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ROBBEN ISLAND
COASTAL DEFENCE
1931-1960

Degree awarded with distinction on 10 December 1998

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PREFACE

Robben Island is generally perceived as a symbolic and a literal dumping ground of all those the ruling powers of the country had deemed unwanted, be they rebels, lepers, the insane or political opponents. As such the Island has been described as the "dustbin of South African society". 1 Ironically, it was these very "unwanted" who became undermining symbols of the systems that banished them to the Island, and subjected them to severe isolation, and gross human rights violations.

I started this Research Report with the assumption that I was going to write a history of a period of the Island's existence that was fundamentally different from preceding and succeeding ones. A period characterized by co-operation as opposed to isolation, by voluntary service in the interest of South Africa as a whole, as opposed to banishment, and of positive life experiences as opposed to gross human rights violations.

During my research, I became convinced that this assumption had been false. That there were many profound continuities with the periods of the Island's history that preceded and succeeded the 30 years under discussion (1931 – 1960). More fundamentally, I became aware that there were many men and women, who had served on Robben Island, and whom had been willing to give their lives in defence of this country, that had not been given the recognition they deserved. These men and women had contested racist and sexist myths, and were an important element in the transformation of South African Defence Force Policies. Implicit in this Research Report is a tribute to them. I pay tribute to the men of the Cape Corps, and to the women of both the South African Women's Naval Service, and the Artillery Specialists of the Women's Auxiliary Army Service.

Without the help, information, and hospitality extended to me by numerous people, this Research Report could not have been written. I wish to thank them all. There are also persons I believe need special mention; Prof Andre Odendaal, for pointing me in the right direction in the first place, and the Odendaal family for their hospitality in letting me stay on the Island with them. The two staff members on Robben Island, who spent hours driving me around the Island, climbing into underground plotting rooms, and onto gun emplacements, throughout the expedition, "protecting" me from countless "harmless" snakes and spiders. Com W.M Bisset for valuable advice and biographical aid, Maj A.G.D Gordon for hours of patient explanation regarding the coastal guns, and interpretation of relevant maps, the Editor of Moth Homefront Magazine for free publication of a notice to which many persons responded, Peter James Smith for copies of his programs on SAFM, for valuable advice, and for putting me in contact with several ex-Robben Islanders. The personnel of the Johannesburg Military Museum, who were extremely helpful, and who spent many days going through various files, publications and records with me. The following ex-Robben Islanders and their families, for their time, the valuable information, the many letters, the many phone calls, their hospitality, interesting photos, autobiographies, diaries, and for sharing their life experiences with me: Captain George Anderson, Mrs I Bester, Mr A Calder, Mr W.A and Mrs De Swardt,

Vice-Admiral Edwards, Mrs F.M King, Mr H.J Linford, General Magnus Malan, Mr Malan (husband of the late Cynthia Malan), Mrs L Marinaki, Major General G.D and Mrs Moodie, Mrs E Parrott, Miss M Orton, Mrs M.P Shinn, Mr D.F Silberbauer (son of Lt Col H.L Silberbauer), Mrs D Smith, Mrs M.E Stewart, Mr C.H Von Weilligh, and Miss L Schenck (daughter of Miss E Wood)

NOTES

1) Schaderberg Movie Company, Voices From Robben Island, The Schaderberg Movie Company and BBC Television, South Africa, 1994

Island of the Land

Ice that melted, sea that rose, a cap of land that stood, was stayed, denied, relegated, and the sea raged cold in its bay, and the wind raged over the sea and the island in the bay of the sea:

and the island gaped in its tossed socket as a eye unlidded and it looked upon the land and the falling of the land and the land's disowning and its tasking, its taxing, the grinding of it, it looked upon it:

'a small Iland that lieth in the mouth of the said bay, which is exceedingly full of Seales and Pengwines' reads an anonymous account of the second voyage of Sir James Lancaster, 1601:

'we saw Penguin Iland on our larbourd syde, it is a small lowe Island and smooth' reads an anonymous account of William Keeling's voyage, 1607:

"Robben Eijlandt in tafel Baaij' reads a map published in Amsterdam, 1670:

Esiqithini, being 33 48' S, 18 22' E, and thus, it might be said, a precisely charted site of sensibility and of consciousness:

exiled land, lepered land, imprisoned land, island of the land:

low lying line, shadow of shadows, shadow on sea at limit of sight, at the edge of eye, at the corner of mind, in the pocket of conscience, almost the unseen, almost beyond:

island other and yet not other but ours, of us, being of one substance with the land, island of the land:

unwanted island and island of the unwanted, freed of the land but always arrested, struck from its flesh but struck in its mouth, in the raging of its mouth, of its unwanting, and of its wanting:

this last stop, this thorn, raw point, this blister of land that looks upon the land:

'that singular low island' said Methuen

Alan Jones

INTRODUCTION

Topologically and symbolically Robben Island has come to represent both the ultimate margin to which the National Party government banished its opposition [1], and the success of that very opposition in the struggle against Apartheid. As a result, interpretations of the Island's history, have focussed mainly on its role as a political prison, and on the well known prisoners who were held there. Some of which include President Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Andrew Mlangeni, Elias Motsoaledi, Patrick Lekota, Neville Alexander, Robert Sebukwe, Herman Toivo Ja Toivo, and Tokyo Sexwale. Although these are certainly important factors, Robben Island has a rich and varied history over the whole period of European involvement in Southern Africa after 1488.[2] I give a brief account of this history in Chapter 1.

The principle aim of this Research Report is to write a history of the period between the closure of the leper hospital on Robben Island in 1931, and its conversion into a maximum security prison in 1960. During this period Robben Island played a crucial role in the military history of South Africa. Robben Island became a heavily fortified military station (Chapter 5), forming the nucleus of the coastal defence systems of the Cape Peninsula. (Chapter 6 – 9). The Island was also home to thousands of armed force personnel and numerous civilians during this period (Chapter 12 – 15). It is against the background of the Second World War that Robben Island acquired a military purpose, and this is therefore accounted for in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 2 concerns the period before the outbreak of the Second World War, 1931 – 1939, when a future purpose for Robben Island still had to be determined. Chapter 10 regards the military defence of the Island itself. Chapter 11 addresses a major controversy that arose out of the millions that were spent on coastal defence systems, including Robben Island, that were never used. The final Chapter, is an account of the post-war military establishments on Robben Island.

The introduction is perhaps the best place to clarify the significance of the military occupation of Robben Island. I will attempt to do so, by briefly giving an account of my reasons for focussing on this period. Firstly, in the literature on Robben Island, the period between 1931 - 1960 has usually been ignored. If not ignored, brushed aside by describing the military role of the Island in one sentence. This, despite the fact that Robben Island was an absolutely crucial element of the Union Government's coastal defence policies, during and after the Second World War. Secondly, many women served as active combatants at military stations along the South African coast during the Second World War. Most of these women were trained on Robben Island, and many served on the Island itself. Artillery Specialists from the Women's Auxiliary Army Service (ASWAAS) served as range-finders and predictors at gun batteries on Robben Island as well as at other coastal defence stations. Others from the South African Women's Auxiliary Naval Service (SWANS), were responsible for anti-submarine and other underwater fixed defences on Robben Island. A study of this period should thus dispel the myth that women in the South African Armed Forces (up until 1992) served as non-combatant auxiliaries only. Implicitly, such a study will also be an acknowledgement of the massive contribution made by these women to the defence of South Africa during the

Second World War. Something for which they have received al[illegible]cognition. Thirdly, the popular myth that "non-whites" served only in a nor[illegible]apacity during the Second World War, can easily be refuted by the f[illegible]undreds of "coloured" men from the Cape Corps, were trained, and serve[illegible]anti-aircraft and coastal gunners on Robben Island, during the period under discussion. Fourthly, it is possible that Robben Island would never have become the notorious maximum-security prison it did, without the massive wartime military expenditure and construction program on Robben Island. In General Moodie's words: "*Talking about the Island without the military power, is like talking about Groote Schuur and leaving out Herbert Baker and Cecil Rhodes*". [3]

A final, perhaps commercial concern, regards tourism. On a visit to Robben Island in 1997, President Mandela commented on the general inadequacy of South African museums and other institutions in portraying the country's diverse heritage. [4] He continued that Robben Island could be the exception, since the Island represented a part of South Africa's collective heritage, and was a "*symbol of the victory of the human spirit over oppression..*". [5] It appears that the future of Robben Island will therefore be closely linked to tourism. In this regard, the tourist potential of the coastal defence systems in the Cape Peninsula and on Robben Island should not be underestimated. The Coastal batteries in the Cape Peninsula are among the oldest and the largest in the world. [6] Two of these batteries are on Robben Island. The massive 9.2 inch gun battery on Robben Island is also one of the only batteries in the world, that is still in its original location. [7] In many cases similar forts and batteries have been developed into income generating tourist attractions. One of the best examples of this, is probably Rottnest Island (Australia), an Island with a military history almost identical to that of Robben Island.

A secondary purpose of this Research Report is to produce a piece of oral history. I have attempted to write a military history of Robben Island, principally from the perspective of the people who lived and served on the Island, as opposed to an official document based account. I have attempted also, to recreate what life on Robben Island was like during this period, using the life experiences my narrators shared with me.

This brings me to my argument. Throughout the history of European involvement in Southern Africa, Robben Island has been a place for outcasts. The Island served as a repository for all those who were considered dangerous to the social order of the ruling groups at the time, [8] be it through disease, lunacy, or political activism. The use of the Island as a place of banishment and isolation, has always been in the interest of a white ruling group, whether it be the Dutch East India Company, the British Colonial Government, or the Apartheid National Party Government. The little that has been written regarding the military history of Robben Island has been from the perspective, that this period of the Island's history was fundamentally different from the preceding and succeeding ones. Principally because the Island ceased to be a place of banishment. Secondly, because during this period there was no civilian prison on the Island. This was a period in the Island's history when people volunteered to go to Robben Island in an attempt to defend South Africa against a foreign aggressor, and not against internal

"dissidents". Those who served on Robben Island, it is argued, had positive life experiences.

I would argue, that although this period exhibits certain obvious differences with preceding and succeeding ones, there are nevertheless some profound continuities. What Robben Island represents in essence, is an attempt by dominant groups, to ignore the realities of their social orders. The National Party government, for example, wanted to ignore the impossibility of maintaining a social order that discriminated against the majority of the people in this country and treated them in an inhumane way. Those people, who through political activism, were exposing the reality of the situation, where banished to Robben Island. Similarly, in an attempt to ignore the reality of disease and lunacy in society, the afflicted, who represented the reality of disease, were banished to Robben Island. It is this attempt to escape the reality of the social order that is present in the period of the military occupation of Robben Island as well. It is no accident that "non-white" and female combatants were concentrated on Robben Island. Like everyone on the Island, they were dumped there to be forgotten about. The Defence of South Africa during the Second World War, was impossible without using "non-whites" and women, given the manpower shortages with which the South African armed forces were faced. This was the reality. On the other hand, official policy and ideology strongly opposed the use of women and "non-Europeans" in the war effort in anything other that supportive roles. How could the Union government escape the reality of female and 'non-white" combatants? They could banish them to Robben Island, where they would be isolated and removed from public view, while at the same time serving in defence of this country, and releasing white men for active service in North Africa.

NOTES

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4) The Citizen, "Mandela Slams South African Museums", Johannesburg, 25 September 1997
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CHAPTER 1

ROBBEN ISLAND IN CONTEXT

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY

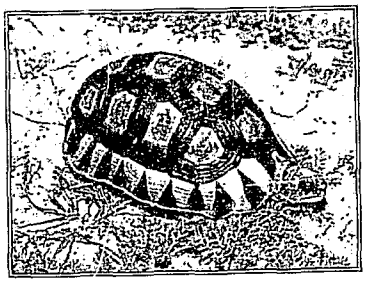
Robben Island is situated in the entrance to Table Bay. It is ten kilometers north of Green Point, and six kilometers west of Bloubergstrand. 1 It is roughly oval in shape, with the longest axis running north to south. Its maximum breadth is little more than 1,5 kilometers. Its maximum length is about 3,4 kilometers, with a total area of about 5,2 square kilometers. 2

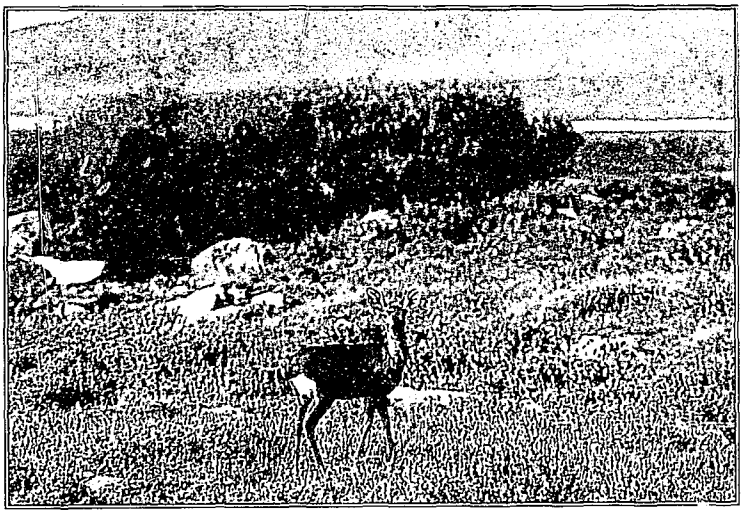
The Island is low lying but undulating, in fact, it hardly protrudes above sea level. It's highest point, on the South Coast, is Minto's Hill (named after a nineteenth century surgeon-Superintendent of the General Infirmary) 3 This hill is a mere 24 meters above sea level, and it is here where the Island lighthouse is situated. But appearances can be deceptive. The Island is actually the summit of a mountain, which sank beneath the waves, and is still connected to Blouberg by an undersea saddle. 4 Its lower strata is blue slate of the Malmesbury series, forming a rocky and inhospitable coastline. The only exception being Murray's Bay. Above this lies a thick limestone and calcrete deposit. 5

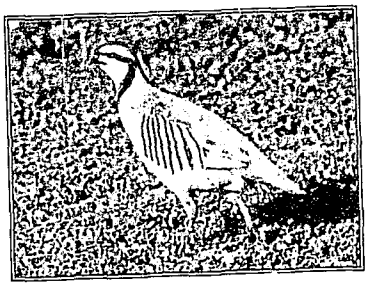
The Climate is Mediterranean, similar to that of nearby Cape Town, with the exception that the winds are stronger and the winters colder. 6 The rainfall on the Island is of the winter precipitation type. Almost 79% of the total rainfall takes place from April to December, and only 11% in the remaining months. 7 It is a desert Island, with no surplus water. The Island had a few wells, which were first used by passing sailors in the 15th century, and which have since all dried up. During the period of the Military Occupation of Robben Island, seven boreholes were laid. Today, a cargo boat transports water to the Island.

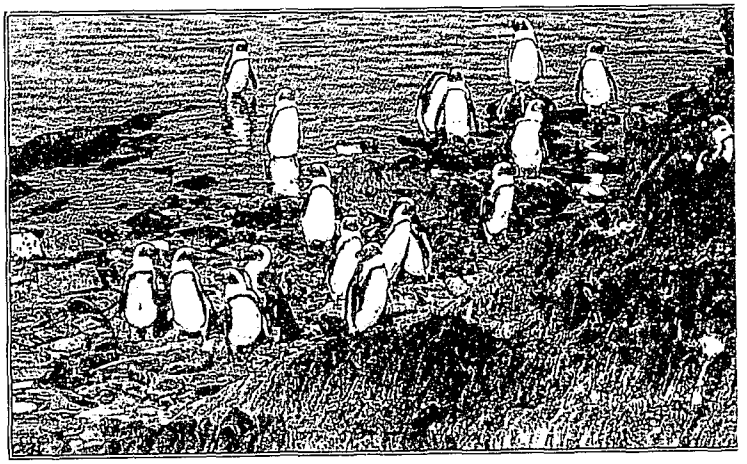
The view of Table Mountain from Robben Island is breathtaking. Bontebok can be seen grazing near the World War II gun batteries on the Island, penguin families have made nests near the gun emplacements, and the odd ostrich can be seen walking around. There are more that 71 indigenous species of birds, and despite poaching over the years, there is still an abundance of crayfish and Perlemoen. Although the fauna and flora of the Island have an affinity with the mainland, it has been greatly and negatively altered by human settlement. The trees on the Island are almost exclusively alien. Other alien plants include, Rooikrans (Accacia Cyclops), Port Jackson (Accacia Saligna) and gums (Eucalyptus). 8 As far as animals are concerned, alien types that were brought over to the Island include cattle, sheep, rabbits, deer, pheasants and cats. The results have been the reduction in number or the elimination from the Island of many indigenous plants and animals. Penguins, which had been virtually eliminated by the 19th century, only began to return to the Island in the 1980's, while the seals (after whom Robben Island is named), have not yet re-established a colony.

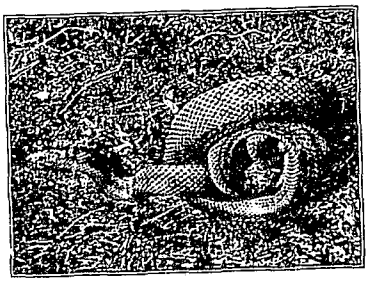
Some of the wildlife species on the Island include tortoises, the indigenous Chukar Patridge, mole snakes, seals and steenbok. The once seriously endangered penguins are once again thriving on the Island (C. 'mith, Robben Island)















A BRIEF HISTORY

Robben Island was literally a paradise for wild life, including tens of thousands of penguins and seals, tortoises and almost a hundred species of birds, before humans started their depredations of the Island.

In 1488, on his return voyage form Mossel Bay, Bartolomeu Dias anchored in Table Bay. It was Jao del Inffante, in command of Dias's second ship, who with some of his men, first sailed across the bay to Robben Island, and began immediately to molest the penguins and seals. [9] From this day onwards, records exist of Portuguese ships visiting Table Bay and Robben Island. The penguins and seals on Robben Island served as an almost unlimited food supply for these sailors. By 1503, massive scale slaughter of these animals was in progress. [10] For the next two centuries, Robben Island was used as a pantry to feed sailors on passing ships, as a postbox for their letters, and occasionally as a prison for miscreant sailors. [11] It has also been recorded in 18th century documents, that members of Vasco da Gama's support fleet took refuge on Robben Island, in fear of KhoiKhoi attacks on the mainland, in 1498. [12]

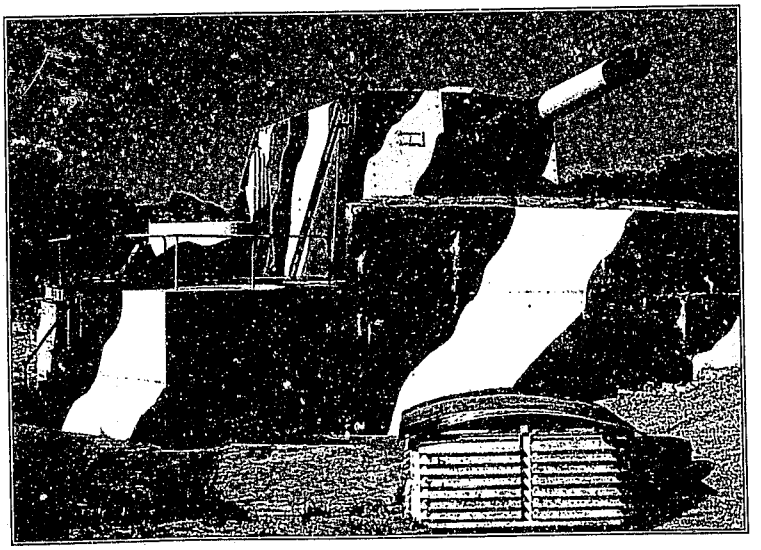
The next recorded visit of a European to the Island, is that of Jorris van Spilbergen, who sailed from Vere in Holland, in command of three vessels, the Ram, the Schaap, and the Lam. Spilbergen landed on the Island on December 2nd 1601, and gave the Island the name of Cornelia, in honour of his mother. [13] As far as can be ascertained, this is why the 6 inch battery on Robben Island was named Cornelia Battery. Before this, the Island had been known both as Seal and Penguin Island. It was also in 1601, that the first unsuccessful attempt to breed sheep on the Island was made by the English Captain, Sir James Lancaster. It was only in 1608, that the Island was given the name *Robben* (Dutch for seals), by Dutch sailors, who clubbed to death hundreds of seals *"for their own amusement"*. [14]

The next period of the Island's history coincides with the period of Dutch rule at the Cape 1652 – 1806 (with a brief period of British rule in-between from 1795 – 1803). Robben Island continued to serve as a refreshment station and pantry, but this time for the Dutch East India Company. For the maintenance of the pantry, men were now placed semi-permanently on the Island, under a Superintendent, who became known as the "postholder" (1654) [15] This period saw the Island becoming increasingly important as a prison, both for criminals and political opponents of the Dutch East India Company. The first political prisoner on the Island was a KhoiKhoi leader, named Autshumoa (Harry). He was banished to the Island in 1658, for attempting to take back cattle he felt had been unjustly confiscated. Autshumoa was also one of the few prisoners ever to escape successfully from the Island. [16] By 1806, Robben Island was virtually a penal settlement. Local, East Indian, and prisoners sentenced by the courts of Batavia were banished to the Island, for sentences varying form ten years to a lifetime. These prisoners were chained, and forced to work in the blue stone quarries. [17] The first of the East Indian prisoners, was a prince of Macassar, whose tomb can still be seen on the Island.

1) The lighthouse on Robben Island (Afrikaanse Kinderensiklopedie) 2) A World War II gun emplacement 3) One of the ship wrecks that is still on Robben Island's shore (2 & 3 from C. Smith, Robben Island)







Many important political leaders, were in fact, banished to Robben Island during the 1800's. One such person was the Xhosa warrior and prophet, Makhanda (also known as Makana or Nxele). He was imprisoned on the Island in 1819. Makhanda died during a futile but legendary escape bib. 18 In 1869, Piet Rooy, David Diedericks, Jan Kivido and Carel Ruyter, captives of the first Koranna War, were banished to Robben Island. It was in 1874, that the Hlubi Chief, Langalibalele, became the first person to be imprisoned on the Island for so-called treason. 19

In 1658, the only Lighthouse in Southern Africa was on Robben Island. It was owned and controlled by the Dutch East India Company, who forbade that the light be used to guide foreign ships to safety. 20 Initially the lighthouse was nothing more than a beacon that burned each night. During the day, flags on a tall mast would serve as a warning. 21 The actual lighthouse, which can still be seen on Robben Island today, was built on Minto's Hill in 1864. In 1901, an explosive fog-signal was added to the lighthouse, which in turn was replaced by a modern foghorn in 1935. Its sound could travel an estimated 12 km in dense fog (reportedly at the time the second biggest foghorn in the world). 22

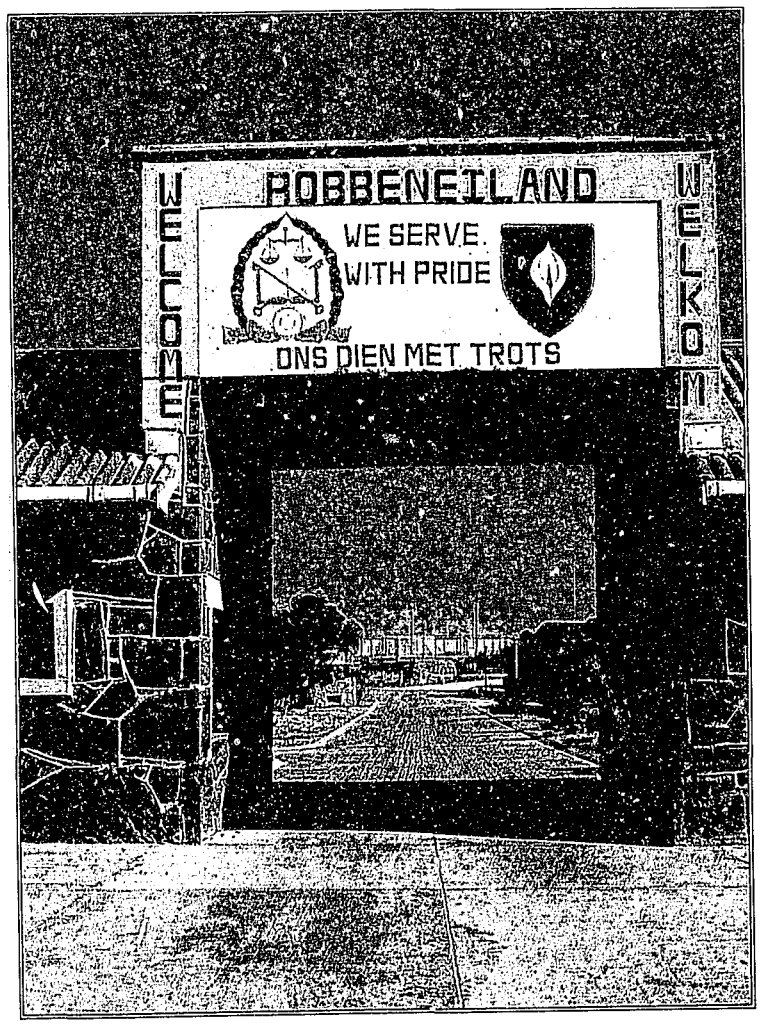
The next period of the Island's history begins in 1846. The need for extra labour on the Cape colony's roads and harbours, resulted in the closure of the prison on Robben Island. The prisoners were transferred to the mainland where they would do hard labour at mainland convict stations. 23 The British Colonial Government now set up a hospital, known as the General Infirmary, on Robben Island. The hospital was divided into three sections, housing "chronic sick", "lunatics" and "lepers". The "lunatics" on Robben Island, were often accused criminals who had been declared insane by the courts. Others were prostitutes, vagrants, or drunks picked up off the streets. Some had even been sent to Robben Island on request of relatives, who had found them either too expensive, too violent, or too embarrassing. 24 The "chronic sick", included destitute government employees, ex-soldiers and sailors, persons to old to work, and ex-slaves. 25 The Lepers were treated according to the Leprosy Repression Act of 1887, which meant rigorous segregation based on sex and race. 26 By 1913, the "chronic sick" and the white "lunatics" had been transferred to mainland institutions. Only the lepers and the black "lunatics" remained. 27 In 1931, the League of Nations Health Organisation invoked a more humane isolation policy for lepers, which resulted in the closure of the leper asylum on Robben Island. 28

John Murray, who operated a Whaling station on Robben Island from 1866, was the only person on the Island during this period not associated with the General Infirmary. 29 The Murray's Bay harbour on Robben Island was named after him.

From 1931 until 1939, the Island was occupied by the Lighthouse keeper, the animals and a few ghosts only. It was also during this period that picnickers frequented the Island.

The next period of the Island's history begins with the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1939, Robben Island became a military station, and was occupied by the military until 1960. The large-scale military occupation of the Island, started in 1940, with a massive construction and fortification program in aid of South African coastal defence.

On arrival at Robben Island today, immediately after disembarking from the ferry at Murray's Bay harbour, one notices this entrance to Robben Island. It was built from Malmesbury slate by the political prisoners. The lily is the Robben Island emblem, the other is the badge of the Prison's service. (C. Smith, Robben Island)



After the war, in 1946, Robben Island became the Headquarters of the South African Coastal Artillery. This continued until 1951, when the Island was placed under command of the South African Marine Corps. The Island entered its final phase as a military station in 1955, when it became a South African Naval Training Center, known as SAS Robbeneiland.

In 1960, Robben Island was handed over to the South African Prisons Service, and so began the Island's notorious history, as a maximum-security prison for political activists opposing the National Party Apartheid government. Following the Rivonia trails in 1964, Nelson Mandela, and seven other leaders of the liberation movements were sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. The second big influx of a new generation of political prisoners to Robben Island, followed the Soweto uprisings of 1976. Robben Island continued to function as a maximum-security prison until 1991.

The last political prisoners were released from Robben Island in 1991. The Island was then handed over to the Department of Arts, Culture, Technology and Science, and was declared a National Monument in 1996. Today the Island is a major tourist attraction, complete with guided tours of the prison, and with approximately 300 visitors a day.

NOTES

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29) Smith P.J, "Robben Island", Heritage, SAFM, SABC, Johannesburg, 27 April 1997

CHAPTER 2

DETERMINING A FUTURE ROLE FOR ROBBEN ISLAND

The suitability of Robben Island as a leper institution had already become questionable by early 1920. The problem was, however, that a suitable future role for Robben Island had not yet been determined, despite numerous debates on the issue.

The value of the real estate on Robben Island was considerable. The policy of the Department of Public Works, at the time, however, decreed that all surplus government property had to be sold and could not be retained for letting. 1 In fact a Public Works Department plan, at the time, showed that numerous buildings on Robben Island were for sale. In essence this meant that the department could not guarantee the transfer of buildings and materials on the Island to whoever was to take over control of Robben Island in future. Thus, when the Head of the Union's Public Works Department inquired in 1926, of other government departments, whether Robben Island could be "*advantageously occupied*" by any of them, there were no takers. 2

The harrowing and haunting epoch of the leper institution on Robben Island, nevertheless, came to an end on February 14th 1931. No purposes had yet been found to which to put the Island. For the almost ten subsequent years, Robben Island was occupied by the lighthouse keeper and his family, some animals and a few ghosts only. An eerie silence settled on the Island, which was disturbed only by the sea, the wind and some picnickers.

In 1931, there were officially some 170 buildings on Robben Island. Approximately 90 of these structures had housed leprosy patients, and were to be destroyed for fear of contamination. Only a few (maybe a dozen) privately owned buildings were to remain. These included the Anglican Church, the Sir Herbert Baker Leper Church, and other churches and associated buildings owned by the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Dutch Reformed Churches. 3

At this stage, neither the public nor the Union government was particularly interested in the future of Robben Island. Discussions in Parliament in February 1931, makes it clear that not even an idea existed, as to what would become of Robben Island. During these discussions, Mr Harry Lawrence inquired whether any suggestions had been made or received regarding the future of Robben Island. He also suggested the possibility of establishing a work colony on Robben Island. 4 The Minister's response was vague, he rejected the proposal for a work colony, and added that no concrete proposals had been received regarding the future of the Island, but that there had been some inquiries by estate agents. 5

At a meeting of the Cape geographical society, it was suggested that Robben Island could become a holiday resort, or else it could be replanted with suitable vegetables and become a home for sheep and goats. 6 Nothing came of these proposals.

Although this period of the Island's history (1931 – 1938), appears to be one of desolation and neglect, it probably also represents the happiest time of the Island's history. During this period Robben Island became a picnic and fishing haven for quite a number of people. This is indicated by a decision made in January 1933, following considerable damage to government property, to impose a fee on persons visiting the Island. [7] Should somebody land on the Island in case of emergency no fee would be payable, otherwise a fee of two cents per person would be charged. Those belonging to the Royal Yacht Club could purchase a yearly permit for one pound. [8] It was decided, that the money received would go to the Consolidated Revenue Fund. [9]

Some of the official visitors to Robben Island during this period included His Excellency, the Governor General, who visited the Island twice. [10] On at least four occasions the Island was also frequented by Representatives of the Lands Department of the Union Government. [11]

The South African Police, also made numerous armed patrols of Robben Island during 1932. In essence the purpose of these patrols, was to carry out the provisions of the Fisheries laws pertaining to Robben Island and the surrounding areas. [12] A secondary purpose, was to prevent the smuggling of goods into South Africa via Robben Island. The reason given for the patrols being armed, was that offending fisherman had on occasion threatened violence, and because it seemed necessary on occasion to shoot the wild cats on the Island.

On one occasion, a group of Girl Guides were stranded on Robben Island due to bad weather, and they had to be rescued by the South African Police. [13]

It was only with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, that the Island again had an official purpose. This time as a military station, with the principle aim of defending Table Bay harbour.

NOTES

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12) Ibid
13) Ibid

CHAPTER 3

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE OUTBREAK OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

THE WAR

By 1933, the League of Nations of Geneva had become ineffectual as an arbiter of peace. This year also saw Hitler come to power in Germany, vowing to fight the restrictions of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. 1 It was in May 1935, that Hitler first broke the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, followed on March 7th 1936 by the German invasion of the Rhineland. 2 The Austrian Anschluss took place in March 1938, followed by the German invasion of Poland on September 1st 1939. 3 Two days later the British government declared war on Germany, and the Second World War commenced.

The Second World War is generally divided into two periods. The first is from September 1939 until November 1942, when Germany was on the offensive. The second from December 1942 until the end of the war, when the Allied countries were on the offensive. It is the events in-between, that changed the nature of the European World War, that were particularly relevant to the South African Coastal Defence Policy, and hence to Robben Island.

In June 1942, Hitler had two choices. He could launch a concentrated attack on Moscow, or alternatively, he could concentrate on the Africa campaign in an attempt to conquer the Middle East. Hitler's generals advised him to opt for the latter. At the same time, the Japanese, Hitler's newly found allies, were debating whether to go north (Russia), or south (Pearl Harbour). Hitler, arguably, made his biggest mistake in the war by opting to launch an attack against the Soviet Union, where Germany suffered great losses. 4 His second mistake had been not to inform the Japanese of his plan to invade Russia, despite speaking to the Japanese ambassador in Germany only a day before. Had he done so, the Japanese would probably have opted to join the German forces in Russia, and would not have attacked Pearl Harbour on December 7th 1942 5 It is this decision that led to America's fateful entrance into the War, and also to the German defeat in Russia.

The retrospective belief, is that if Hitler had informed the Japanese of his decision to invade the Soviet Union, or if he had backed the Africa campaign as his generals advised, Hitler would have achieved his thousand years of power. 6 It is argued, that if Hitler had gone through Palestine and the Middle East, to join up with Japan in India, the two countries could then have made a concentrated effort to rig the Cape sea route, and would thus have won the war. 7 It was a fear of exactly this, that motivated the coastal defence policy of the Union of South Africa, and which turned Robben Island into the nucleus of the South African coastal defence system in the Cape Peninsula.

THE POSITION OF THE UNION GOVERNMENT AT THE OUTBREAK OF WORLD WAR II

South Africa declared war on Germany on September 6th 1939, and on Italy on the 11th of June 1940. [8] The declaration of war did not come about easily or unanimously.

In early 1939, the South African government had made it clear that it was not prepared to take armed action on the side of Britain and France in case of war. At this stage, the cabinet had also given its full support to Hertzog's policy of neutrality. Since 1936, in fact, Hertzog had time and again declared that South Africa would take part in a European war only if South African interests were threatened. [9]

Due to a clerical error during the Union Parliament's annual session in 1939, it was neglected to provide for the continued existence of the Senate. As a result, a special sitting of Parliament was scheduled for early September 1939, with the purpose of addressing the life of the Senate. As chance would have it, this meeting took place on the 4th of September, only a day after Britain had declared war against Germany. The question of South Africa's possible participation in the war could thus not be ignored.

In a context, where many white South Africans were actively supporting the Third Reich, Hertzog and his followers took a position for neutrality. Hertzog's supporters in Parliament were; Mr N.C Havenga, Mr Oswald Pirow, Mr A.P.J Faine, Mr H.A Fagan and General J.C.G Kemp. [10] General Jan Smuts, Hertzog's deputy, on the other hand, considered it to be in South Africa's interest to participate in the war on the side of Britain. Smuts was supported by the following six members of Parliament; Colonel Deneys Reitz, Mr R Stuttaford, Mr H.G Lawrence, Colonel W.R Williams, Mr R.H Henderson and Mr C.F Clarkson. [11]

When the vote was put to Parliament, Hertzog was defeated by a mere 80 votes to 67. As a result Hertzog resigned, and for a second time, General Smuts became the Prime Minister of South Africa. Under his leadership, the Union government began to take the first steps in preparation for war. Starting with an amendment to the Union government's defence policy. The amendment contained the following: [12]

a) It is in the interest of the Union that its relations with the German Reich should be severed, and that the union should refuse to adopt an attitude of neutrality in this conflict.
b) The Union should carry out the obligations to which it has agreed, and continue its co-operation with its friends and associates in the British Commonwealth of Nations.
c) The Union should take all the necessary measures for the defence of its territory and South African interests, and the government should not send forces overseas as it did in the last war.
d) This house is profoundly convinced that the freedom and independence of the Union are at stake in this conflict, and that it is therefore in its true interest to oppose the use of force as an instrument of national policy.

THE STATE OF THE UNION'S DEFENCES AT THE OUTBREAK OF WORLD WAR II

It is said that when Hitler heard that South Africa had declared war on Germany, he laughed. [13] This is not surprising given the pitiful state of the Union's defences at the time.

The Minister of Defence, Oswald Pirow, had allowed the South African Defence Force to deteriorate to such an extent, that when Prime Minister General Smuts took over the Defence Portfolio in September 1939, he virtually had to build the South African Defence Force up from scratch. The military expenditure shortly after the First World War, in most nations, had been based on the assumption that no major war was likely to occur for at least another 10 years. When this view no longer obtained, the depression made increased military expenditure in South Africa unfeasible.

THE NAVY

At the outbreak of the war, the South African naval forces did not possess a single ship. In terms of personnel they could rely only on a small group of men from the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) South Africa. Any actual defence against a threat at sea would have to be conducted by the small contingent of the British Royal Navy at Simon's Town.

By 15 January 1940, several dozen ships were under commission, all of them whalers and trawlers that had been converted for war purposes by South African labour. [14] In terms of personnel the South African naval forces consisted of 17 Officers and 381 ratings.

THE ARMY

The army consisted of only 313 Permanent Force Officers, and 3 040 men. The Citizen Force consisted of only 14 631 men. [15]

THE AIR FORCE

The South African Air Force consisted of two high-speed bombers and 26 obsolete general purpose planes. [16]

COASTAL DEFENCE

The Union's Ports and Harbours were, in theory, defended by coastal batteries manned by Permanent Force members of the Artillery. The only coastal armaments which could be said to be operational, however, was the old Scala battery with its 9.2 inch breech loading naval guns of 1914 or 1918 vintage. It had been kept operational only on the insistence of the Royal Navy that their Naval Dockyard at Simon's Town be protected. In Cape Town, the Fort Wynyard Battery, had only two 6 inch manually operated breech loading guns dating back to 1914. [17] Port Elizabeth and East London were virtually undefended. In Durban, there was only one obsolete 6-inch gun mounted at the Bluff. Captain Anderson recalls, that when he arrived at The Bluff, he found that the gun had

been completely neglected, and that it was buried in the sand. Later on he had to "*enlist the services of a number of soldiers, to dig it out*". [18]

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CHAPTER 4

PREPARING FOR WAR: ROBBEN ISLAND GETS A MILITARY ROLE

PREPARING FOR WAR

In 1934, the Minister of Defence, Oswald Pirow, unveiled a five-year plan to rejuvenate South Africa's Defence System. His plans were aimed mainly at the expansion of the Army and the Air force. As far as coastal defence was concerned, Pirow was convinced that a large-scale naval attack was unlikely, and thus a few mobile artillery units in conjunction with field batteries would be adequate.

In 1939, when General Smuts took over the Defence Portfolio, Cape Town had already been recognised as potentially significant in the war effort. The Suez Canal had become vulnerable to attack, and hence the shipping traffic in South African waters was expected to increase dramatically. The first step in preparation for the war, was accordingly, the speedy completion of the Duncan Dock in Cape Town, for which Britain was now helping to pay. The two areas that were most fundamentally affected by preparations for World War II, were the Navy, and the Coastal Artillery.

THE NAVY

On October 25th 1939, General Smuts announced to the British High Commission that he had decided to establish a South African Navy. The Admiralty agreed to release volunteers from the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (SA) to assist. Accordingly, on 15 January 1940, the Seaward Defence Force (SDF) came into being. It consisted of a mere 15 ships. 1 The SDF was placed under the command of Rear-Admiral Halifax. 2 In terms of personnel, the SDF consisted of 74 Officers and 381 ratings. 3 When Admiral Halifax died in a tragic air crash in May 1940 (see Appendix A), Commodore James Dalgleish replaced him as Director of the SDF.

Shore establishments were set up in Cape Town, Simon's Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban. At each of these ports the SDF maintained a base, a Port War Signal Station, ships for anti-submarine patrols and minesweeping, and an Examinations Service. The SDF was called upon for the first time in May 1940, when it had to clear an enemy minefield, which had been laid in the main shipping route off Cape Agulhus. 4

In August 1942, the SDF and RNVR SA merged to form the South African Naval Forces (SANF), in which 10 332 officers and ratings served. 5

COASTAL ARTILLERY

The Union government had already begun to modernize the docks and harbour facilities of the country in 1934, when a government Commission reported that the Table Bay docks should be modernized and enlarged. 6 Thus, construction on the new Duncan Dock began. The year 1934 also saw the revival of the South African economy, which allowed Minister of Defence, Oswald Pirow, to embark on his afore mentioned five year plan. Point four of his plan regarded coastal defences. 8 It was expected that fixed coastal defences would be established at Simon's Town, Cape Town (Robben Island), and Durban, by the middle of 1938. 7 Simon's Town would according to the plan, be the first coastal defence station with modern high-angle 9.2-inch guns. 9

The Coast Artillery Brigade itself, had been established on the 20th of February 1934, consisting of the 1st and 2nd Heavy Batteries, the South African Permanent Garrison Artillery, the 1st and 2nd Medium Batteries, the Cape Field Artillery, and the No.1 Armoured Train Cape Town. 10 It had its headquarters in the Castle in Cape Town, and was under command of Lt. Col. B.F Armstrong.

On the evening of the outbreak of the Second World War, Officers and men of the Coastal Artillery Brigade, were already reporting in Cape Town and Simon's Town. 11

The Coastal Artillery Brigade was renamed the Cape Peninsula Artillery Brigade on the 8th of February 1940. It was placed under command of Lt Col H.E Cilliers who became Deputy Director of Coast Artillery, and reported to the Coast Artillery Directorate at Wynberg Camp. 12 The new Cape Peninsula Artillery Brigade was in control of the Table Bay Fire Command (which included the 1st Heavy Battery Cape Town and the 2nd Heavy Battery Robben Island), the Saldanha Bay Fire Command, and the 1st Anti-Aircraft Training Brigade. 13 It was now also decided that fixed coastal defences should be established at Port Elizabeth and East London.

With dual control of Coast Artillery and Anti-Aircraft Artillery vested in one Directorate, it was inevitable that the training functions of the two arms be combined, and this at a Training Depot on Robben Island. 14

ROBBEN ISLAND GETS A MILITARY PURPOSE

Robben Island's first military purpose (before it became a Training Depot for coastal gunners) was to replace the HMS Erebus, as a static battleship.

On 17 March 1936, Minister of Defence, Oswald Pirow, remarked in Parliament that he would declare Robben Island a military property and fortify it with light caliber and heavy coastal guns. 15 Pirow continued that the government was considering replacing the Signal Hill Battery, by a battery on Robben Island. 16 The reason for the possible

replacement of the Signal Hill Battery, was that when the 9.2" guns at the battery were fired, considerable damage was done to neighbouring properties.

In order to modernize South Africa's coastal defences, Pirow proposed that 15" guns be placed on Robben Island, in the approaches to Table Bay, in order to make the Bay battleship proof. The Admiralty was asked to provide these 15" guns. They, however, saw the implementation of 15" guns on Robben Island as an over insurance, no matter what. Instead, the Admiralty reiterated the recommendations of the 1928 Imperial Defence Committee. [17] The Admiralty suggested, that it would be more appropriate to elevate the 9.2" guns at Simon's Town and Cape Town, by converting them onto 35 degree mountings, which would increase the range of the guns tremendously. They also suggested, that the obsolete 6 inch guns at the Bluff in Durban be replaced by 9.2 inch guns. [18]

Pirow was not easily dissuaded from his 15" gun idea. After lengthy discussions with the Admiralty, a compromise was reached in December 1938. Two 15" guns would be erected on the HMS Erebus, after which she would be loaned to the South African government to be used at either Durban or Robben Island. [19]

On the 23rd of March 1939, Pirow announced in Parliament, that as from the 1st of September 1939, Cape Town would be defended by the monitor Erebus (armed with 15" guns) [20] The loan of the monitor Erebus appeared expedient at the time, since it would take at least four years for the necessary coastal guns to arrive in South Africa.

The HMS Erebus would, however, not be operated as a naval unit. Her intended use was as a self-contained artillery battery, manned by South African Artillery Personnel, and organised entirely as an army unit. [21] She would be known on arrival in Cape Town, not as the HMS Erebus, but rather as the Erebus Heavy Battery, Coast Artillery Brigade. The intention was to station the Erebus close to Robben Island, where it would serve to protect the ships in the Table Bay harbour, until such time as fixed armaments had been established on the Island. After that, the Erebus would be sent to Durban, pending fortifications there.

The Admiralty immediately started drawing up the conditions for the proposed loan of the Erebus to the Union government. The conditions included the following: [22]

a) The South African government accepted responsibility for reconditioning the ship at an estimated cost of 85 000 pounds
b) The Admiralty would provide a full issue of naval and armament stores free of charge
c) The South African government would be responsible for any additional or consumable material, such as fuel
d) The Admiralty would deliver the ship to Cape Town in the latter half of 1939
e) The Admiralty would undertake the training of a South African gunnery contingent, for the purpose of manning the ship
f) The Union government would be responsible for all expenses of the delivery trip, and would be responsible for returning to Britain, the Royal Navy crew on board the Erebus

g) The Union government would be responsible for all the running costs of the ship
h) If the Erebus was scrapped while in the service of the Union, the equivalent of her sale price would have to be paid by the Union government

Despite these elaborate plans and negotiations, the whole ill-conceived idea collapsed with the formation of the new government under General Smuts. The issue of the Erebus was consequently debated in Parliament, where General Smuts ridiculed the whole scheme. Smuts pointed out, that not only was the Erebus unsuitable for the rough sea waters around the Cape, but also, that a blast from one of her 15" guns, would have done more damage to the center of Cape Town, than any battleship could inflict. [23] At the same time, Winston Churchill, informed Smuts that the Erebus was ready to be sent to South Africa, but that he thought the 15" guns quite unnecessary. Churchill continued that although the Royal navy was willing to do without the ship, they would find it most useful for defence on the Belgium Coast. [24] Smuts agreed, and the Royal Navy retained the Erebus.

Following the recommendations of the 1928 Imperial Defence Commission, it was decided instead, that a high-angle 9.2" gun battery would be established on Robben Island. Arrangements for the speedy delivery of the necessary guns were made, and so Robben Island took up its first military role, as a static battleship, in place of the monitor Erebus.

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CHAPTER 5

CONSTRUCTION ON AND FORTIFICATION OF ROBBEN ISLAND

By 1939 the Directorate of Works and Fortifications, and the Directorate of Coastal Works had been formed with the responsibility of all the inland areas under the former, and the coastal region from Walvis Bay round to Richards Bay under the latter. At the time, both Directorates were faced with the immediate problem of finding staff, since no regular Engineers Corps existed. The solution, which met with outstanding success, was to recruit highly qualified civilians and give them a rank appropriate to their standing in civilian life, in the emerging and rapidly growing new Engineers Corps. 1 The new recruits came from the South African Railways and Harbours, from the Public Works Department, the Irrigation Department, Provincial Administrations, Municipalities, as well as from industry in general. Many of them were also skilled tradesmen, including bricklayers, carpenters, and so forth. 2 By early 1940, the two Directorates could really begin to function effectively, drawing on the newly established South African Engineer Corps (SAEC) for highly qualified personnel.

Mr John Craig, who had been the Union's Harbour Advisory Engineer since 1931, received the immediate rank of Lt Col, and was sent to London in 1939 on a secret mission. In talks with Lord Chatfield, Minister of Coordination of Defence, Lt Col Craig learnt the role that South Africa was to play in the scheme of commonwealth defence. On his return to South Africa Lt Col Craig was appointed Deputy Director of Fortifications (15 August 1941). 3 As such his tasks included the fortifications of all South Africa's "defended" ports. This would include Saldanha Bay, Robben Island, Cape Town, Simon's Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban and Walvis Bay. The Directorate and the SAEC had such a vast array of commitments, that they could not hope to cope alone with the immense task of building fortifications, costing more than 30 million pounds for coastal batteries, forward observation posts, aerodromes, harbours, and so forth. All this within a few years. 4 As a result, much of the work would be done by private contractors under military supervision.

Construction at coastal defence establishments all over the Cape Peninsula, and particularly the construction on Robben Island, seems, in official war histories, to be always attributed to Lt Col John Craig. Without in any way derogating from the work of Lt Col Craig, my research has led me to believe that any history pertaining to the War years on Robben Island, should acknowledge and give credit to the work of Col Shearer and his associates. Col Shearer, was in fact, the first Director of Fortifications and Coastal Works. He had been appointed as such in 1939, the year in which construction on Robben Island began. 5 It was Col Shearer who initiated the fortification program on Robben Island. It was only after his tragic death in an air crash in May 1941 (see Appendix A), that the responsibility was passed on to Lt Col Craig. When Lt Col Craig took over the fortification of Robben Island, more than a years work had already been done under the leadership of Col Shearer. Even before the Directorate of Fortifications

and Coastal Works (DFCW) was really up and running, Col Shearer, Captain Anderson, and Bill Warren were given offices in the Public Works Department Building at Buitekant Street in Cape Town, and so became the first three members of what would later become the DFCW. 6 It was also these three men, who arrived on Robben Island in 1939, to do a preliminary survey before plans for construction and fortification on Robben Island could be drawn up.

The fortification of Robben Island included the conveyance of a 150 000 tons of equipment and material to the Island by four independent firms and the Public Works Department, clearing trees, building roads, a harbour, gun emplacements for two batteries, underground magazines and plotting rooms, observation towers, accommodation for thousands, recreational facilities, a runway of a thousand yards and more. Old buildings were also renovated. The last building to be completed on Robben Island during the period, was the John Craig recreational hall.

PERSONS RESPONSIBLE FOR CONSTRUCTION ON ROBBEN ISLAND

The Resident Garrison Engineer on Robben Island was Mr Gus de Swardt. He had been appointed in 1939 by the DFCW, to control the Civil Engineering Works Program on Robben Island

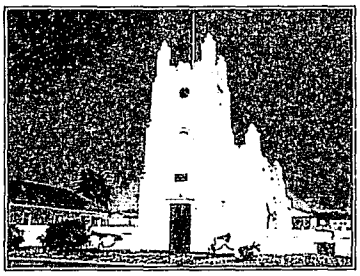
Captain Anderson was a specialist Technical Engineer, from the Royal Engineers, whose duties extended to include major construction works right around the coast, from Durban down to Saldanha and beyond. On Robben Island he was mainly responsible for electrical construction and development. He had been posted to the Union of South Africa in 1939, along with Col G.P Shearer and Captain W (Bill) Warren, for the express purpose of supervising the Union's Coastal Defences.

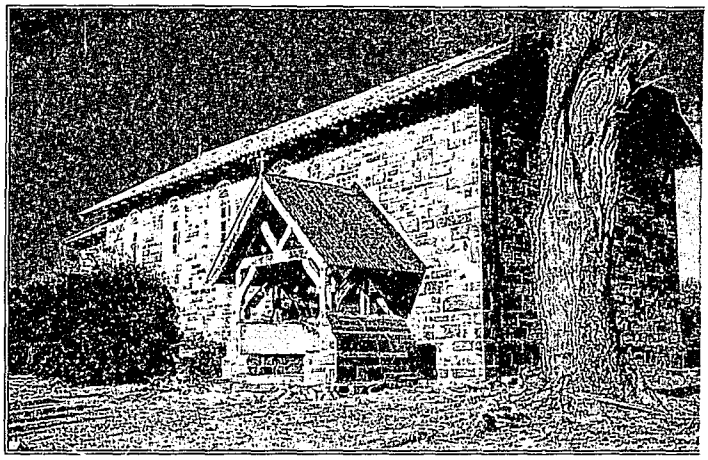
The Engineers posted to Robben Island, included Engineers from the Royal Navy, from the SANF, and from the 97th and 2nd Engineers of the SAEC. There were also on average some 2 000 workers on the Island. At times, the number of workers could have been as high as 5 000. A very large proportion of these workers were African labourers. They were responsible for the hard menial labour, such as digging foundations and laying concrete. These African labourers were accommodated in a specially created compound, separated from the rest of the Island's inhabitants. There were also some white and coloured artisans. All of whom fell under the jurisdiction of Mr De Swardt. Up until 1942, the labour force and some of the engineers on Robben Island were civilians. In 1942, however, in fear of a Japanese air attack, all civilians were evacuated from the Island, and all future construction work was done by the South African Engineers Corps.

ON ARRIVAL

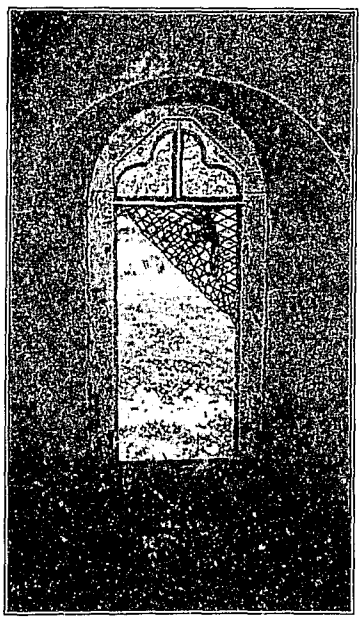
When the Construction and Fortification works started on Robben Island in 1939, the Island had been empty and deserted for close to ten years. The roads were overgrown pathways where two might walk abreast. Thick undergrowth hid many of the buildings. In fact one little house was only discovered after spending several months on the Island.

Right Top: One of the buildings that survived and was not destroyed when the lepers left the island in 1931, is the Anglican Church.
(C Smith, Robben Island)
Centre Left: Col G.P Shearer
(donated by Capt Anderson)
Centre Right: The Sir Herbert Baker Leper Church which also survived.
(C. Smith, Robben Island)
Bottom Left: Col J Craig
(donated by Capt Anderson)
Bottom Right: Window of the Leper Church
(C, Smith, Robben Island)









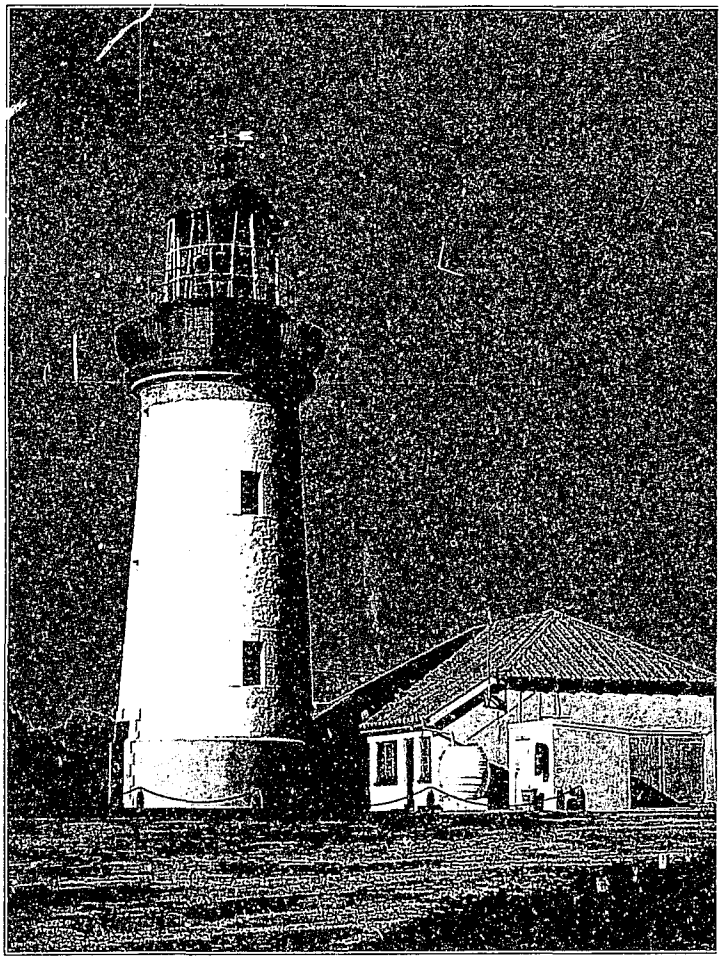


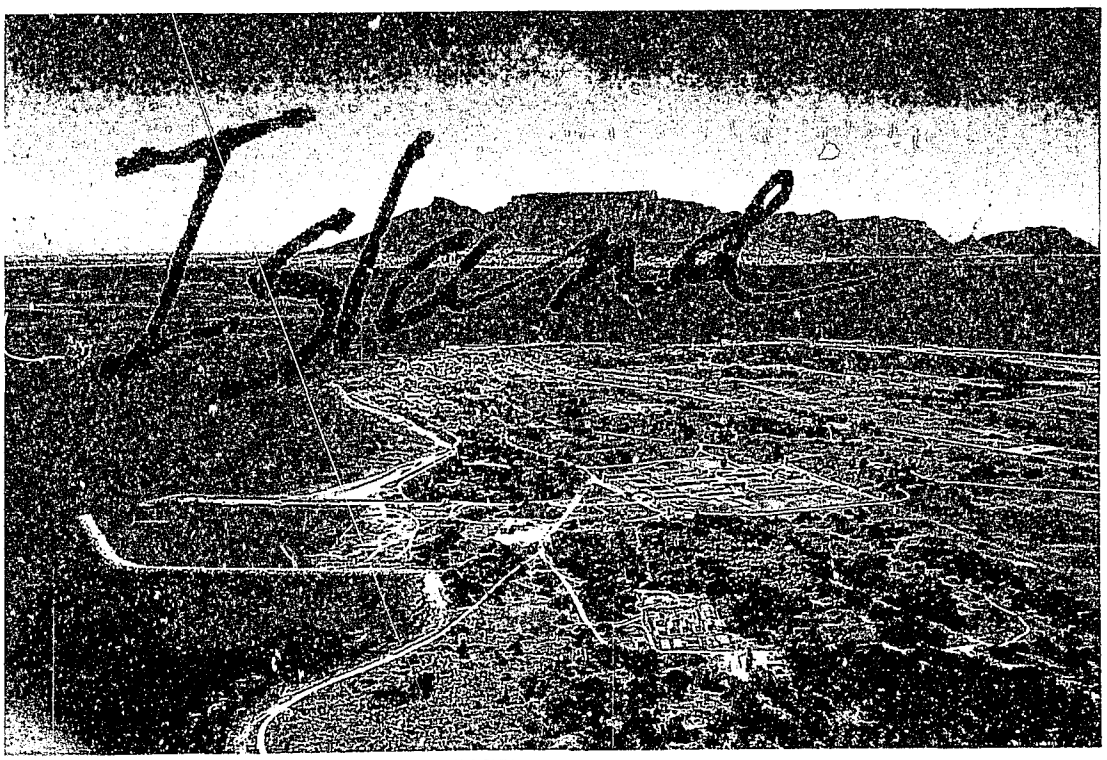
"One day I discovered a little house among the trees, I had never noticed it before. It had a big lounge, a kitchen, a dining room and a bedroom. I then asked for permission to bring my wife over to Robben Island, when she joined me on the Island, we moved into that house". 7 Captain Anderson clearly remembers his first expedition to the Island in 1939. They were visiting the Island to conduct a preliminary survey, before setting up the formal construction plan. After being dropped of by a police launch at Murray's Bay, the party walked the 5 or so kilometers to the abandoned settlement. *"A number of houses were facing on to a single road together with a small church on which there was a clock tower. A few more houses were scattered behind those facing the road".* 8 Captain Anderson and the rest of the party found the whole scene utterly deserted, with the exception of the immediate area of the lighthouse which had been kept in order by the Lighthouse Keeper, Mr Auret, and his assistant. Anderson describes inspecting this old and abandoned settlement with its deserted buildings as *"an utterly weird experience.....The houses were in a state of disrepair, doors hung askew on rotten hinges, and weeds grew profusely from the roof gutters, whilst here and there young trees had protruded through broken or collapsed roofs. Strangely, the once tidy gardens had receded themselves over successive years and were now covered in a profusion of flowers, making the whole scene even more eerie, and induced in one the feeling that the ghosts of yesterday were watching us".* 9 The Church itself was locked, and the party made no attempt to enter it.

There was a considerable number of wild rabbits on the Island, descendants of pet rabbits which had been released on the Island when it was evacuated some 10 years previously. Mr De Swardt also remembers that on one occasion they were forced to rely on the rabbits as their sole source of food, since supplies could not be brought over to the Island due to bad weather. Wild cats were numerous, they were the fourth or fifth generation of domestic cats that had been left on the Island, and having perforce to hunt rabbits for their survival, they became wild. In one instance, remembers Mr De Swardt, it was necessary to put stitches into a wound inflicted by one of these cats, which grew to twice the size of ordinary tame cats. Many – if not most- of these cats were shot. It is often said that there were no Penguins left on Robben Island by 1939. Yet, in a letter written by Mr L.H Jordaan, to Magnus Malan, Jordaan points out that there were in fact penguins on Robben Island when they started the construction program, but that with thousands of workmen on the Island, *"the eggs were picked up as fast as they were laid"*, and the colony disappeared. 10 There were also numerous harmless snakes on the Island. Many of them were killed by the soldiers and workers, only to be replaced by plagues of rats and mice.

Disturbing remnants of the leper and lunatic asylum days were still to be found. Mr De Swardt remembers walking through the tiny cells where lunatics had been incarcerated. *"There were tiny peepholes and only one little window. Just beneath one such window there were five clear finger marks about half an inch deep".* 11 These deep groves made by human fingers are a grim record of futile efforts made by inmates to escape. In some of the buildings photographs were still hanging on the walls, and the floors were littered with correspondence. Captain Anderson vividly recalls walking through parts of some of the buildings that had not been destroyed, *"....here we found it to be even more weird to*

1) The Lighthouse on Robben Island
(C. Smith, Robben Island)
2) Murray's Bay Harbour, on the left
(Getaway, April 1997)





walk around these partially destroyed buildings, which had witnessed so much human suffering in the past. In the inmates washroom we found the crude iron bath tubs still in place, whilst fixed to the walls were the iron manacles used to restrain the more violent inmates..... These observations left me with a feeling of great sadness for all the unfortunate inmates who had been incarcerated in that asylum and forced to eke out their lives in such conditions without any hope of reprieve during their lifetime". 12

There was no harbour on the Island, only a small jetty, which would not be adequate for either the transport of equipment or personnel. Anderson describers it as an *"old, dilapidated wooden landing pier"*. 13 Almost all the magnificent old stone buildings had been destroyed in fear of contamination. The only useful thing the expedition found on the Island, was a railway track, going right around the Island.

It was this wilderness, that the military turned into a comfortable settlement for 3 000 people in only a couple of years.

THE HARBOUR

Robben Island is surrounded by near freezing water and treacherous currents. This, along with a rocky shoreline, made landing anywhere on the Island's shore virtually impossible. The various shipwrecks on the Island's shore serve as testimony of this. The only place to bring equipment ashore at Robben Island in 1939, was at the Murray's Bay jetty. As has been said before, this small wooden jetty was completely inadequate, especially considering that the gun barrels that needed to be brought ashore weighed 30 tons each. In the winter months, strong north-westerly gales, frequent fog and rough seas, made any landing of equipment at the jetty impossible.

Nevertheless, equipment worth hundreds of thousands of pounds had to be brought ashore, including the guns, radar equipment, asdic equipment, steam rollers to make the aerodrome, material for the degaussing range, building materials and equipment for the construction of accommodation and so forth. 14

Although the first priority of the Engineers was to build the gun emplacements, this could not be done until a new harbour had been built. Without the harbour, the gun barrels and other heavy and delicate equipment could not be brought ashore, and construction and fortification could not continue. Despite the obvious need to build the harbour, it took approximately one year for plans, that had changed almost a dozen times, to be accepted. The first idea was simply to provide some form of protection for the Murray's Bay jetty. When these plans were rejected, it was decided that an anchorage capable of accommodating only the patrol vessels of the SANF should be built. Finally, however, in November 1940, the construction of the Murray's Bay Harbour began. The result was a small harbour, capable at low tide of serving vessels with a draught of 16 feet. 15 During and after the war, the harbour was also used by the South African Air Force (SAAF) crash boats (rescue boats).

The Harbour wall itself, was built with stones collected on the Island, which had formerly belonged to the now destroyed leper buildings. The Construction of the Harbour was no

easy feat, and included work done by Sapper divers, who had been trained at the Simon's Town Naval Base. [16] In total it took almost two years to complete the Murray's Bay Harbour.

BRINGING THE EQUIPMENT OVER

Before the harbour had been built, fishing boats were hired to bring small pieces of equipment and building materials such as bricks across. For the owners of these fishing boats the construction and fortification program on Robben Island, provided them with a lucrative income, as well as a way in which to serve the country in its war effort. Once the harbour had been completed, a tugboat was used to bring the heavy equipment, including the 9.2"gun barrels over. Captain Anderson recalls, how on the day the truck switch gear for the power station had to be unloaded at Murray's Bay, there was a heavy swell coming into the Bay. The skipper of the fishing boat they had hired to transport the cases *"..turned out to be a cantankerous and self-willed man, who insisted in handling the cargo himself, with his own crew, and would not take advice form anyone"*. [17] The result was that two of the cases containing switch gear were dropped overboard. *"I was standing on the warfside with my installation crew at the time, and before the two cases could sink, I, and two of my crew, dived in and managed to get a rope around them, and have them hauled out with a wharf crane"*. [18] Captain Anderson had the two cases opened up immediately, and had all the instrumentation removed. These where then rushed to Cape Town City Electrical Meter and Testing Department, where they were washed with distilled water and carefully dried out. Other items were washed and dried on the Island itself. They had managed to save all the equipment, but *"needless to say, the boat skipper was severely reprimanded, his contract cancelled, and his name removed from our contract list"*. [19] Despite the difficulties of landing material, practically nothing was lost, with the exception of a consignment of tea-cups valued at 15 pounds. [20] In the end, a total of 150 000 tons of equipment and building materials had been transported to the Island. [21]

THE GUN EMPLACEMENTS

The War Office time for completing a 9.2" gun battery was 24 months, but General Smuts had requested that all the coastal defences, including the batteries on Robben Island, be completed within six months. [22] Such expectations were clearly unreasonable. In about June 1939, work on the gun emplacements and accompanying fighting buildings on Robben Island began. The plan was for the construction of both a 6" Battery (Cornelia) and a 9.2" gun battery (Robben Island), situated on the northern and southern sides of the Island respectively. Both the construction and operation of these gun emplacements and fighting buildings were delayed due to difficulties in bringing equipment over to the Island. The process only really started running smoothly, once the Murray's Bay Harbour had been completed.

In 1939, in order to create the impression that Robben Island was equipped with heavy armaments, it was decided to build mock guns out of wood. This task was allotted to Bill Warren, who spent many hours on the Island building these wooden dummy guns and

emplacements. The dummy guns were slightly elevated to give the impression, when observing them from a distance, that they were real guns. "*They were a great success and I have often wondered what the reaction of the public in Cape Town would have been, had they known the real situation*". [23]

By April 1940, work had advanced sufficiently enough to allow for the installation of the first 6"guns at Cornelia Battery. Although the Battery only became operational in July 1940, due to lack of equipment, personnel were immediately drafted to the Battery. They occupied a part of the Island known as the "village". [24]

During May and June 1942, the first 9.2" gun was mounted at the Robben Island Battery. The installation could not be completed, however, again due to lack of equipment. November 1942, saw the installation of the second 9.2" gun at the Robben Island Battery. [25] The Battery was soon manned, as a modern counter-bombardment battery, and was operational by the end of the year. The third 9.2" gun at the Robben Island Battery was only installed in 1945.

Building the gun emplacements also implied building their ancillary points, such as observation posts, a power station, plotting rooms, and magazines, most of which were 30 feet underground.

FORTIFICATION OF THE ISLAND PERIMETER

In addition to the gun emplacements and ancillary points, the Island perimeter had to be fortified. This included machine gun posts, searchlight stations, and barbed wire barriers. All this had been accomplished by the end of 1940. In March 1942, it was decided to also prepare the Island against attack by Japanese landing craft. Thus the construction of pill-boxes, and rifle posts at strategic points on the Island began. [25] These war bunkers can still be seen on the Island. {If South Africa had won the Olympic bid, the Olympic flame would have been placed on one of these bunkers.}

ACCOMMODATION

It was estimated that some 3 000 persons would be living on Robben Island during the war, all in some way related to the defence of the Cape Peninsula. Over and above the extensive tasks the Engineer Corps already had, it thus also had to construct accommodation for 3 000 persons. This implied the construction of barracks for white male soldiers, for coloured male soldiers, for the female Artillery Specialists, for the female Naval personnel and so forth. Yet, accommodation was more than the mere provision of living quarters, it included messes, naval wardrooms, religious facilities, recreational facilities, a hospital, a recreation hall, sewerage disposal works, electrification works, a shop, a bakery, and even a library. True to South African policies at the time, many of these requirements had to be duplicated to meet the requirements of racial segregation.

The construction of dwelling houses to accommodate the Garrison and their families, was commenced in 1940. Mr De Swardt named the street on which the new houses were built Shearer Avenue (and so it remains today), in memory of Col Shearer. 27

THE WATER SUPPLY SYSTEM

Despite previous occupation, there was no water supply system on Robben Island when the Engineers arrived. During the leper era, several windmills had been in use, but they had all dried up. 28 Under command of the Garrison Engineer, Lt De Swardt, six boreholes were sunk. Five of them were very successful, but the final hole had to be sealed almost immediately, because it was draining the water supply at Llundudno. 29 During the whole military occupation of the Island (until 1960), there were never any real water supply problems. "*We were always careful not to over pump, if one did over pump, the sea water would come in, and the water would become brackish, and one would not be able to use it again for a long time, since one would have to wait for enough rain water to push the sea back again*". 30 Today, water has to be transported to the Island with a cargo boat, at enormous costs.

THE AERODROME

Construction of the aerodrome commenced in early 1940, under command of the Garrison Engineer. One of the greatest difficulties in building the runway, was the constant sabotage attempts by the Island's large rabbit population. The rabbits developed a habit of burrowing under the tarmac. As a result, a plane landing on a hot day was liable to sink through the crust. The "solution", was an official poisoner, who would make daily inspection tours of the 30 feet wide strip, and at the first sight of burrowing would lay his poison. 31 The aerodrome was completed by the end of 1942. The runway itself was approximately 1 000 yards long. The aerodrome soon proved its value, by providing refuge for bombers and reconnaissance aircraft, which had run out of fuel on sea patrols.

ELECTRIFICATION AND THE POWER STATION

Up until the massive construction program undertaken by the military, except for a small generating unit at the lighthouse for operating the light, there was no other source of power on the Island. It appears that everyone who had occupied the Island before, had made use of candles and oil lamps.

Captain Anderson was given the task of designing a domestic power station for the existing village, as well as for the new houses on Shearer Avenue. In the power station itself, Captain Anderson, made provision for three diesel driven alternators and distribution feeders, as well as an earth leakage detection and indicator panel. 32 On completion of his design, Captain Anderson sent a copy of his plan and of the estimated costs to the Authorities Committee in Pretoria, who would provide the necessary funding. The Authorities Committee sent the plans to the Cape Town City Electrical Engineer and War Supplies Officer, Mr Eastman, to be vetted. Mr Eastman approved the plans, and phoned Captain Anderson to congratulate him on his good work. 33

By the end of 1942, the domestic electrical system had been completed, and was equal to, if not better, than the system operating in Cape Town at the time.

The building in which the power station itself was housed, was made of concrete, but had the appearance of a corrugated iron shack. The purpose of this was to create the impression that the building was not important, and so deter the enemy from attacking it. [34]

THE CLOCK TOWER

Although not part of their job description, the old clock in the church tower of the former leper church was repaired, and worked again for the first time in almost ten years. On one occasion, Captain Anderson, had been marooned to Robben Island, to arrange for additions to the temporary electrical system, which was used by the workers to augment the water pump supply. As a result of bad weather, he was stranded on the Island for a week. While strolling around the Island, looking for something with which to occupy himself, he began "*...wondering if the old clock..could be restarted*". [35] Anderson then unlocked the church doors that had been shut for almost ten years, "*..It seemed to us on entering the House of God that after the last service, when the Island was evacuated all those years ago, nothing had been removed, and the Minister had simply turned the key in the lock. The interior was of course covered in dust, but the hassocks and the hymn books were still as the congregation had left them. The withered flowers in the vases and the furnishings in the channel together with the Bible still on the lectern produced a feeling in us, that the ghosts of yesterday were watching us..*". [36] The small clock tower inside the church, had clearly suffered from the passage of time. The supporting cable had broken due to corrosion, and the clock weights had fallen through the ceiling, leaving a huge hole. The clock mechanism had to be completely dismantled and replaced. Captain Anderson completed this task successfully. "*At the end of the week, on the day before I was able to leave the Island, at midday to be exact, I restarted the clock, and to everyone's surprise the clock faithfully struck out the hour of twelve, after a silence of almost ten years*". [37]

WORK AT THE LIGHTHOUSE

The South African Railways and Harbours asked Garrison Engineer Gus de Swardt, whether it was possible to build some new buildings for the lighthouse personnel. De Swardt obtained the necessary permission, and construction began. While members of the Robben Island Engineers Garrison were digging foundations for the lighthouse keeper's new quarters, they came across a skull, a small dagger and some coins. The French coins had been well preserved under the soil, and dated back to 1688 and 1726. [38] Most of these coins seem to have simply disappeared. De Swardt recalls that he had tried to obtain one of these coins to make a necklace for his daughter, but that "*they had all disappeared among the troops*". [39]

Robben Island was full of unmarked graves. It thus frequently happened, that while digging foundations, or sometimes even when gardening, skulls, bones and other human remains would be unearthed.

GHOST STORIES

The isolation, history and excavations on Robben Island, produced a whole array of ghost stories, and accounts of super natural phenomena. Here are some from the early war days.

On one occasion, a foreman reported, "*..you can fire me if you like, but I am not going back to that place..*". [40] The story goes, that while this man was cutting branches off the minatoka trees, to clear a path, he suddenly felt a grip on his shoulder. He tried to shake it off, but it only grew stronger. When he looked over his shoulder, there was nothing, but the mortuary behind him.

While the foundations for the Cornelia Battery were being dug, a grave was uncovered. The rumour spread, that the disturbed ghost walked across its former grave at six o'clock every morning. Gus de Swardt, remembers getting up early one morning to go have a look, "*I saw nothing, but the man next to me, who said he had some kind of calling, could apparently see it*". [41] There are also numerous stories of late night walkers, and unexplained knocks at the door.

LIFE ON THE ISLAND DURING THE PERIOD OF FORTIFICATION

Mrs De Swardt, who was the first (and for a long time) the only military wife on Robben Island, was not at all perturbed by the thought of going to live on Robben Island. She went across when her son (Billy) was only 14 months old. [42] Her daughter (Joy) was born four years later, and became the first child to be baptised in the Anglican church on the Island, which by then was already one hundred years old. Once a month she would go shopping in Cape Town. "*I enjoyed every minute of living on the Island. It was so pretty, with lots and lots of wild flowers, and thousands of seabirds*". [43]

Billy De Swardt, had spent most of his childhood on Robben Island. He remembers being a "*spoilt child*", since there were so many soldiers who would take him on picnics or to go swimming. He was also allowed, perhaps illegally, to sit in the gun seat, of one of the gun emplacements. [44] Billy also remembers going around with his father at night for inspections. He had to stay low in the car, so as not to be seen. His father had to give a password to a sentry armed with a bayonet, to allow him to inspect the gun emplacements. "*I thought he (the sentry) was there to pierce my dad, if he did not know the password*". [45] On occasion Billy also went out on the Navy's Crash boats. One night, during a blackout, a crash boat (carrying Mr Frank Gale, the Deputy Town Clerk of Cape Town at the time) crashed into a rocky part of the Island, opposite the harbour. A plan was devised whereby the boat was transported right around the Island on the railway tracks, and taken to the harbour. From there it could be taken over to the mainland for repairs. [46]

In the early stages of the war, there was no resident doctor on the Island. A doctor used to come over to the Island for regular visits only. There was, however, a small hospital, run by a matron. The most common affliction suffered on the Island, was an "upset stomach", due to the Island water. [47] A small store for groceries was also opened on the Island in an attempt to overcome supply problems (particularly acute in periods of bad weather, when ships could not cross to and from the Island). Gus De Swardt recalls, that in times when supplies were short, it was "*not unknown that men would smoke dried tea leaves in lieu of tobacco*". [48]

There were also some interesting characters on the Island. Captain Anderson remembers that the stores foreman kept a human skull on the mantle shelf of his quarters, which he had obtained from excavations on the Island. "*He was an extremely eccentric man and drank heavily when off duty. When in his cups he would indulge in one sided conversations with the skull*". [49]

In terms of entertainment, there wasn't much on the Island in the early days of the war. When the Engineers had free time, which wasn't often given their heavy work load and hectic time schedule, some of them would go fishing. "*If I felt like crayfish or fish for breakfast, I would go out and catch it*", remembers Gus De Swardt. [50] One ex-serviceman described a rather destructive method of fishing that he and his friends employed: "*We used to chuck a couple of dynamite sticks in the water, and then collect huge amounts of dead sea life to feast on*". [51] There was also a pub on the Island. The barman had a rabbit that he had caught and tamed, "*which he kept on the bar counter during canteen hours, where it would roam up and down, lapping up beer offered it, until it became drunk, to the amusement of its patrons*". [52] The canteen also had no lights. Gus De Swardt remembers that he had to be very careful about going to the canteen at night, because he owned an oil lamp, and thus, when he went for a drink, "*nobody would let me go, they would just buy me beer after beer, so that I would stay*". [53]

COMPLETION

Most of the massive construction and fortification program had been completed by 1944. This, at a cost that amounted to millions of pounds in the currency value of the time. [54] Since the construction program on Robben Island had been part of the Union government's wartime expenditure, money was never an object. It is out of this, as well as the later military occupation of the Island that a major controversy arose. The question as to whether the huge expense was justified, since none of the guns on the Island ever fired a shot in anger, remains unanswered.

It is also interesting to think about the possibility, that without this massive construction program, and the huge amounts of money involved, the Island might never have become a maximum-security prison. It is doubtful, that either the South African government or the Prisons Service, could have afforded the massive scale construction necessary.

NOTES

1) Orpen N & Martin H.J, Salute the Sappers, Sappers Association, Johannesburg, 1981
2) Calder A, Interview, 23 October 1997, Pretoria
3) Jordaan L.H, Petition No.103 to the House of Assembly of the Union of South Africa, 1948
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5) Anderson G Capt (Ret), Letter to Robben Island Museum, Cape Town, 20 June 1997
6) Anderson G Capt (Ret), Interview, Fish Hoek, 1 September 1997
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8) Anderson G Capt (Ret), Autobiography, Unpublished paper, Fish Hoek
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10) Jordaan L.H, Letter to General Magnus Malan SSA OVDG SD SM LP, Cape Town, March, 1988
11) De Swardt W.A, Interview
12) Anderson G Capt (Ret), Autobiography
13) Anderson G Capt (Ret), Interview
14) Green L.G, Islands Time Forgot, Putnam and Company, London, 1962
15) The Argus, "Boom Town Robben Island", date unknown
16) Calder A, Interview
17) Anderson G Capt (Ret), Autobiography
18) Ibid
19) Ibid
20) The Argus, "Boom Town Robben Island
21) Smith P.J, "Memories of Robben Island", Heritage, SAFM, SABC, Johannesburg, 13 May 1997
22) Jordaan L.H, Letter to General Magnus Malan
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28) Moodie G.D Maj Gen (Ret), Map of Robben Island Water Supply, 1920's
29) Smith P.J, "Memories of Robben Island", Heritage
30) Moodie G.D Maj Gen (Ret), Interview, Swellendam, 15 July 1997
31) The Argus, "Boom Town Robben Island"
32) Anderson G Capt (Ret), Autobiography
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34) Odendaal A & The Robben Island Staff, Guided Tour of Robben Island, July 1997
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45) Ibid
46) De Swardt W.A, Interview
47) Wicht J.H, "Robbeneiland Toe en Nou", Commando, March 1957
48) De Swardt W.A, Talk by Lt De Swardt
49) Anderson G Capt (Ret), Interview
50) De Swardt W.A, Interview

51) Calder A, Interview
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53) De Swardt W.A, Interview
54) Wicht J.H, "Robbeneiland Toe en Nou", Commando

CHAPTER 6

THE COASTAL BATTERIES AND ROBBEN ISLAND

With a long coastline, and situated at a strategically important location at the Southern end of Africa, guarding the passage between the Atlantic and Indian ocean, South African military preparedness had to involve the defence of the coastline and harbours. Such defence was crucial not only to South Africa's survival, but also crucial to the Allied cause. The closure of the Suez Canal had vastly increased shipping around the Cape, and these ships needed a safe harbour where they could refuel, undergo repairs and so forth. At the height of the war, for example, there would be an average of 50 ships anchored at Table Bay harbour. 1 Given the absence in South Africa of a large naval force, fixed coastal defences were of absolute importance.

As a result, former coastal batteries were improved and new coastal batteries were built at Llundudno, the Cape Town Docks, Gordons Bay, Simon's Town, and on Robben Island. This long line of coastal batteries protected the South African Coast from about Jacobs Bay, north of Atlantis, right around to Cape Hangklip (including the False Bay area). They were all manned by the Coast Garrison Artillery. The main armament defences of the Cape Peninsula were formed by the powerful gun batteries at Simon's Town, Llundudno, and on Robben Island. These batteries were also all designed to support each other, hence, the arcs of the 9.2" gun batteries would overlap to cover the entire coast line, and in particular the harbours.

The British Ports Defence Committee had recommended that none of the 9.2" or 6" gun batteries on South Africa's coast should have fewer than three guns. Although important improvements had been made to coastal defences, South Africa still did not meet these recommendations by January 1942. Primarily because the Union government did not have access to 9.2" gun barrels.

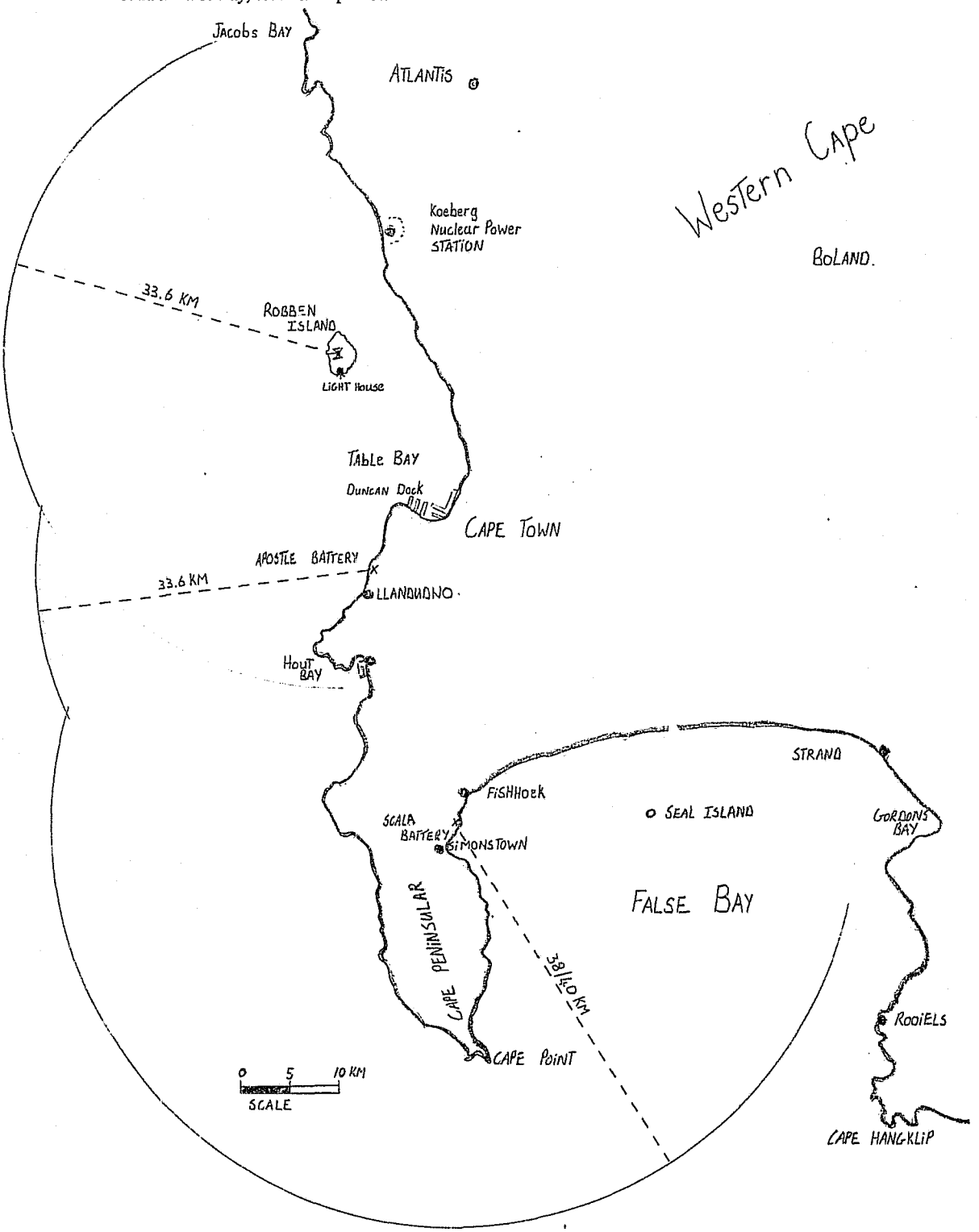
The long line of coastal batteries situated in Cape Town (Robben Island), Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth, and Gordons Bay, formed an enormous and complicated defence system, placed under the Fortress Command, which was based in the Castle in Cape Town. This Fortress Command was in control of all the related forces and activities, including the Army, the Navy, the coastal guns, the Air Force and shipping in general.

By 1946, most of these coastal batteries had been placed under care and maintenance.

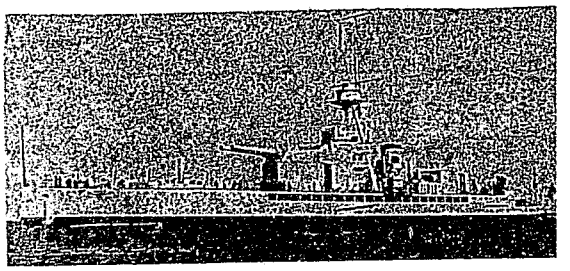
THE BATTERIES

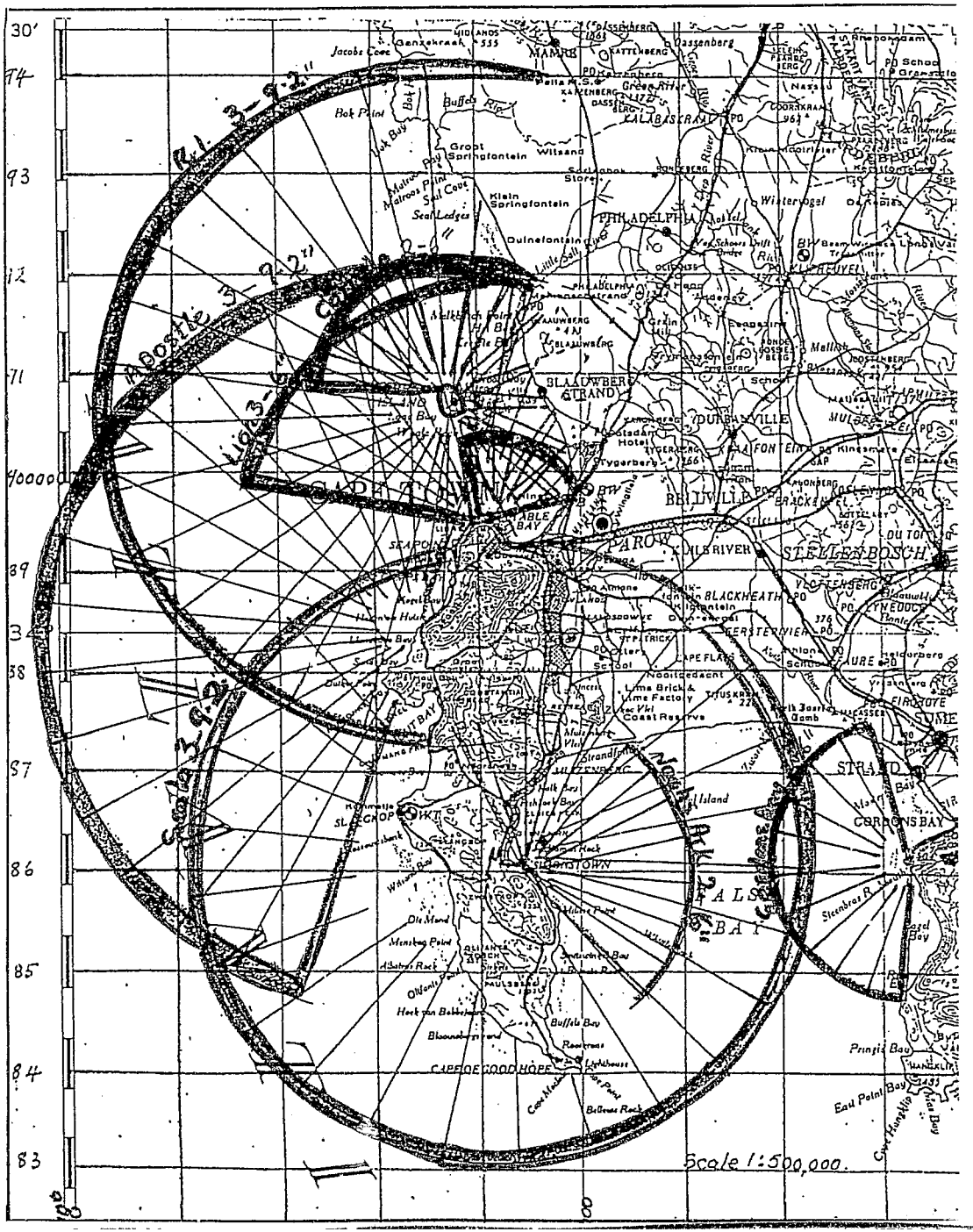
SIMON'S TOWN: South Africa was obliged to defend the British Naval base at Simon's Town, whether or not the Union declared war on Germany. As such the batteries at Simon's Town had been maintained far better than any other South African coastal batteries, and it was also here that the first coastal defence improvements took place. The Batteries in the Simon's Town area included:

This map illustrates the defence problem of the harbour systems of the Cape Peninsula: in which Robben Island played a major role. The three harbours involved are shown, and the arcs of range of the 9.2" gun batteries (Robben Island, Apostle Battery and Llandudno and Scala Battery at Simonstown), are superimposed. These arcs interlock, protecting the coastline from about Jacobs Bay, north of Atlantis, right round to False Bay, south of Cape Town.



1) The HMS Erebus (Bisset, Navy News, Vol.6, 1987)
2) This indicates the ranges of the guns at the various batteries around the peninsula, including the Robben Island guns. (Bisset, Guided Tour of Coast Artillery in the Cape Peninsula.)



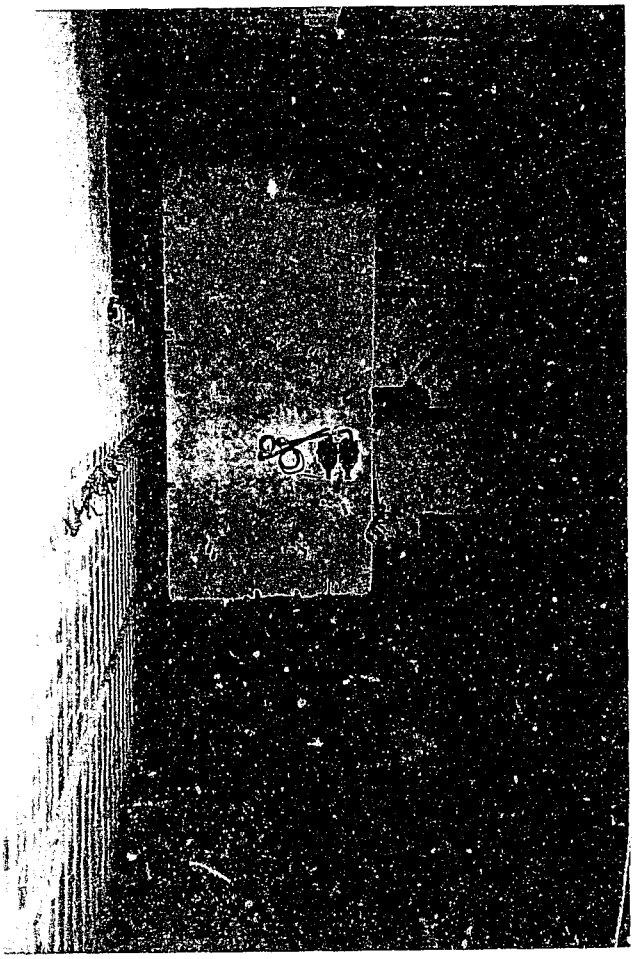


1) **Scala Battery**: The maximum range of a 9.2" gun at sea level was 16 275 meters. The 9.2" guns at Scala battery were elevated above sea level, by placing them on new high-angle mountings. This increased the range of the guns to 30 630 meters [2], thus enabling them to fire right across False Bay and protect the wide entrance of the Bay. Scala Battery boasted three 9.2" guns, the first had been installed in 1939, the second on July 10th 1940. By 1941, the battery had become fully operational, along with the Fortress Observation Posts at Cape Point, Olifiantsbosch, and Slangkop.
2) **Docks Battery**: This battery was formed on December 18th 1940, and was armed with two Naval 12 pounder guns, on each side of the Simon's Town harbour entrance. [3]
3) **Noah's Ark Battery**: This Battery was armed with two 9.2" breech loading guns by December 1939. In December 1942, work was commenced for a further two 6" gun emplacements. Noah's Ark Battery became fully operational on the 21st of August 1943, also replacing Queen's Battery as the Examinations Battery. [4]
4) **Lower North Battery**: Although this Battery was not armed and manned during the Second World War, two 12 pounder naval guns and one 4.7" gun was held in reserve in case of emergency. [5] The Battery was also used by the Royal Navy from 1944 onwards.
5) **Middle North Battery**: This Battery was never fully manned due to personnel shortages, and the few 6" quick firing guns mounted here, had been dismantled and sent to Port Elizabeth by May 1940. [6] After that, the Battery served as a training battery for coastal defence recruits.
6) **Queen's Battery**: This Battery was operational from August 1939, until the 21st of August 1943, when its duties were taken over by the Noah's Ark Battery. It had been armed with four 6" quick firing guns, and had also served as the Examination's Battery.

LLANDUDNO: The Batteries at Llundudno included:
1) **Lion Battery**: The erection of the Apostle Battery made the two 9.2" guns at Lion Battery redundant. They were thus both dismantled and removed by April 6th 1942. Instead two 6" quick firing guns were mounted on their converted emplacements by 30 May 1942.[7] In January 1944, these guns in turn were replaced by three 6" breech loading guns.
2) **Apostle Battery**: Work on Apostle Battery and its accompanying buildings began in November 1939. By October 1940, the barracks were occupied and the Battery became operational as an Anti-Aircraft Training Center. Initially (1941) the Battery was armed with two 6" Field Guns. [8] In August 1942, an additional 9.2" gun, brought over form Lion Battery was installed. In October 1943, yet another 9.2" gun was installed, but the two 6" Field Guns were removed. Despite these elaborate defences, the Battery was placed under care and maintenance by December 1943.[9]

CAPE TOWN: Robben Island formed part of the Cape Town Batteries, but I will discuss the two Batteries on Robben Island separately. The other batteries included:
1) **Signal Hill**: Three 6" quick firing guns had been mounted at Signal Hill Battery by 30 May 1942. These guns were replaced by three 6" breech loading guns in March 1944.[10]
2) **Wynyard Battery**: The armament of Wynyard Battery was augmented by two 12 pounder quick firing guns, supplied by the Royal Navy, and erected in March 1940.[11]
3) **Table Docks Battery**: This Battery was formed and armed with one 18 pounder quick firing gun in 1939. On 14 October 1942, a 12 pounder naval gun was installed, followed

Below: Robben Island no.3 gun, shell magazine, pullay on the roof, and hoist on the right (Photo: Maj Gordon, April 1997)



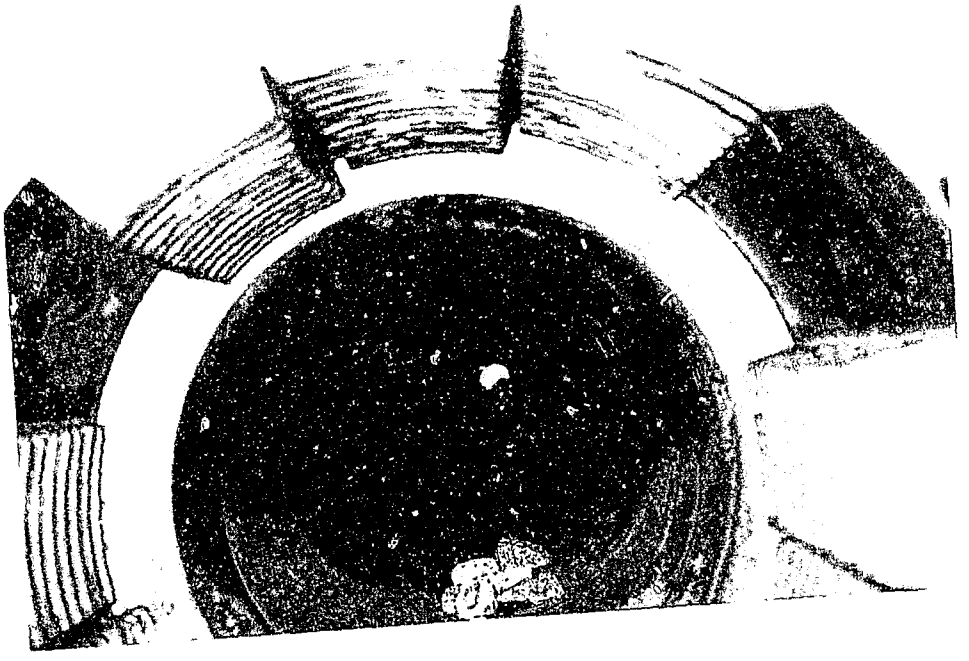


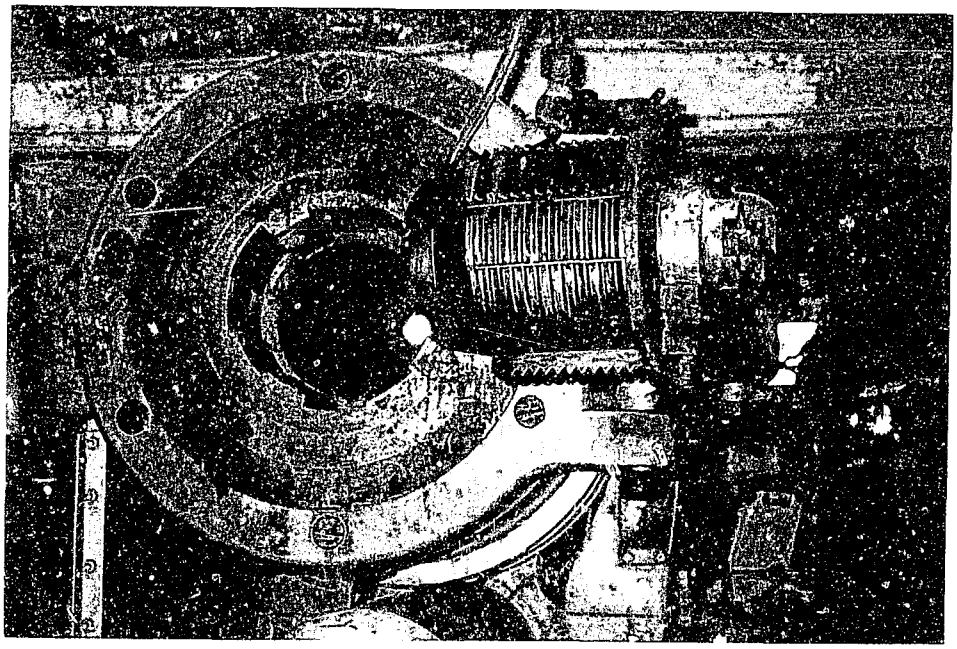


Above: Scala Battery, no.2 gun Mark 7, left side, most instruments still present. (Photo: Maj Gordon, April 1997) Left: Apostle battery, no.1 gun, right side (Maj Gordon, April 1997)

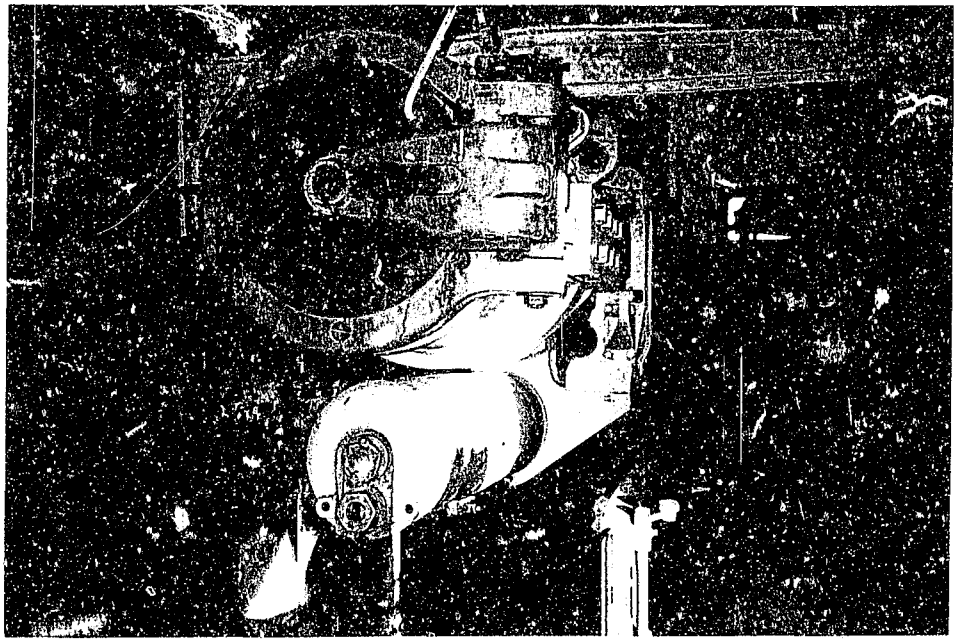


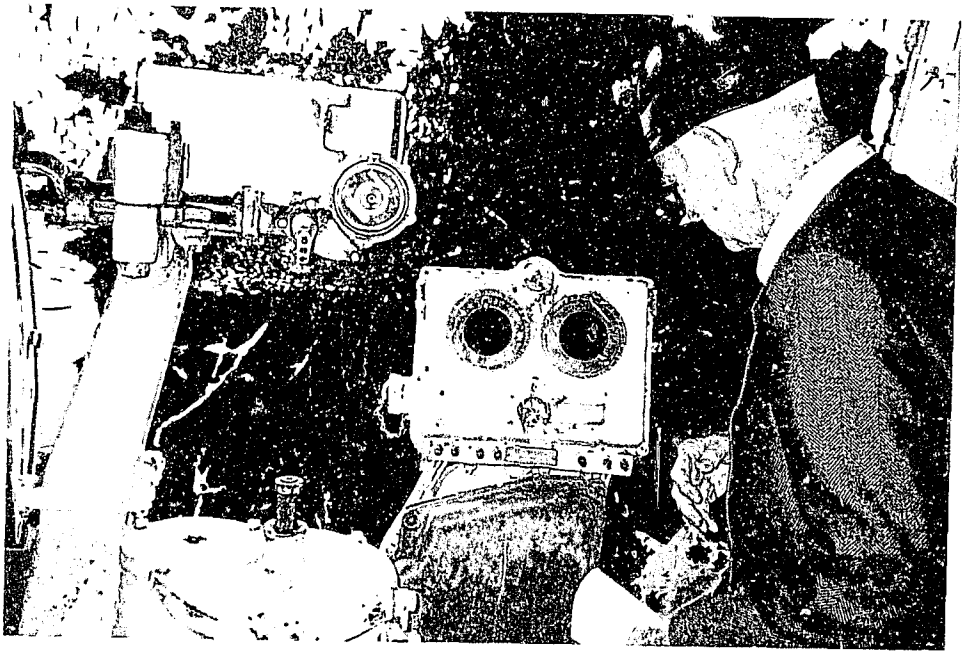
Above: Robben Island no.2 gun, mounting (Photo: Maj Gordon, 1996)
Below: Apostle Battery, no.1 gun barrel (Photo: Maj Gordon, April 1997)



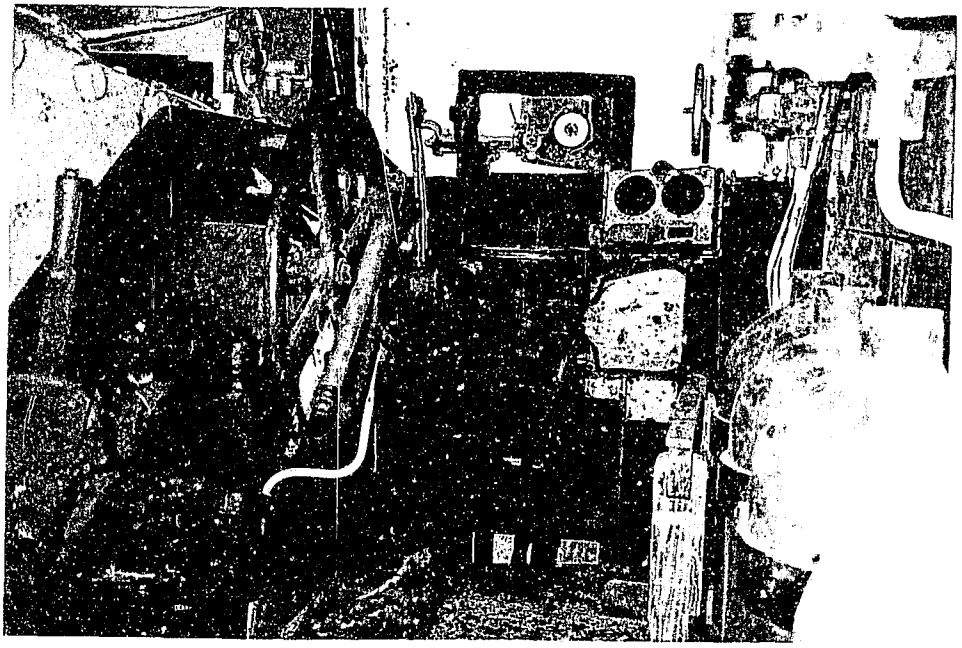


Above: Apostle Battery, no.1 gun with open breech (Photo; Maj Gordon, April 1997)
Below: Scala Battery, no.2 gun, complete breech (Photo: Maj Gordon, April 1997)





Above: Apostle Battery, no.1 gun, right side, some of the old instruments are still there (Photo: Maj Gordon, 1996)
Below: Scala Battery, no.2 gun, right side (Photo: Maj Gordon, 1996)



by a further three at a later stage. 12 During October 1942, depth charge throwers were installed at the right and left sections of the Battery. An additional 6 pounder gun was installed in May 1943. 13

SALDANHA BAY: The danger to shipping in the congested harbours of Durban and Cape Town led to the development of Saldanha Bay. Batteries in this area included:
1) **Noord Battery**: This Battery became operational on the 15th of June 1942. It had been built at Noordkop, and was armed with two 6" breech loading guns, supplied by the Naval Dockyard in Simon's Town. The Battery served as a close defence and Examinations Battery.
2) **Baviaans Battery**: This 6" gun Battery had the dual purpose of close defence and counter bombardment. 14
3) **Hoedjies Battery** (Hoedjies Point) and **Eiland Battery** (Schier Island): Both were armed with two 12 pounder quick firing guns, and both served as anti-motor torpedo boat Batteries.

EAST LONDON: The first two coastal batteries at East London were built during the Second World War. They were:
1) **Buffalo Battery**: In early 1939, this Battery was armed with four 6" field guns, but by August 1939, two of the guns had been sent to Signal Hill, and two to Port Elizabeth.
2) **Docks Battery**: On the 3rd of September 1939, this Battery was armed with an 18 pounder quick firing gun. A 12 pounder was installed in March 1942, followed by another 18 pounder later that year. 15 October 1942, saw depth charge throwers installed.

PORT ELIZABETH: The improvement of the coastal defences in Port Elizabeth only happened rather late in the war. The main Battery was:
1) **Algoa Battery**: In May 1940, two of the Queens Battery 6" guns were dismounted and erected at Algoa Battery.

HOUT BAY: The main Battery at Hout Bay was:
1) **East Fort**: Forming part of the Table Bay Fire Command, a Fortress Observation Post was located here. The Battery's purpose was the protection of the Hout Bay approach, and for this it was armed with three quick firing 12 pounder guns. 16

GORDONS BAY: Due to fear that the Steenbras reservoir was not adequately protected by the 9.2" gun Battery at Simon's Town, the Admirality and the Ports Defence Committee recommended that a battery be built near the mouth of the Steenbras River, in Gordons Bay. 17
1) **Gordons Bay Battery**: By May 1943, the Battery was armed with two 6" breech loading guns.

DURBAN: In 1939, at the same time as British 9.2" guns were being ordered for Robben Island, the fortification program at Durban was accelerated. Durban Batteries included:
1) **Docks Battery**: The Battery was initially armed with one 12 pounder gun and one 3 pounder gun. The latter was mounted on the channel side, and covered the anti-submarine

fixed defences. June 1943, saw one 6 pounder quick firing gun, and three 12 pounder guns mounted in addition to the existing defences.
2) **The Bluff**: This Battery served as a defence of the Durban Harbour, and was armed with two 6" quick firing guns in 1939.
3) **The Lighthouse Battery**: In February 1940, this Battery was armed with two 6" breech loading guns. A welcome addition to the Durban coastal defences.
4) **Da Gama Battery**: This Battery was armed with three 9.2" guns, the erection of which commenced in November 1942, February 1943, and February 1944, respectively. [18]

WALVIS BAY: The Battery at Walvis Bay was armed with two practically obsolete 6" guns.

THE ROBBEN ISLAND BATTERIES

By 1939, South African coastal defences still fell far short of the 1928 Committee of Imperial Defence recommendations. Immediate arrangements for the speedy delivery of two high-angle British 9.2" guns for Robben Island were thus made.

Robben Island played a central role in the coastal defence system of the Cape Peninsula. As has been said, work on the two gun batteries on Robben Island began in 1939. Cornelia Battery, on the Northern side of the Island, was armed with two 6" quick firing guns which were installed in June 1940 and February 1942 respectively. [19] Robben Island Battery was armed with two 9.2" guns, that were mounted in June and November 1942 respectively. A third 9.2" gun was installed at the Robben Island Battery in November 1945. This Battery had been built on the Southern side of the Island.

The principle functions of the Batteries on Robben Island was to protect both the approaches to Table Bay Harbour and the Table Bay Harbour itself. The 6" Battery's (Cornelia) role was the close defence of Table Bay Harbour and later also the adjacent degaussing range in the Blouberg channel. The 6" breech loading guns at this Battery could fire a shell as far as 7,85 miles, [20] and could thus target a ship in Table Bay harbour. Huge convoys including some of the world's biggest and most important ships, were anchored at Table Bay Harbour during the war. Robben Island's 6" gun Battery, as well as its 9.2" gun battery, formed the lynch pin of the activities to protect the harbour.

The primary role of the Robben Island 9.2" gun Battery was to keep sea raiders at a safe distance from Cape Town and the other larger coastal towns. [21] These 9.2" guns, which were artfully decorated with camouflage paint and nets interspersed with small branches, [22] capable of firing a 385 pound projectile for a distance of 32 kilometers, became the mainstay of the Island's defences. These guns gave Cape Town a great advantage against enemy battleships because they were placed "well forward" [23]. In other words, the biggest coastal defence guns were 9.2" high-angle guns. These gur s had an average range of 30 000 yards. Their purpose was to defend the country against Battleships. Yet, battleships were mounted with 15" guns, which had a range of 50 000 yards, and could,

thus, always out range the coastal defence guns. [24] Hence, in order to effectively counter a battleship, one needed another battleship. By building a 9.2" Battery on Robben Island, the guns were actually "out at sea". [25] Robben Island Battery was thus important, simply because it could target a battleship before it was close enough to inflict any damage on the Cape Peninsula's coastal towns or on Table Bay harbour. A second advantage of placing the 9,2" gun Battery on Robben Island, was that although these guns were "out at sea", they were far more accurate than guns of a similar capacity on a battleship. Quite simply, because land guns are more stable than guns at sea. [26] Effectively, this meant that a whole convoy could be safely anchored at Table Bay, defended by the Robben Island guns.

A secondary, but also crucial role played by the batteries on Robben Island was as a training establishment for Coastal and Anti-Aircraft gunners. Robben Island continued in its capacity as a Training Depot until May 1942, when the Anti-Aircraft component was detached to form a separate training center at Ottery, near Young's Field. After that the training depot on Robben Island became the Coastal Artillery School, where coastal gunners, many of them "coloured", and Artillery Specialists of the Women's Auxiliary Army Service were trained. The Robben Island Coastal Artillery School remained operational until January 1944.

In addition, there were two sets of searchlights on Robben Island which were very useful for look outs at night, pending the invention and application of Radar. The presence of these lights on the Island meant that even in the dark, battleships, cruisers or raiders could not get close enough to inflict damage on the Cape Peninsula's Coastal Towns, nor in Table Bay Harbour.

LIFE ON THE ROBBEN ISLAND BATTERIES

Mr Von Weilligh was the no.1 gunner at Cornelia Battery in early 1940. His gun crew were "coloured" soldiers from the Cape Corps. These Cape Corps men had to live in barracks on the Northern side of Robben Island, separated from "the village" where the white personnel were accommodated. [27] Von Weilligh remembers that the barracks in which he was accommodated (along with other white gunners) was a converted former leper ward. The Building was nothing more than an open hall, with no compartments, filled up with numerous uncomfortable beds. [28] As part of their duties at Cornelia Battery, they had to make a daily patrol of the Island. On one such occasion, following the sinking of a vessel torpedoed just south of the Island, they *"saw an orange windbreaker on the shore, when I went to pick it up, there was a body in it..."*. [29]

Another former soldier remembers being posted to Robben Island's Cornelia Battery, overlooking the approaches to Table Bay, for a three month gunnery training course. Training, he recalls, involved endless dummy loading of the 6" guns with shells that weighed close to a hundred lbs. each. [30] This particular course had been run by two Master Gunners, Warrant Officer 1st Class (WO1) Poolman, and WO Van Rooyen. As far as accommodation was concerned, he recalls living in *"appalling"* conditions. There were 32 trainees in a bungalow, with a single naked bulb to light up the whole place. [31]

Their uncomfortable beds, with crude frames made of chicken wire and extremely hard "*semi-mattresses*", made sleep virtually impossible. This situation was aggravated by the discordant sounds of the foghorn made every 30 seconds on misty nights. 32

On one occasion, a practice fire held at Cornelia Battery, ignited the Bluegum trees across the north of the Island. This unintentional, but impressive blaze, could be seen from Cape Town. 33

In January 1944, all operational personnel on the Robben Island batteries were withdrawn, and the two batteries themselves were placed under care and maintenance. 34 All three the 9.2" guns can still be seen on Robben Island today. The 6" guns were, however, partially removed, although one of the barrels can still be seen on the Island.

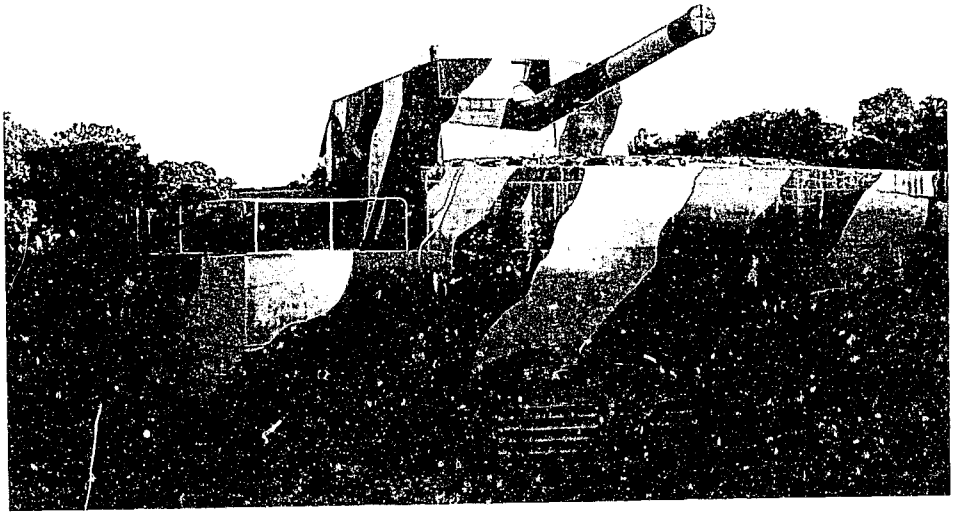
THE GUNS

The 9.2" Gun: The 9.2" coast gun was the standard counter bombardment weapon, and was installed in large numbers throughout the British Commonwealth. These guns became obsolete in 1956. 35 Many of the actual gun barrels date back to 1901 or 1902. What had made the guns modern were the new and modern breech mechanisms, the new high-angle mountings, the power operated loading system, and the ammunition elevation and traversing gear. 36

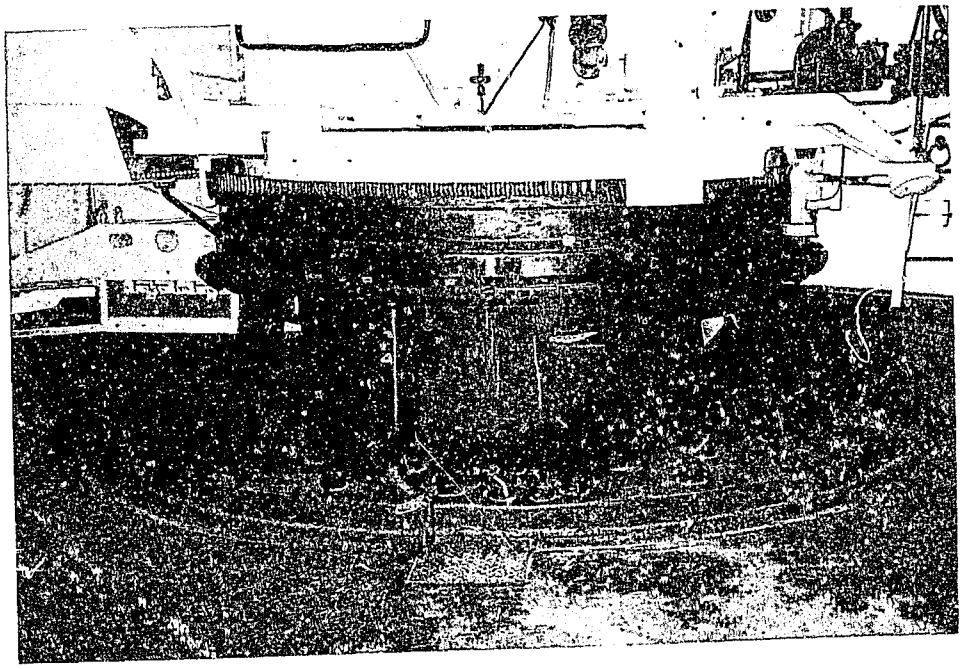
The Ammunition: The guns fired a high explosive capped armour piercing projectile, which was expected to be able to pierce six inches of armour plate at maximum range. 37 The 9.2" breech loading gun could deliver a shell as far as 20, 85 miles. 38

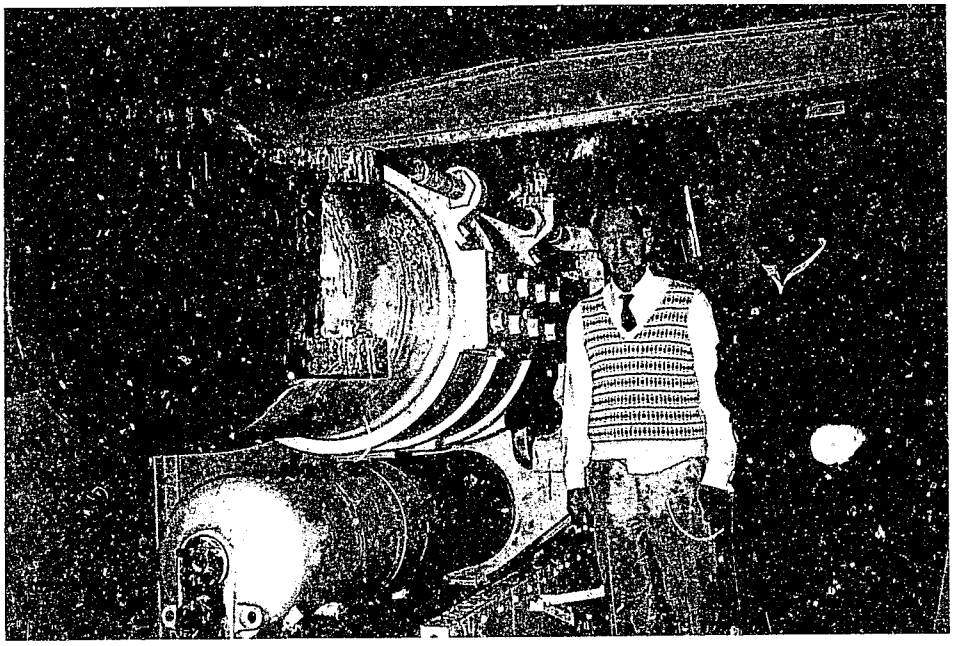
A typical propellant charge used to fire the projectile, consisted of two half charge bags, each containing approximately 53.5 lbs. (24,3kg) of cordite, tied in a bundle and enclosed in a silk cloth bag, with a gun powder igniter stitched to the rear end. 39 The charges were stored in Zinc cylinders in an underground magazine, separate from the shells and the shell magazine for safety reasons. 40 They were only removed from the cylinders immediately prior to the loading procedure, and this would be done in the gunhouse itself, not in the underground magazine. These charges were extremely volatile, and even the tiniest spark could set them off. Hence, precautions such as the silk bags, and special uniforms and gloves for magazine personnel were used. The magazine on Robben Island, did not even have an electric light, for fear that it might ignite the charges.

The Loading Procedure: To load the gun, the shell and cordite charges were sent up from the gun pit, in the gun hoist ammunition cage, and transferred to the hydraulic rammer loading tray. 41 The gun would then be brought to the appropriate loading angle (5 degree elevation). The shell would be rammed into the gun by the hydraulic rammer which, when it withdrew to take up the receiving position again, would leave the charge in the breech chamber of the gun. The breech operator no.2 would then close the breech and insert either an electric tube for electric firing, or a percussion tube for percussion firing, into the lock on the outside of the breech. 42 When fired, the flash from the tube

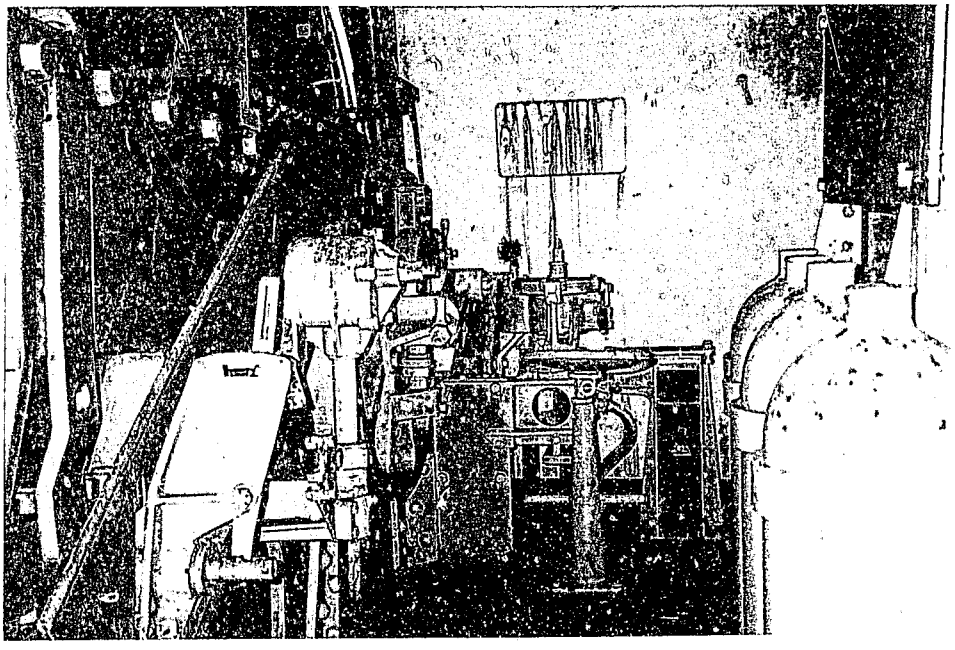


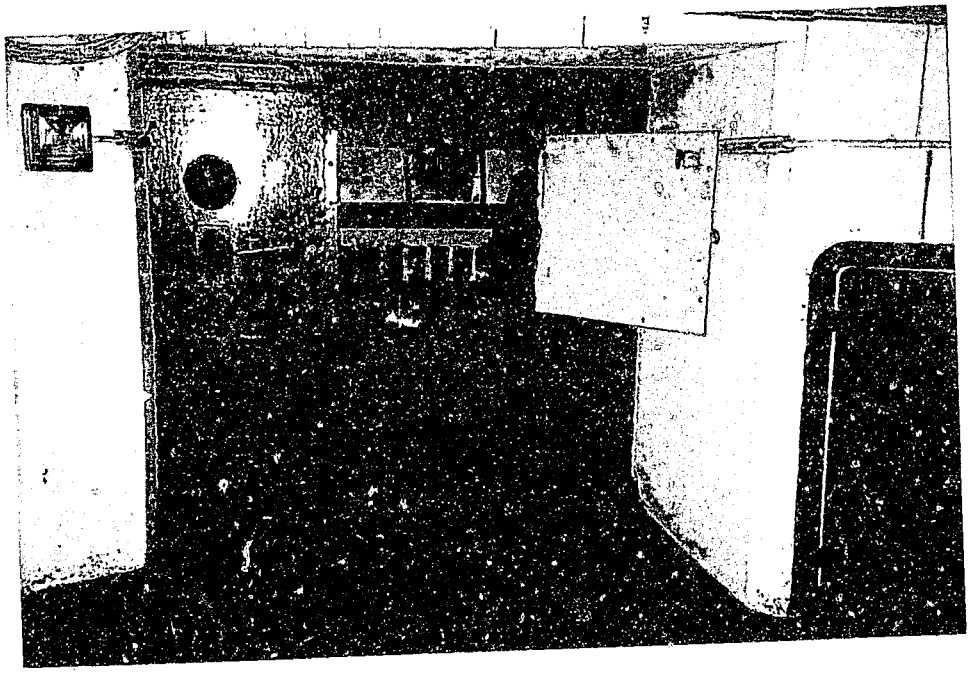
Above: Robben Island no.2 gun, Mark 7, De Waal Battery, Power House entrance in the foreground.
Below: Robben Island no.2 gun mounting mechanism (Both photos: Maj. Gordon, 1997)





Above: Robben Island no.1 gun, Mark 9, Breech (Photo: Maj Gordon, April 1997)
Below: Robben Island no.1 gun, Mark 9, right side (Photo: Maj Gordon, April 1997)

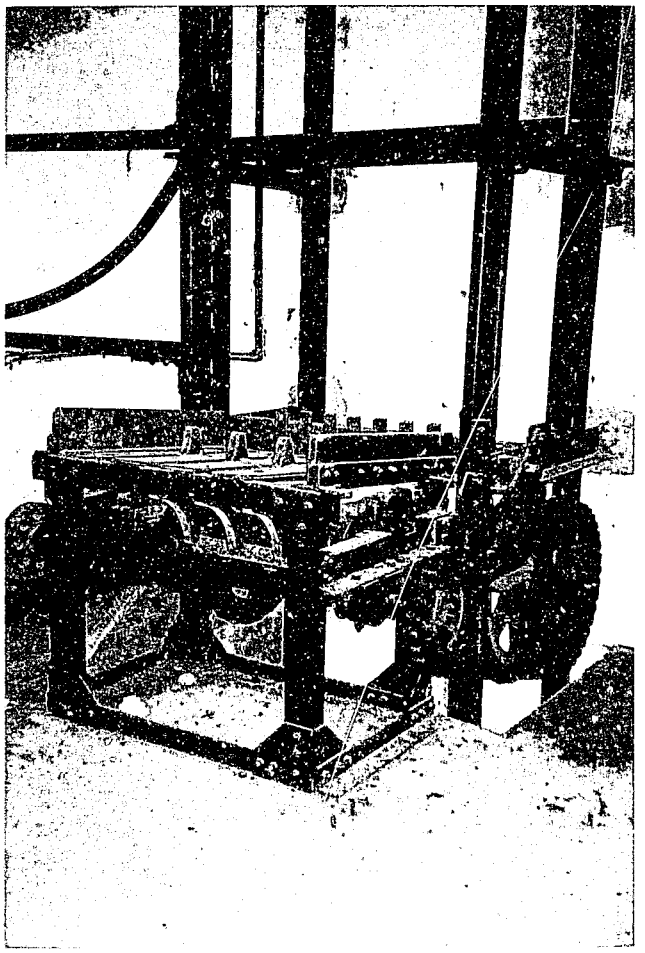




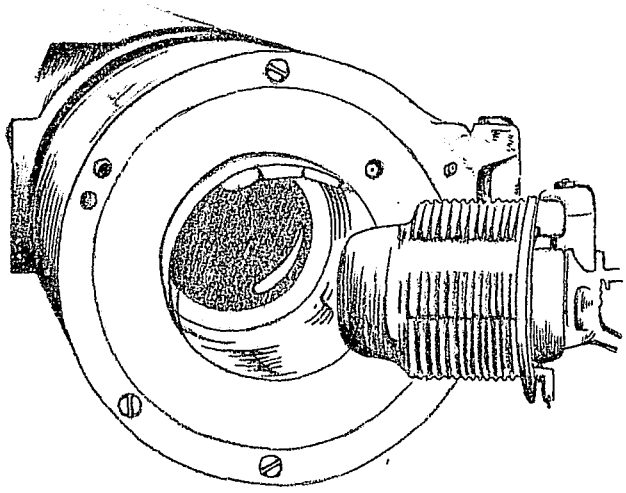
Above: Robben Island no.2 gun, Top of the ammunition hoist (Photo: Maj Gordon, April 1997)
Below. Robben Island no.1 gun, Mark 9, Chain loading system (Photo: Maj Gordon, April 1997)



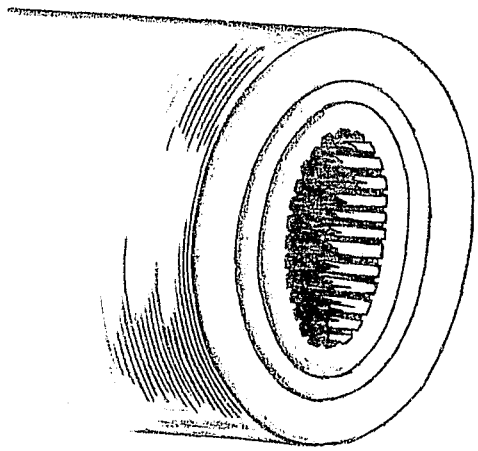
Below: Robben Island 9.2" gun no.3 , shell hoist (Photo: Maj Gordon, April 1997)



Breech Mechanism of a 9.2" gun.



Inner rifling of 9.2" gun barrel.



would pass through a vent in the breech and ignite the cordite, which, in turn would fire the projectile. [43]

According to General Moodie, "*..it was amazing if one actually managed to hit a battleship with a long range gun*", since the aiming procedure was so complicated. Accurate aiming required taking account of, the rise and fall of the tide, the actual movements of a vessel, the muscle velocity of the gun which varied with the temperature, the gun barrel which would jump differently by calibration, the air temperature, the curvature, the corrections for the rotation of the guns, and so forth. [44]

The Gun Detachments: The gun detachment of a 9.2" coast defence gun usually consisted of eleven men, with a further eleven on reserve. Five men were required at the turret, and six in the gun pit for ammunition supply. Additional personnel served in the underground magazines. [45]

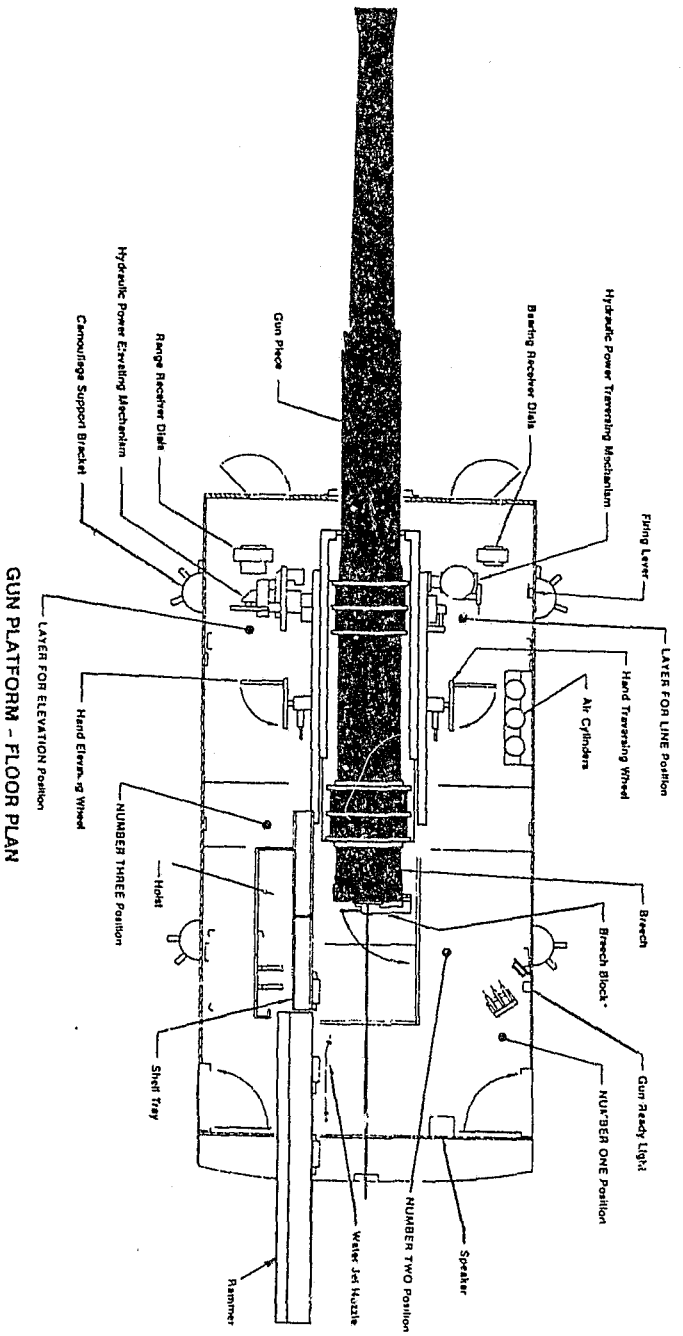
BATTERY INSTRUMENTATION

A concrete Battery and Fortress Plotting Room was situated underground from where target information was fed into the Fire Control Instruments, and corrected data transmitted to the gun range and bearing dials. [46] Plotting Room equipment included vertical and horizontal plotting tables on which coordinates of the target would be plotted and then converted to range and bearing information regarding the target. A course and speed table calculator was used to plot the immediate past course and speed of the target. [47] Since all targets, were in fact moving targets, continuous corrections had to be applied by the plotting table crew, in order to accurately predict the future positions of the target. The coordinated data would then continuously and automatically be transmitted to magslip receivers mounted on the gun dials. This enabled the gun crew to continuously correct their aim onto the moving target.

Optical Instruments were used at the Battery Observation Posts, including telescopes, which were fairly accurate in determining range. The range and bearing information obtained by these instruments in turn, were either automatically or telephonically transmitted to magslip receivers in the underground Plotting Rooms. The Battery Observation Posts, themselves, were usually as high as possible, since the higher the Observation Post, the better the variation the instruments could get. Persons in the Battery Observation Posts were responsible for the areas covering the immediate range of the guns. Coverage of the whole coastal area was left to personnel in the Fortress Observation Posts. Artillery Specialists of the Women's Auxiliary Army Service (ASWAAS) operated instruments in the plotting rooms and at the Battery Observation Posts on Robben Island.

Battery's which served as Examination Service batteries, were responsible for checking and boarding each incoming ship, making sure that these ships were who they claimed to be, and to make sure that they were not carrying contraband goods of any kind (such as explosives and cement). A ship carrying explosives could enter the harbour and then blow itself and the harbour to pieces. A ship carrying cement could drop it in the harbour entrance so that no ship could enter or leave the harbour. [48]

The inside sketch of a typical 9.2" gun platform, showing the positions the crew would have occupied. Other crew were situated below the gun and in the underground complex. (Oliver Hill Battery Heritage Trail, Rottnest Island Authority)



GUN PLATFORM - FLOOR PLAN

NOTES

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41) Higginson F, The Star, November 1983
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45) Gordon A.G.D Maj, Interview
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47) Ibid

48) Gordon A.G.D Maj, Interview

CHAPTER 7

ROBBEN ISLAND AND NAVAL FIXED DEFENCES

At the beginning of the Second World War, battleships and surface raiders were seen as the biggest threat to South Africa's coastal towns and harbours. As a result coastal defence lay with the South African Artillery in the form of coastal batteries. Towards the latter half of the War, submarines and deadly German magnetic mines, became the major threats. 1 The emphasis of coastal defences thus shifted to naval underwater and other fixed defences. The Naval Fixed Defences for the Cape Peninsula were concentrated on and around Robben Island. A Degaussing Range was established on the east side of Robben Island in the Blouberg channel. Robben Island also became the control center for submarine detection cables (indicator loops) and other asdic defences.

THE DEGAUSSING RANGE

As a result of the enemy's use of magnetic mines in Europe, the Senior Naval Officer at Simon's Town received the following message, dated June 4th 1940, from the Admirality: *"It is desired to establish degaussing open ranges at certain Dominion and Indian Ports. Information is requested whether Dominion and Indian Naval Authorities will undertake their establishment and operation. Instruments and stores not available locally would be supplied by the United Kingdom. Instructions for laying already promulgated. Personnel for ranges, are one Lieutenant, one civilian electrical officer and assistant, three recorders...two signal men. In addition, one physicist per Dominion with necessary qualifications to analyse and make recommendations. Ranges in order of priority, Halifax, Cape Town, Bombay, Sydney..".* 2

After obtaining more information the South African Government accepted the commitment on the 31st of July 1940. The services of Professor Goodlet of the University of Cape Town, were obtained as Technical Advisor. At that stage the Seaward Defence Force (SDF) possessed no technical officers, and as a result Prof. Goodlet had to recruit and train his own personnel. They were to become the first members of the SDF Electrical Branch, which was formed at the end of 1940, with an initial establishment of three officers and nine ratings. 3 The branch expanded rapidly, taking on additional technical duties over time. Soon enough divers were required, and members of this branch were trained as such at the Simon's Town Naval Base. 4 Prof. Goodlet continued to serve in a civilian capacity, until he was commissioned in December 1941, as Electrical Commander SDF. In April 1943, he was seconded for special duties under the Admirality. His chief assistant, Lt Cdr A.L James succeeded him. Prof. Goodlet was later awarded the OBE for his valuable service. 5

The Royal Navy made a major contribution to the Allied cause when a degaussing range was consequently established on Robben Island, close to the Murray's Bay Harbour in June 1941. 6 A second degaussing range was later established near Durban. Much later, ships were also being degaussed at Port Elizabeth, and 21 ships had also been degaussed

at East London. 7 Although the equipment was mostly provided by the Royal Navy, the South African engineers played a significant role in helping the Allied nations overcome the menace of Hitler's secret weapon, the magnetic mine, since they were responsible for the installation of these ranges. Similarly, the South African Naval Forces were responsible for operating the degaussing ranges. It is also worth mentioning that not all the necessary equipment was imported from the United Kingdom. In fact, a large quantity of the degaussing equipment was manufactured in South Africa. This included degaussing rheostats, degaussing generators, and compass corrector coils. 8

Degaussing was devised as a counter measure to the magnetic mines the Germans began to lay, more lethal than earlier types of mines, because the magnetism of the ship could trigger the mine without actually touching it. Degaussing involves circling the ship with a current carrying cable of sufficient capacity to neutralize (as effectively as possible) the ships magnetism, thus preventing them from attracting the magnetic mines laid by enemy submarines. 9 This would be followed by a procedure for testing the magnetism of the ship against electrified undersea cables. For this, the design of each particular ship had to be taken into account. Intricate constructional features of certain ships often presented unusual and difficult problems. The main problem was that the cable required for the operation of the degaussing range, varied with the size of each ship, resulting in a need for constant improvisation. For a ship of about 10 000 tons, between 7 000 and 8 000 yards of cable was required. 10 If the ship to be degaussed was a huge merchant cruiser of 22 000 tons, over 32 miles of cable was necessary. 11 Over a period of four years, more than a million yards of cable was salvaged repaired and put back into service, while enormous lengths of unprotected cables were wrapped with suitable preservatives against the elements. 12.

A further aspect, that was essential to the success of the degaussing range at Robben Island, was the need for effective generating plants, with continuous output. Since, very often, a vessel's generators had to be reconditioned and adapted to meet the increased electrical energy necessary to degauss the ship.

Finally, the South African Naval Forces provided the additional service on Robben Island of correcting the compasses of the degaussed ships. The magnetic field used to degauss a ship, affected the ship's compasses. Compass corrector coils were used to rectify this problem.

The South African Naval Forces, who operated these ranges (Robben Island and Durban) dealt with between 4 451 and 4 700 ships totaling between 27 714 502 and 29 478 650 tons. 13 The Robben Island range, which officially started operations in June 1941, dealt with an estimated 3 156 ships totaling 19 522 419 tons. 14 Among the ships that were degaussed at both Robben Island and Durban, were the Ile de France, Mauretania, The Prince of Whales, the Nieuwe Amsterdam, and other battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and a host of smaller ships.

INSTALLATION OF THE DEGAUSSING RANGE AT ROBBEN ISLAND

The only suitable position for the first degaussing range in Cape town was found to be close to the Eastern Shore of Robben Island. This meant that the site for the instrumentation rooms, offices, and living accommodation had to be built on the Island itself, doubling the estimated cost of 3 500 pounds. 15 This location also caused a number of delays, mainly due to transport and accommodation difficulties.

It was only toward the end of February 1941 that the process of laying the range units could begin. The Senior Naval Officer at Simon's Town arranged for the HMS cruiser Delhi, to come to Cape Town for the purpose of laying the degaussing units, since a ship of considerable size was needed. Two sets of units, for ranging shallow and deep ships were laid on separate days in February 1941. For each range there were 12 units, laced 30 feet apart for the deep range and 20 feet apart for the shallow range. 16

The next step was to lay the electric cables, which would connect the degaussing units with the shore stations on Robben Island. For this purpose, the minesweeper Crasula was prepared.

The range officially opened on the 6th of June 1941, but due to bad weather, only began operating efficiently at the end of 1941. By the end of the first year an average of 100 ships per month used this facility to protect themselves against the magnetic mines. 17

Despite efficient operation, and the approval for additional posts and personnel, the Robben Island Degaussing Station was unable to deal with the wartime increases of shipping traffic around the Cape. A sailor at the Robben Island installation recalled the operation vividly: *"It seemed that every ship ever launched was drawn to our Island waters with the alacrity of bees to the proverbial honeypot. From sun-up to darkness we sweated in the summer heat, as grimly hulks and streamlined hulls from all eight oceans maneuvered to and fro across sensitive cables in the Blaauwberg Channel"*. 18

It was thus decided that a second degaussing station would be built at the Durban Harbour. This range came into operation of February 20th 1943.

THE INDICATOR LOOPS

After numerous mines were detected (some detonated by ships) in South African waters, and after many of them had washed ashore on South African beaches, the British War Cabinet Sub-Committee of Defence Arrangements for the Indian Ocean Area, made recommendations in early 1942, for various fixed underwater defences in South Africa. 19 This included recommendations for apparatus for the detection of midget submarines.

None of the necessary equipment or instruments were available in South Africa, but given the urgency of the matter, Cdr Goodlet began with some experimental work. He

Laying anti-submarine detection cables between Robben Island and the mainland. (Deacon H (ed), The Island).





was so successful, that an adapted version of the British Loop System was in operation in the Durban entrance Channel by the end of October 1942. 20

These loops were made of electric cable, which in turn were connected to a small control station, manned by an officer, who would keep a continuous watch. Each of the indicator loop circuits, passed through a fluxmeter, which would act upon a photo-electric trigger relay, which in turn operated an electrical bell. The system was so effective that it could detect the crossing of an 80 foot fishing boat, made entirely of wood, with the exception of a steel keel and engine. 21 When a crossing took place, the outer loop would give warning of enemy presence, and the inner loop would confirm this.

To these defences were added, two Harbour Defence Asdic sets, consisting of hundreds of miles of cable for A/S indicator loops, and a controlled minefield.

ASDIC HARBOUR DEFENCE SYSTEMS AND INDICATOR LOOPS ON ROBBEN ISLAND.

The arrangement with regard to the harbour defence asdics, were much the same as the arrangements for the degaussing range. The Admirality would be responsible for providing the equipment. Personnel seconded from the Royal Navy as well as personnel from the South African Naval Forces would be responsible for installation. The South African government would be responsible for the necessary labour and the construction of additional buildings. Initially the asdic sets would be operated by Royal Navy personnel, while personnel from the South African Naval Forces would be trained with the purpose of taking over the operation as soon as possible. By 1944, these asdic sets were being operated by personnel from the South African Women's Auxiliary Naval Service (SWANS).

Early in 1942 it was decided that the first harbours to be provided with A/S Fixed Defences would be Cape Town and Durban. After a preliminary survey in April and May, Cdr Goodlet drew up a proposed lay out of the Cape Town Defences. The Proposal was approved by the Union Government in June 1942. The Cape Town Defence System was to consist of four indicator loops, with an average length of four miles each, passing just outside Robben Island. The first main loop would run from Robben Island to Melkbosstrand, and the second main loop from Robben Island to Clifton. The loops were to be backed up by four HDA's (Harbour Defence Asdics) situated on Robben Island. All the tail cables would also be landed on the East side of Robben Island.

On July 11th the Emile Baudot began to lay the Robben Island indicator loops. They came into full operation on the 20th of November 1942. By this stage the four HDA's had also been laid and connected to the control station on Robben Island. The place where all the cables came ashore, was known as Sub-Depot Robben Island. The operators at Sub-Depot Robben Island, when experienced on the asdic equipment, could tell the size and location of the vessel under consideration.

Some of the cables were also connected to a controlled minefield. Personnel on Robben Island could electronically detonate mines that sat on the seabed, to blow up an enemy ship. These mines were only used once, in Saldanha.

In January 1943, work was commenced on the Durban indicator loops, which became operational in June 1943. The third and last loop system consisting of two loops was installed at Port Elizabeth, and became operational on the 27th of March 1944. 22

As soon as each loop system was completed, it would be closely linked up with the other coastal defences, via the local Fortress Command Operation Room, so that in the event of a vessel crossing a loop, patrol ships could be sent out immediately.

Although these elaborate and costly installations probably acted as a deterrent, there was never a definite established instance of an enemy submarine crossing at any of them. There were, however, two distinct unidentified crossings of the Robben Island Loops, at a time when submarines were active in the area.

NOTES

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CHAPTER 8

THE DEVELOPMENT OF RADAR AND THE INSTALLATION ON ROBBEN ISLAND.

Even before the declaration of War, scientific and military authorities had been given an inkling of what radiolocation was about. At the same time it was apparent that the British had their hands full, and that this and other radio developments were taxing even the expanding capacities of the United States and Canada to the limit. The British for example, had informed South African Authorities that they would not be able to export the necessary material for some considerable time after the start of the war, if indeed at all. 1 At the same time there was a desperate need for radar in the South African Air Force, the South African Navy and the South African government's Intelligence Service. It was also necessary for merchant shipping, which would then have all its movements under radio direction. South Africa along with Australia, New Zealand and India, thus realized, that they had to build and design their own radiolocation equipment.

THE EQUIPMENT

An extensive range of radio and scientific apparatus was being produced for war purposes in the Union at the time. There was, however, a huge gap between peacetime radio production, and the output that was made necessary by wartime demands. As a survey on the radio resources of the country in August 1941 showed, the Union's radio industry was only beginning to pass from a phase of purely servicing domestic radio equipment to one of production on a small scale. 2 Consequently the production of radio and scientific apparatus was developed in two factories established by the Director General of War Supplies. The first was established in Cape Town in December 1941, and the second in Johannesburg in June 1942. The factory in Johannesburg was devoted mainly to the development of new models and associated equipment, while the factory in Cape Town geared itself toward providing radio equipment for the SANF, Royal Navy, and merchant shipping. 3 This was necessary as a direct result of the Japanese midget submarine threat.

THE TECHNOLOGY

At the start of the Second World War, Dr Basil Schonland was appointed to secretly develop newly invented radar equipment for the armed forces of South Africa, by General Smuts. Dr Schonland was then the Director of the Bernard Price Institute of Geophysics at the University of the Witwatersrand. In order to obtain more detailed information on radiolocation, Dr Schonland personally met with Dr Ernest Marsden, a New Zealand scientist, on board a mailship, between Cape Town and Durban. 4 As has already been said, Britain was not in the position to supply Dr Schonland with the necessary apparatus. He thus assembled a group of technical experts from various Universities in South Africa. He also arranged with the authorities of the UDF, for

preparatory work to be done at his Institute, as well as in the Department of Electrical Engineering at the University of the Witwatersrand, under the direction of Prof. Bozzoli. These men started to create a suitable transmitter/ receiver, which they termed a JB. It was so called to indicate its place of origin. 5 The first JB's achieved very satisfactorily results in the East African Campaign and then in the Sinai desert in the Middle East. Meanwhile sets were being constructed for installation around South Africa's coasts. According to his diary entry of February 1940, Schonland had completed his report for the coastal radar stations of the Union. 6

THE FIRST RADAR STATIONS

The Director of Fortifications and Coastal Works, Lt Col John Craig, was responsible for the construction of the necessary buildings and camps, required for the protective chain of radar stations right around the South African Coast. This chain would stretch form St Lucia in Natal to, as far as, Baboon Point well above Saldanha. 7

The first radar site to be established and become operational, on the South African coasts, was Signal Hill, in May 1941. This radar station used a mobile JB unit. 8 Because Signal Hill was 300 meters high, it was an excellent site for sea surface coverage to the north. At the same time, it was not effective in a southerly direction, since, it was somewhat cut off by Lion's Head.

The second site was established in the vicinity of the Cape Fortress at Cape Point. 9 It appears that the third JB was installed at Blouberg in 1942, to supplement the coverage of the radar station at Signal Hill by covering the coastline south of Clifton. 10 It became operational in mid 1942.

The JB radar installation at Slangkop, near Kommetjie, was probably established at more or less the same time as the Blouberg installation (1942). This was one of the most important installations since it provided dual air/sea coverage continuously and effectively until the end of the war.

The fifth JB radar installation, also established in 1942, was at Hangklip, high up the mountainside of the eastern extremity of False bay. These five installations provided essential coverage in the vicinity of Table Bay and False Bay.

It was also in 1942 that Durban received its first radar installation at Brighton Beach, and Port Elizabeth its first radar installation at Schoenmakerskop. 11

All this activity was followed by another phase of radar installation, in an attempt to increase the initial radar coverage, and extend it along the coast, north and east. Two of the most important installations of the second phase were at Noordkopbaai and Saldanha Bay (1943). These were followed by installations at Ysterfontein (1943), Karbonkelberg (1943), Silversands, St Mungo's (mid 1943), and Baboon Point (1944). 12 These installations were all using more advanced British equipment, that had become available

to the Union in A[illegible] 1942, and thereafter continued in a constant supply. [13] Transportable radio ur[illegible] also installed in 1943, at Somersveld and Betty's Bay.

A special radar set was also developed for the interception of enemy aircraft. The system could determine the relative position of enemy or friendly aircraft, and could then pass the information on to aircraft fighters, who would then attempt to intercept the aircraft. This system was installed at Melkbosstrand in 1943. [14]

Further radar installations included sets at Bull Point and at Woodbourne at the entrance of the Knysna Lagoon. Others were located at Rooikrans near Cape Point, Hermes at Port St Johns, Apostle at Llundudno, and Scala at Simon's Town. There were also sets at Baviaansberg, at Blue Hills, and at Green Point. [15]

THE RADAR SITE ON ROBBEN ISLAND

The coverage provided initially by the JB's at Signal Hill and Blouberg in the immediate vicinity of Robben Island, had proved to be inadequate. A short –range radar set was thus established on Robben Island in January 1943. The installation became known as Windy Ridge. The small close defence radar set on Robben Island, was based on a British ASV MK 2 set, which had been specially developed for short range coastal defence. [16] The radar station on Robben Island was manned by eight female Special Signals Service (SSS) personnel, under command of Mrs. Rooke. The Commanding Officer was S/Sgt Anderson. [17] They reported to the Castle as well as to the Coastal Artillery with whom they shared the Island. The SSS women were housed in primitive facilities, which they shared with the Artillery Specialists of the Women's Auxiliary Army Service (ASWAAS). The radar technical hut itself, was a prefab building, which Mary Tudhope remembers as having a hole in the roof, where the aerial went through, and through which water leaked constantly during the many rainy nights on the Island. She continued that they "*..made tea and coffee on a blowlamp*". [18]

THE SOUTH AFRICAN SPECIAL SIGNALS SERVICE

Initially the arrangement was, for the person who had built the radar set, also to operate it. In the early stages this was possible, since the first few sets were few in number and were sent outside the borders of the Union. For example, the first two radar sets, which had been designed and built at the Bernard Price Institute, JB1 and JB2, were shipped to East Africa to operate, among other places, in Mombassa. [19] When it was decided to create radar stations right around the South African coast, however, it became necessary to train more technicians and operators.

The South African Corps of Signals was mobilised two months after the declaration of war. [20] It became the military administrative control for radar, for which it was well suited, especially regarding the requirement for secrecy. Under the Director of Signals, Col Freddie Collins, a new unit was established, known as the Special Signals Service (SSS). [21] It came into existence with headquarters in the Bernard Price Institute. Accommodation and other facilities for the new unit, were provided by the

Witwatersrand Command. Recruiting was done mostly within South African Universities, and mostly by word of mouth. Some of the staff members were Professors Hodges (Durban), Bozzoli (Wits), and Phillips (Cape Town), and graduates Hewitt (Rhodes), Gane (Rhodes), Roberts (Cape Town), Boden (Durban), and many others. 22

The technical personnel of the SSS consisted largely of electrical and other engineering graduates and as many electronics technicians as could be found. All technicians were male, although recently graduated women served as radar operators. Personnel of the SSS, worked 24 hours a day, in shifts.

Training in the construction, operation and maintenance of radiolocation equipment initially took place at the Bernard Price Institute in Johannesburg, and the Howard College in Durban. It was at the Howard College that Prof. Clarke undertook the training of SSS recruits in radiolocation electronics. 23

The 17 secret radar stations established around the Cape Peninsula were initially operated on a 24 hour basis by young men, and later by young women form the SSS. Radar was developed with the purpose of detecting enemy aircraft and submarines in particular. Radar involves the beaming of powerful radio impulses in a specific direction. These pulses would then be reflected back by objects, to register on a screen as "blips" or "echoes". 24 It was the duty of the SSS operators to analyze these "blips, and then sent their plots of all shipping, aircraft and suspected U-boats to the SSS Filter Room (known as Freddie) at the Castle. Here the information was plotted with movable arrows, on a table covered with a map and a grid. The information would then be passed on to the adjacent Military Combined Operations, who would decide what the appropriate action should be, based on the size, speed and movement of the object under consideration. 25

The plots that the operators sent to the Filter Room, often involved a large degree of interpretation. For example, the readings form U-boats and Fishing boats were very similar. It thus happened on several occasions, that the investigating SAAF aircraft, found the enemy to be nothing more than a fishing boat, or even a whale and her pup.

As far as the women of the SSS are concerned, as was always the case, they were only called upon, when it was no longer possible to "man" the extensive chain of radar installations around the South African coast with technically trained white men. Two former ASWAAS officers, Miss Nancy Blue and Mrs Hartshorn were seconded to the SSS to attend to the recruiting and training of women as radar operators around the South African coast. 26

The object of the radar coverage was the detection and tracking of all aircraft, ships, small surface craft and surfaced submarines. Radar was useful in both sea defence and air roles, it gave early warning of possible enemy presence, and it could accurately measure the distance of the particular object. Apart from detecting enemy shipping or aircraft, radar was also useful in directing and guiding friendly ships in bad weather or at night, by giving accurate information on the ships' as well as other object's positions. Many ships had in fact been warned successfully. On December 9th 1942, for example, the radar installation on Robben Island, noticed that, a 6 000 ton vessel was about to go aground in

the heavy fog. It was successfully warned off by the Robben Island Fog Horn. [27] Lost aircraft were also assisted on occasion.

Because radar was such a closely guarded secret, SSS personnel were forbidden to talk to anyone about the type of work they were doing.

These radar defences probably served as a deterrent, since the enemy later knew that there was some sort of radar defence system along the South African Coast, and thus probably tried to stay clear of these radar ranges (which in some freak cases exceeded 200 km). [28] In the early days of the war there was, however, a considerable number of sinkings in South African waters, which fell mainly outside the ranges of the coastal radar installations. In the end, the majority of the ships that were plotted were friendly.

By the end of the War (1945), the SSS with a personnel complement of 1 400 men and women, were responsible for 50 Radar installations in Africa (including some on the South African coast) [29]

NOTES

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CHAPTER 9

ROBBEN ISLAND AND ANTI-AIRCRAFT DEFENCE

Senior Military and Civil Staff expressed concern about the vulnerability of Cape Town and Table Bay Harbour to attack from the air. The Anti-Aircraft Officers Commanding at Young's Field, Brooklyn, and Wingfield, were calling for at least elementary Anti-Aircraft defences for their respective bases. 1 An estimate of the weaponry available in the Union, indicated that only minimal Anti- Aircraft defences were possible. The Anti-Aircraft defence plan that was subsequently developed, focussed anti-aircraft defence on the Cape Town area, and the three airfields mentioned above. It also recommended that Simon's Town would receive its own Anti-Aircraft defence system. 2 As a result all the 3.7 inch guns, and Bofors anti- aircraft guns were divided between the major ports in South Africa. Eighteen of the 3.7 inch guns and 32 of the 40mm anti-aircraft Bofors guns were allocated to the Cape Town area. 3 Subsequently, in 1942, two Bofors were placed on Robben Island, along with four 3.7 inch guns. 4

Several Anti- Aircraft searchlight posts were also established under the control of the Coastal Artillery. Two of these searchlight posts were located on Robben Island. On 25 February 1942, however, instructions were issued by the Deputy Chief of Staff UDF, that all Anti-Aircraft (Ack – Ack) guns and searchlight posts be manned by the South African Air Force (SAAF). 5

Coastal Area Squadrons also flew numerous sorties with the aim of intercepting enemy aircraft or enemy shipping. In 1943, Coastal Area Squadrons flew 589 sorties, intercepting 513 ships. 6 They also flew on regular enemy detection patrols. In fact, Coastal Air Reconnaissance Aircraft daily swept hundreds of miles of the sea in a ceaseless vigil for enemy raiders and submarines. 7 On several occasions, some of these aircraft used the landing strip on Robben Island, when they ran out of petrol or encountered other difficulties while on a patrol.

When Cape Town had its first air raid alarm on November 24th 1941, it was a gun positioned on Robben Island that first detected and reported the presence of three unidentified possible enemy aircraft at 11:15 p.m. The report was confirmed at 12: 55 a.m., when troops at Green Point Common noticed and reported a yellow light flying west to east. 8 Consequent reports on the unidentified aircraft were received from Camps Bay, and Lion Battery. As a result the entire military corps was put on red alert. At 2:30 a.m., the all clear sign was eventually given. 9

Bridgette Oppenheimer, who was working at the SACS School in the cipher office under General I.P De Villiers at the time, and whc was privy to some of the most sensitive information in the Cape, remembers the incident well. 10 As soon as the Robben Island report came through, she recalls that "*all hell broke loose in fear of a Japanese attack*". 11 Three aircraft had been sent to intercept the "enemy", only to find that the "enemy" was a

young aviator who had taken his aircraft on an unauthorized flight. She recalls that on his return he was "*anything but welcome*", due to the panic he had caused. 12

The second air raid alert in Cape Town occurred only a few days later on November 27th, when two Furies were sent to intercept an unidentified aircraft 12,8 kilometers north east of Cape Town. There appears, however, to be no record of what transpired. 13 On occasion, mysterious unidentified aircraft also visited Durban.

NOTES

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CHAPTER 10

DEFENDING ROBBEN ISLAND

On December 7th 1941, Japan launched its surprise attack on Pearl Harbour. This was followed by a number of Japanese victories in the Far East. As a direct result, the fear of a naval attack in South Africa increased dramatically. This period also saw a small detachment of armoured cars placed on Robben Island, with the purpose of protecting the guns on the Island in the event of a landing. The problem was, that the guns on Robben Island (both the 6" Battery and the 9.2" Battery) were positioned in such a way, that the guns could easily be turned on Cape Town, and could then blow away the City Hall and surrounding area. 1 This fear was exacerbated when the Japanese took Singapore, and captured the British Coastal Defence guns. Since exactly the same type of guns were placed on Robben Island, the fear was that a small Japanese party or commando, could land at Robben Island and turn the guns on Cape Town. Robben Island had no defences against this possible scenario. 2

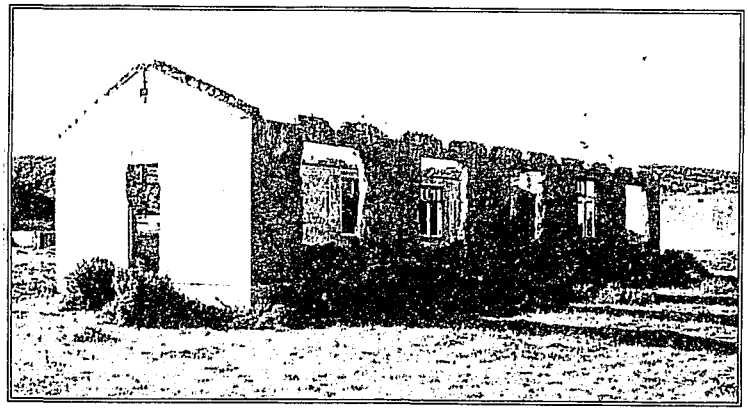
General Moodie, commander of the Artillery section on Robben Island, thus went to the Castle in Cape Town to request a detachment of armoured cars for Robben Island. On his arrival at the Castle, one of the Senior Officers there, told him, "*Moodie, go back to your Island, and do not disturb the General*". 3 Nevertheless, in March 1942, General Moodie got his land defences, as well as a small division of armoured cars, under command of Frits Reitz.

