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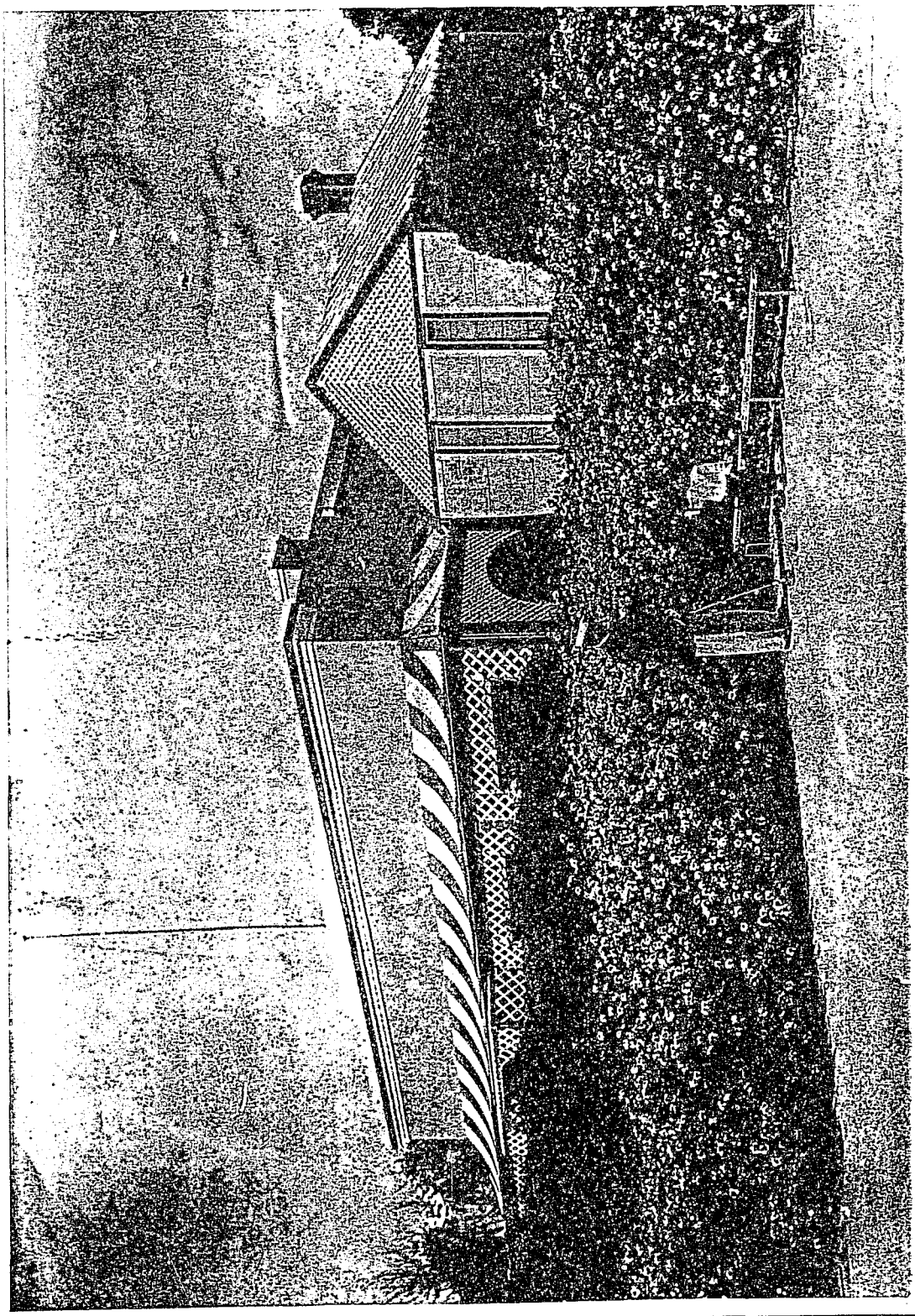
Robben Island coastal defence 1931-1960

Weideman, Marinda

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...irds' House on Robben Island (photo donated by ...)



establishment on the Island were allowed to catch. On another occasion, a young man had drowned while attempting to catch crayfish. His body was never found. [42]

The biggest social event on Robben Island, at the time, must have been the annual traditional Christmas Party. Fundraising for this occasion, which would include the military as well as the civilian personnel on the Island, would be started as early as June. The Robben Island Women's Association always coordinated the fundraising campaign. The women on Robben Island would start cooking several days before the party, while the men on the Island would be engaged in decorating the John Craig Hall for the event. Just to create an idea of the extent of this party, in 1950, 40 pigs were brought over from the mainland, and even more poultry was slaughtered. [43] Furthermore, Sgt Kockett, who arrived in a jeep dressed as father Christmas, had presents for all 135 children on the Island. The 1950 party was also attended by the Commanding Officer of the School of Coast and Anti-Aircraft Artillery, Commandant D. Kruger, who came over to the Island especially for this occasion.

ROBBEN ISLAND IS HANDED OVER TO THE PRISONS SERVICE

In 1960, the Minister of Justice, Mr C.R Swart, temporarily took on a second portfolio as acting Minister of Defence for the indisposed Mr Erasmus. [44] It occurred to him, as it had to others 300 years ago, that Robben Island would be an ideal place for a maximum security penal settlement. An agreement was accordingly reached, whereby the Navy would temporarily move to SAS Bloemfontein, which had been taken over as a reserve, under the command of Lt Commander L.T Kingom, until such time as appropriate buildings for training had been constructed at Simon's Town. The first buildings to be completed were on the west of the dockyard. What became known as SAS Simonsberg, was finally commissioned on July 17th 1963. [45]

In the meantime the Artillery School on Robben Island had been closed, and the Navy had vacated Robben Island on April 1st 1961. And so the 20-year stay of the armed forces on Robben Island was brought to a close, and the Island became a maximum-security prison, housing anti-Apartheid political prisoners, who were subjected to gross human rights violations.

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CONCLUSION

Any History of Robben Island should include the period of military occupation from 1939 – 1960. Firstly, because during this period Robben Island played a central and crucial role in the coastal defence of this country. The shipping route in the Mediterranean was closed in 1941, as a result all mercantile shipping, and 60% of Allied shipping was diverted and rounded the Cape. An average of 50 ships were anchored in Table Bay Harbour on a daily basis. The two coastal gun batteries on Robben Island ensured the safety of the ships in Table Bay Harbour, against any attack from a surface raider. The ships anchored in Table Bay Harbour were also defended against submarine attacks by indicator loops and asdic equipment operated by personnel on Robben Island. Several anti-aircraft guns and a specially designed radar station on Robben Island protected the ships against a possible Japanese air raid. Furthermore, one of the biggest threats to Allied and neutral shipping during the later half of the war, was the German magnetic mines. A degaussing range was thus established with its operating station on Robben Island. An estimated 3 156 ships were degaussed at Robben Island. Robben Island was thus crucial in the defence of Allied and neutral shipping, as well as for the defence of the South African coast and surrounding waters. For the first and only time in the Island's history, it served to protect South Africa as a whole from an external aggressor, and not a dominant white group from internal political opposition.

Secondly, after the closure of the leper hospital on Robben Island in 1931, the Island could have become anything. Suggestions included an agricultural institution, a work colony or a holiday resort. If there had been reaction on any of these suggestions, and if any of these ventures were successful, the Island might never have become a penal settlement. More fundamentally, it was the outbreak of the Second World War that resulted in Robben Island's new purpose as a military station. It is under military command, and with wartime military expenditure, that 150 000 tons of equipment and building materials were transported to Robben Island, and a comfortable settlement for up to 3 000 people was created. Without such a massive construction program unhindered by financial concerns, Robben Island would almost certainly not have become the maximum-security prison it did. It is unlikely that the South African government, or the Prisons Department could have afforded such large-scale construction.

Thirdly, Robben Island's future seems to lie in tourism. Currently, approximately 300 tourists visit the Island on a daily basis. As planning and development continues, this number is likely to increase. In this regard, the potential income generating value of the coastal guns and so forth on Robben Island, as a tourist attraction should not be underestimated. Similar ventures have been very successful in other countries, for instance on Rottnest Island in Australia. Robben Island is likely to be even more successful in this regard, since the guns on the Island are some of the oldest and largest in the world, and unlike most other coastal guns, are still in their original location.

I have argued that this period of the Island's history exhibits certain fundamental continuities with the periods of the Island's history, which preceded and succeeded it. I believe that the evidence contained in the Research Report has supported this argument. There are certain basic continuities, such as continued environmental and geographical destruction. Not only through the massive construction campaign, and the damage inflicted on the animal and plant life by the thousands of people who lived on Robben Island during this period, but also through the introduction of alien fauna and flora. One of the more profound continuities, which seems to have been completely ignored in all written histories of the period, is the fact that there were prisoners on the Island during this period. Frisoners included the Vichy French Prisoners of War, who were incarcerated in a barbed wire camp on the Island during the war. After the war, a group of about 60 civilian prisoners with indeterminate sentences was banished to Robben Island, where they would engage in hard labour. This means that from the time of the arrival of whites in Southern Africa in 1488, until 1991, Robben Island has served as a penal settlement.

The most important continuity is a symbolic one. Robben Island has always represented an attempt by ruling white groups to ignore the reality of the social order. Those groups or individuals that were in some way exposing or representing the realities of the various social orders were banished to Robben Island. Here they would be isolated and kept from public view. The Union government's defence policy, during and after the Second World War, was that women and "non-whites" could serve in the South African Military Establishment only in supportive capacities. Nevertheless, due to South Africa's acute manpower shortages, it was decided to "dilute" the South African Coastal defences. Women from ASWAAS and the SWANS, and men from the Cape Corps would replace white men in certain posts, to release them for active combat in North Africa. The posts that these men and women took over, however, were active combat positions. Since this was contrary to official policies and the ideology of the time, the majority of these men and women were trained and placed on Robben Island, where they would be isolated and kept from public view. As a result, these men and women have never received the recognition they deserved. Furthermore, almost nothing regarding their activities has been written in subsequent military histories. Possibly because, up until the formation of the new South African National Defence Force, official defence policy had remained the same, and could still not condone the fact that "non-whites" and women had indeed played a role in the defence of this Country as active combatants during the Second World War. A study of this period in Robben Island's history is thus significant simply because it can award these men and women with the tribute they deserve.

APPENDIX A

The tragedy surrounding the air crash in which Admiral W.H Halifax, Commander in Chief of the South Atlantic and Simon's Town Naval Base, Colonel H.E Cilliers, Director of Coast Artillery, and Colonel G.P Shearer, Director of Fortifications and Coastal Works died, cannot easily be forgotten. The Defence Headquarters had become concerned with the defences at Elands Bay and Walvis Bay. They thus decided to fly a group of senior officers to the area, to access the situation and to make recommendations. The trip had been scheduled for the 28th of May 1941, and they were to leave in a Lockhead Lodestar aircraft from Brooklyn Assembly Depot, early in the morning. Due to bad weather the flight was postponed until 10 o'clock that morning. The news of the air crash reached South Africa that afternoon. Apparently, when approaching Elands Bay, there was a heavy mist, and the pilot flew out to sea in order to fly around the headland, instead of flying over it as he would have done in clear weather. It seems that the pilot had misjudged his position and turned to quickly, because he flew straight into the headland. The machine burst into flames, and all those on board were killed. When the rescue party arrived, they found unidentifiable bodies and limbs scattered all over the area. Since no single person could be identified, they were consequently all brought back to Cape Town, and were buried in two huge caskets.

APPENDIX B

In the bibliography I refer to "correspondence interviews". Perhaps this needs clarification. A correspondence interview includes a number of letters and phone calls between the person in question and myself. In some cases the correspondence interview consists of no more than one very detailed letter (semi-autobiography). In others it consisted of numerous letters, unstructured questionnaires and many phone calls. The date given, is the date on which correspondence ceased.

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