, p. 132.

118 MAD, SD, Box 5. SD3/15/16. SANF Monthly report Mediterranean Station. Monthly report 16 August-14 September 1944. See also Keeble: *op cit.*, p. 163.

119 MAD, SD, Box 59. SD10/10/14. SANF Historical records.

South African sailors made great sacrifices in the Mediterranean during the Second World War and the hazardous minesweeping operations which continued after it had ended. They served under difficult conditions and went to sea in small, uncomfortable ships that were not at all designed for the war in the Mediterranean, but rather for fishing and whaling in the southern oceans. The crews had to work hard in restricted spaces and were sometimes on active duty for long periods without respite, being exposed to constant danger. But eventually they also paid the price in the struggle against the sea and the constant danger of the enemy and mines. This makes their achievement all the more remarkable.

Unfortunately few are aware of the South African naval participation in the Mediterranean theatre of operations during the Second World War. For the South African Navy, on the other hand, the achievements of South Africans serving in the Mediterranean established the proud fighting tradition which has served as an inspiration for the Navy and those who serve in it.



THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN