

The Sinking of the South African Navy

By STEPHEN GOODSON

THE South African Navy was formed on 1 April 1922 after the amalgamation of seven Royal Naval Voluntary Reserve units.

In World War II it was first known as the Seaward Defence Force, and on 1 August 1942 evolved into the South African Naval Forces (SANF). The SANF was responsible for operating mine-sweepers, anti-submarine services, patrolling of port entrances, and the escorting of convoys. South Africa's sailors were as good as the finest in the world and established a proud fighting tradition.

In 1951 the SANF became the South African Navy (SAN), and on 1 April 1957 it acquired the naval dockyard at Simons Town from the Royal Navy (RN). It continued to maintain links through joint manoeuvres with the RN and the very high standards it had inherited from the latter navy.

High standards

Although hindered by sanctions from 1975 onwards, it remained one of the elite small navies of the world, and was able to compete with the best in terms of advanced weapons systems.

In April 1994, after the white government had capitulated to the African National Congress (ANC), a decision was made to replace the ageing fleet with four patrol corvettes and three Class 209 submarines. Although a Spanish consortium had tendered to supply more versatile corvettes at a lower price than the R6-bn asked by the German shipbuilding firm of Blohm & Voss for each corvette, the Germans were awarded the contract. It later transpired that this higher, inflated price had been needed in order to accommodate the bribes and commissions paid to ANC cabinet ministers and their cohorts.

The ships were delivered, after having followed all standard operating procedures, from October 2005 onwards.

Affirmative action

However, the following year a transformation/affirmative action programme was introduced, which in the first phase resulted in the forced retirement, with the aid of financial packages, of 384 highly skilled artisans and technicians. Many of these servicemen had over 20 years of experience, and the transfer of on-the-job skills came to a halt.

New recruits were sent to Kiel, Germany, in order to obtain diving certifi-

cates for the submarines, but they were found not to have the capacity to complete the course. Later they were sent to India in the hope that, being a Third World country, it might be more lenient. The Indian Navy, to its credit, also found them to be incapable of completing the



course. Thus the submarines, which have highly advanced and sophisticated systems on board, can only be used on the surface and not for the purpose for which they were intended.

Blow-out of a submarine

Nine months ago, disaster struck when an unsupervised, unskilled seaman connected one of the submarines to a 440 volt power supply. As the submarines use 110 volts, the computers and the entire internal circuitry, which consists of tens of kilometres of wiring, were blown up. Due to budgetary constraints, it has still not been decided whether to tow the submarine back to Germany or to bring in outside experts. It may well be more prudent to leave the hulk as it is, because it is unlikely ever to operate below the sea surface as a submarine.

One of the key aspects of the navy is *maintenance*; notwithstanding the fact that none of the SAN's ships is operational. According to an engineering firm from Paarden Eiland, Cape Town, the only maintenance taking place is on the generators, providing power for the galleys of the corvettes, so that the officers can enjoy a warm midday meal.

In November 2009, the United States Navy (USN) requested that a joint exercise take place with the SAN. This was not a typical exercise in which live ammunition was used, but simply a sailing trip. In order to get the SAN's ships to sea, it was necessary to call up a large

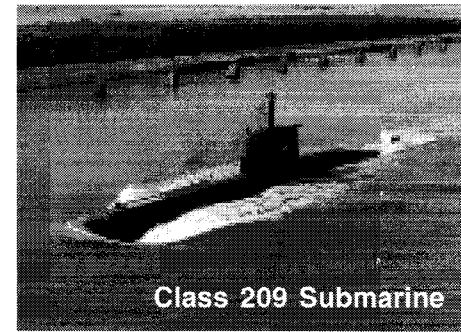
number of retired naval reserve officers and engineers. After the 'exercise', the USN set up a register in San Diego, California so that in the event of an international emergency occurring in the South Atlantic, these retired officers and engineers could be called up.

An MK 'Comrade' running the SAN

Currently, morale in the SAN is very low. There is no discipline and the few remaining white officers are frequently absent on 'stress' leave. Although 20% of annual recruits may be white, very few apply because of the very low training standards.

The Chief of the Navy is Vice Admiral J Mudimu, a former member of the liberation army, *Umkhonto We Sizwe*. He boasts an impressive array of qualifications, but they do not include a certificate of seamanship or a navigation certificate.

The official website of the SAN, which contains dated information and links to several blank pages, claims that the core business and mission of the SAN is to fight and win at sea. With its ships being almost permanently moored, and with the lack of any trained crews, this must surely be rated as Mission Impossible.



THE African Union has been holding a security summit in Uganda. The Somali Foreign Minister pleaded on camera for South Africa to help patrol the Indian Ocean along the East Coast of Africa to combat the ongoing piracy there. [SABC news bulletin] There was an awkward diplomatic silence from SA's leaders, knowing that SA's vessels are incapable of putting out to sea; and fearing that their untrained crews might land up as further trophies of the Somali pirates, like the other 20 ships (plus 400 men) held captive in secret coves along the wild Somali coast.