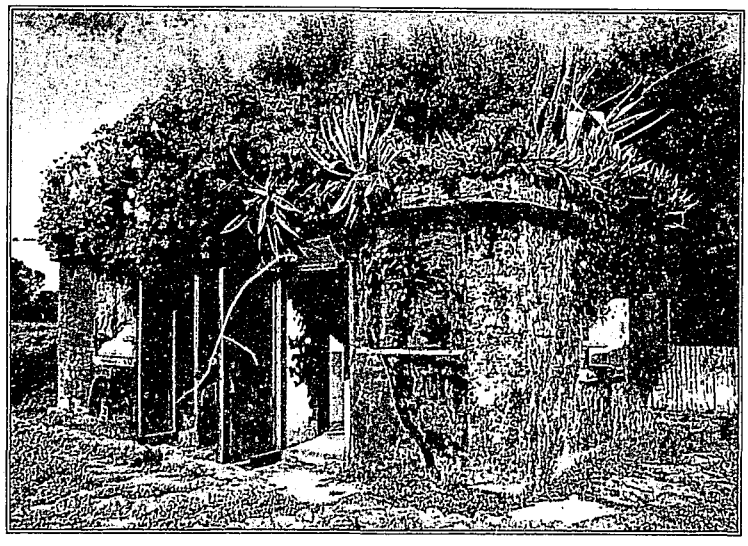
The land defences included war bunkers, concrete pill-boxes containing machine guns and rifle posts. These were situated along the Island's shore, at places where a landing would be most likely to take place.

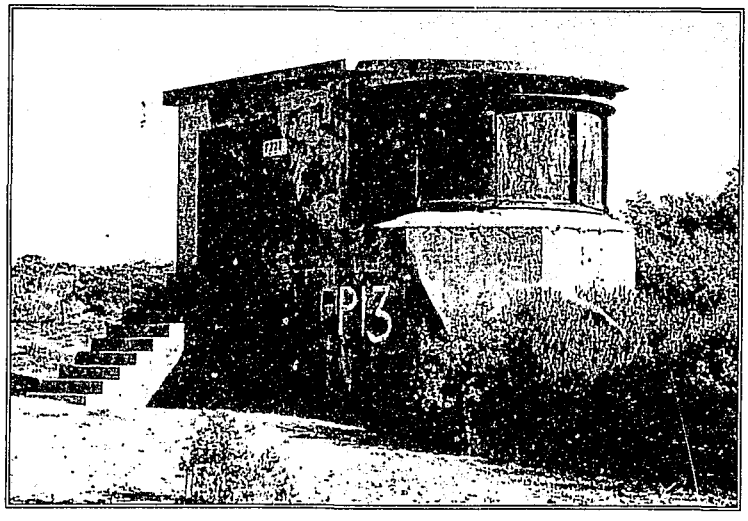
The commander of the Armoured Cars Division on Robben Island, Frits Reitz, had felt "*that it was the duty of every citizen to assist as far as possible in enabling the country to resist aggression*". 4 Reitz, however, had a number of physical deformities, he had a deformed foot, had to wear glasses, and was slightly deaf in one ear. Initially he had endeavored to enlist in the Artillery, only to be humiliated during the ensuing Medical Inspection. "*Stark naked, I was bawled at by an overworked, ill-tempered Medico for wasting his time. I had no difficulty in obtaining the required medical certificate to the effect that I was not fit for any military service whatsoever*". 5 Reitz's personal friend General George Brink intervened, and as a result, Reitz was appointed Captain, in command of the armoured cars division on Robben Island. All his troops were of a low medical category, or were men who had returned from North Africa, due to injury or age. 6

Reitz and his contingent were sent to Robben Island with the purpose of training the Artillery personnel stationed on the Island, to eventually take over operation of the small armoured car detachment. Reitz describes his troops as an "*excellent crowd*", but also mentions that they had initially suffered from a lack of morale. To rectify this situation,

1) Abandoned World War II barracks 2) Gun emplacement as it looks today 3) Outpost for the defence of the island itself. (All photo's from C.Smith, Robben Island)







the armoured cars were embellished with a Golden Lion Rampant, which contributed immensely to esprit de corps. 7

Reitz also tells the amusing story of the "*stick parade*" introduced by himself and his two "*excellent Sergeants*". In order to encourage smart appearance, the man found to be most "*spick and span*" at the weekly inspection, would be given a leave-pass to Cape Town for an additional day. 8 The "*stick parade*" worked wonders, "*with the exception of one ultra-disgruntled type who was our despair and non-conformist*". 9 A strategy was consequently evolved by Reitz and his two Sergeants. They organised that the other 33 men of their detachment would labour to turn out number 34 with "*impeccable military elegance*" for the next inspection. 10 The plan met with great success, no.34 was chosen as "*stick-man*", and on a later occasion, was again given the "*stick*" award, entirely due to his own efforts.

Training for the armoured car detachment included getting the cars operational in the shortest possible time. "*Woken from scratch, in their pajamas, the cars were ready to go, the crew clothed, ammunition panniers loaded, engines revving in three and a quarter minutes record time, and in three and three quarters average*". 11

Higher military officials had decided at some stage that carrier pigeons should be kept on Robben Island. The purpose of these pigeons would be to serve as a link with Cape Town, in case of an emergency when all other channels of communication had broken down. Reitz remembers, that on the first occasion that a pigeon was sent on a test flight, "*it went in the general direction of Madagascar and was never seen again*". 12

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CHAPTER 11

WERE THE COSTS JUSTIFIED

The Coastal Defence system had been extremely costly, involving hundreds of thousands of pounds, for the installation and maintenance of coastal batteries and related defences. At the same time, none of the guns on Robben Island, nor any of the other big coastal guns were ever required to fire a shot in anger. As such, the coastal defence system has been likened to an individual who has to pay heavily for household insurance against a fire that never occurs. 1

The basic answer given to the argument that millions were wasted on this coastal defence system, is that the system acted as a deterrent. In General Moodie's words: "*A bulldog does not have to bite to scare you off*". 2 The argument is, that the defence of certain points along the South African coastline, was an almost 100% guarantee that these points would not be attacked. 3 The reason is, that any enemy wishing to invade the country would have to establish a footing at a harbour facility where they would be able to disembark equipment and ammunition. If no such facilities were available, it would be virtually impossible to carry out a landing. 4 Thus, certain vital points, such as the Table Bay Harbour and other ports, were provided with coastal defences. Similarly, the fact, that no hostile vessels ever attacked South African ports, is seen as positive proof of the deterrent effect that the coastal defences had. "*Provided the port is not attacked, the coast gunner is doing his job*". 5

The basic justifications given for the huge expenses on coastal defence, include the threefold importance of South Africa's ports and harbours, and the threat posed by German and Japanese submarines and surface raiders. The threefold importance of South African harbours was: 6

a) To provide a safe anchorage for our own and friendly shipping. This is important for the continuation of imports and exports, and thus, for the country's economic well being. It was also necessary, in support of the war effort, to provide Allied shipping with a place to refuel, undergo repairs, and obtain supplies.
b) Nearly all South Africa's major towns, at the time, were situated near these ports, and they had to be defended.
c) Coastal defence systems were also necessary in order to prevent enemy usage of our ports.

With hindsight one may conclude, that although no direct attack was ever launched on the congested shipping in the Table Bay Harbour, the U-boat factor had to be taken seriously, since 81 ships were lost in, or close to South African Waters. 7 On occasion, submarines had come very close, notably on October 6th 1942, when the German U – 172, lay at periscope depth between Robben Island and Green Point. 8

In the end, it will never be known to what extent the coastal defences acted as a deterrent. As Orpen argues, the danger at sea was either beyond the range of the naval fixed

defences, or beneath the surface, where the enemy could not be located by radar or fired upon by the Artillery. 9

WAS THE THREAT REAL?

In retrospect, it might seem that the massive coastal defence system was elaborate and even unnecessary. Yet, from the perspective of the time, with intense submarine activity, numerous sinkings, and a vast increase in the amount of shipping around the Cape, it appears justified.

SUBMARINE AND SURFACE RAIDER ACTIVITIES IN SOUTH AFRICAN WATERS

During the first week of the war, the German Navy sunk 11 British ships with a total tonnage of 64 595 tons, a further 53 561 tons in the second week, 12 750 in the third week, and 4 646 in the fourth week. 10 They were clearly on the offensive.

Perhaps the most dramatic incident in South African waters at the start of the war, was the attack on the German Liner, the Watussi, off Cape Point. On December 2nd 1939, two members of the crew of Captain Boshoff's JU 86, patrolling about 160 kilometers of Cape Point, sighted the 9 673 ton Watussi. 11 In the confrontation that followed, the HMS Renown sunk the Watussi, and the HMS Sussex picked up the survivors. 12 The famous pocket battleship the Graf Spee, under command of Captain Hans Langsdorf, and its sister ship the Deutschland were also sailing in South African waters in late 1939. On September 26th , Hitler ordered the Graf Spee and the Deutschland to begin attacks on British shipping. On October 1st , the 5 051 ton Clement was sunk near Pernumbuco. 13 South Africans were unpleasantly reminded of the Graf Spee's presence when she sank the small tanker, Africa Shell, on the Mozambican Coast. The Graf Spee also sunk the Doric Star, about 884 km north west of Walvis Bay in early December 1939, followed by the Tairoa the next day. 14 The Graf Spee was finally blown up by a British cruiser on December 17th 1939. 15 By the end of 1943, Axis surface raiders had sunk 20 Allied ships close to and in South African waters, but at the same time they were becoming a dying breed. Most of them had been sunk, and the new threat in the Southern Oceans, now came from the submarines. 16

The following report was received from the Port War Signal Station on December 24th 1940: "*Submarine sighted between Robben Island and Blaauwberg. Keep vigilant look-out*". 17

By 1942, the Mediterranean had become a battleground, and huge convoys carrying reinforcements and war material were rounding the Cape in a constant stream. Offensives in Cape waters, might have severed the Allied supply route to the Middle East and Far East. As a result, the German Naval Authorities send four U-boats, in August 1942, to attack shipping in South African waters. On their way to the Cape, they sank the troopship, Laconia, carrying 1 800 Italian prisoners of war, on the west coast of Africa. 18

One of these submarines was consequently damaged by a United States bomber, but the other three refueled at night, south of Walvis Bay and headed for the Cape. They were the U-68, the U-172 and the U- 504. On October 5th , the U –68 was 40 km off Cape Town, within view of Table Mountain, and in sight of the Saldanha Bay searchlights. That same night, Captain Earl Emmerman, commander of U-172, headed for Table Bay. He stopped within hailing distance from Robben Island, carefully studying the harbour installations, and allowing his crew up, one by one, to enjoy the magnificent sight of a city unconcerned with war-time blackouts, before submerging again. 19 The next afternoon, Emmerman brought his U-boat even closer, and lay at periscope depth between Robben Island and Green Point, waiting for the order to commence attack. On October 7th, Emmerman sank the Firethorn, and the Chickasaw City, only 96 kilometers from Cape Town. 20 In the next two days, his fellow U-boat commanders blew up another eight Allied ships. These included the Boringa, the Koumoudouros, and three days later the 23 456 ton liner Orcades carrying a complement of crew and passengers numbering about a thousand, 250 miles west south of Cape Town. 21 As these U-boats cruised back to Europe they left a trial of torpedoed ships along the African coast.

The period between October 1942, and March 1943, saw German submarines take a heavy toll on ships sailing out of convoy in South African waters. Within the first four days of the German submarine offensive launched in October 1942, 13 merchant ships were sunk. 22 By late 1942, the South African Naval Forces, had rescued over 400 survivors of ships that had been torpedoed of the South African coast as part of this offensive. 23 By this stage, within a thousand miles of the South African coast, German submarines had destroyed 133 Allied merchant ships, and damaged six more. A further 20 ships had been captured and sunk by German Surface Raiders, and two ships had been sunk, and two damaged by mines laid by German ships. 24 The greatest individual success gained by a submarine in South African waters, was the U –160, which in one night torpedoed six ships in a convoy 50 odd miles from Durban. 25

The year 1942 (June and July) also saw Japanese submarine activity on the east coast. The Japanese submarines sank 21 ships, mostly in the Mozambican Channel, and one only 115 miles off Durban. 26 On November 29th 1942, the Italian submarine, the Ammiraglio Cagni, sank the Greek Argo only 88km south west of Cape Town. 27 On the 5th, 8th, and 14th of April, the Italian submarine, the Leonardo da Vinci, was also spotted in Cape waters. 28

When the convoy system was introduced in South African waters in 1943, 155 Allied merchant ships and one Allied warship had been sunk. 29 The submarine scare was, however, not over yet. In 1944, the Admirality estimated that a U-boat moving towards Cape Town, would probably pass south of Cape Point between the 4th and 6th of January. Despite vigilant look-outs, the U-510 rounded the Cape undetected. 30 Similarly, the Japanese I –8 and I –29 rounded the Cape undetected.

MINEFIELDS

Enemy minefields were laid of Cape Agulhus, on the main shipping route around the Cape in early 1940. Others were laid at Cape Columbine, and Danger Point in the approaches to Table Bay.

The German Raider Atlantis was known to be at sea. It approached Cape Agulhus from the southeast undetected by SAAF patrols and shorewatches. On the night of May 10th , Atlantis laid 92 mines between 8 and 37 km off Cape Agulhus. [31] This was only discovered when, on 13 and 14 May 1940, two explosions were seen and heard about 5 – 10 nautical miles from the Cape Agulhus lighthouse. As a result, six South African minesweepers were sent to the scene, and shipping was diverted from the area. By June 7th, eleven mines had been accounted for, three seen to be exploded and eight swept up by the minesweepers. [32] Of the 92 mines laid by the German Raider Atlantis in May 1940, only four more were swept.

The German Auxiliary Cruiser, the 7 889 ton Pinguin, commanded by Captain Ernst Felix Kruder, left Danzig on June 15th 1940, for South African waters. [33] Port Elizabeth was included in her list for minelaying. After sinking the British Domingo de Larrinaga north west of Ascension Island on 31 July 1940, however, the Pinguin decided against the risk of laying mines off Cape St. Francis. [34]

The German Doggerbank had left Bordeaux on the 21st of January 1942. It arrived in Cape Town on 16 March 1942 with a dummy deck cargo prominently marked "General Motors New York", and displaying the name Lavernbank on the ship's sides. [35] The Doggerbank had, in fact, been approached by an aircraft on the 12th of March, but by flashing "*Lavernbank from New York via Pernambuco for Cape Town*", it had fooled the aircraft. [36] That same night, the Doggerbank laid 60 mines approximately 35km west of Table Bay Harbour. It made an easy getaway by joining the rest of the usual sea traffic around the Cape. The Doggerbank was sighted by the HMS Durban that same night, but again successfully used false signaling to pass off the challenge. As soon as the HMS Durban was out of sight, the Doggerbank laid another 15 mines approximately 8km south west of Cape Agulhus. [37] The true nature of the Lavernbank only became apparent on 16 March, when the Dutch ship the Alcycone was mined and sunk off Green Point. The mine clearance flotilla, was thus recalled from Durban, and sent to search the area. Another four vessels, only one of which sunk, struck mines laid by the German Doggerbank. [38] Only six of the Doggerbank's mines were actually swept. A Number of the mines washed ashore, and the remainder is believed to have self-destructed. The Doggerbank's mines, were the last mines to be laid by the enemy in South African waters.

INCREASED SHIPPING

From the time that the shipping route in the Mediterranean was closed in 1941 all mercantile shipping traffic was diverted, and 60% of Allied shipping rounded the Cape. [39]

Large convoys of ships, carrying men, ammunition, equipment and other war related materials, from the United Kingdom and elsewhere, now undertook the longer voyage around the Cape to Egypt, India, and the Middle and Far East. Many of these convoys naturally called at the Table Bay Harbour to replenish and refuel. Cape Town, Durban and the other smaller South African ports, now assumed great importance as a strategic link in the war effort of the Allies. As a result, a great responsibility for the protection of these ships and their precious cargo was placed on the Union government, and coastal defences became more important. This importance increased in late 1941, with the Japanese entry into the war.

Some of the world's largest and most famous ships were anchored at Table Bay Harbour at some stage during the war. These included warships, huge convoys, troop carriers, supply ships, merchant ships and so forth. [40] In July 1940, for instance, a convoy that included some of the largest British oceanliners, adapted for troop carrying, were anchored in Table Bay. [41] At another stage a convoy consisting of 90 ships was anchored in Table Bay. [42] At peak periods, an average of 50 ships were anchored in Table Bay. [43] Some of the famous warships that were repaired at South African Ports include the, Nelson, Revenge, Renown, Howe, Ilustrious, Valiant, Royal Sovereign, and many others [44] Some of the famous merchant ships included the, Aquitania, Mauretania, Ile de France, Nieuwe Amsterdam, Empress of Canada, Athlone Castle, Pretoria Castle and many more. [45]

In the period from 1941 to December 1944, altogether 49 241 ships had visited South African Harbours. [46] Of these more than 500 were warships.

The South African coast, and in particular Cape Town was thus clearly important. Possession of the Cape Sea Route, would have enabled the Axis countries to throttle the vital supplies and communication channel of the Allied countries to the Middle East and elsewhere. [47] Cape waters had become what Roskill refers to as a "*zone of maritime control*". [48] As a result, naval warfare in the Southern Oceans, from 1941 until 1944, tended to crystallize around the Cape. [49]

By September 1943, Italy had capitulated, Japan had lost its former ascendancy at sea, the United States Navy had become involved, and the Suez Canal had been re-opened. Cape Town receded in importance, and many of the coastal batteries were closed down. Robben Island remained important, as a training and anti-submarine fixed defences base.

In conclusion, given the strategic importance of Cape Town during the Second World War, it would appear that the enormous costs for coastal defence were justified. The importance of Table Bay Harbour, and the huge number of ships that were anchored there, more than justified the expenses to fortify Robben Island. It was the defences built on Robben Island, that ensured a safe anchorage for all these important ships in Table Bay Harbour. Robben Island, its personnel and armaments, thus made a crucial and important contribution not only to the safety of Table Bay Harbour, but also to the South African coastal area, and to the Allied war effort on a whole.

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The map on the following page is based on the map from memory by A.M McGregor, L.Ellis and M.Laver. It has, however, been changed in places, based on information provided by Gen. Moodie's Secret Military Map. It represents Robben Island at about 1945 (except for the inclusion of the infamous prison). The Key to the Map is as follows:

 Lighthouse

 BOP

 WAAS Barracks

 CPGI (shop)

 Bakery

 Wreck of Liberty Ship

 Searchlights camouflaged as seaside cottages

 Seagulls' Nests

 Robben Island Battery with 9.2" guns

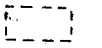
 Dummy Guns

 Old Cemetery

 Tomb of the Prince of Madura

 Arum lilies

 Naval Church

 Sub-Depot, Royal Navy

 Detector and Mine cables for Sub-Depot came ashore here

 Air-raid shelter

 SAAF Crash Boat Station

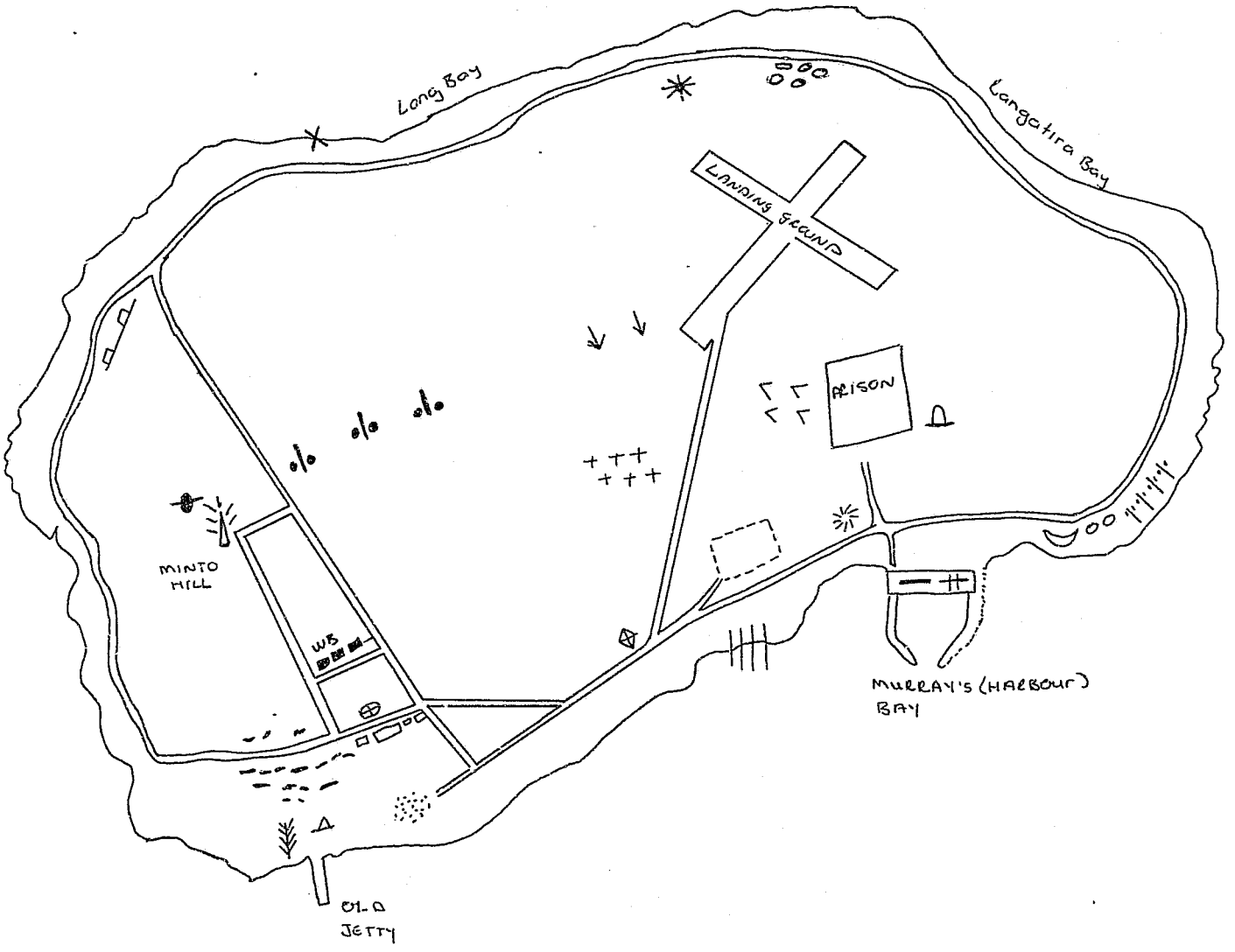
 Degaussing Range HQ

 Cornelia Battery, quick firing 6" guns

 Searchlights

 Village

 NE Quarters


Long Bay
Langatira Bay
LANDING GROUND
PRISON
MINTO HILL
WB
MURRAY'S (HARBOUR) BAY
OLD JETTY

CHAPTER 12

ROBBEN ISLAND'S PERSONNEL, CIVILIANS AND PRISONERS DURING THE WAR

Robben Island was clearly significant as a central part of the coastal defence system of South Africa during the Second World War. A second factor that makes this period significant and influential, is the people who lived and worked on the Island during the war. The three most important groups were the Artillery Specialists of the Women's Auxiliary Army Service, the South African Women's Auxiliary Naval Service and the Cape Corps. Each of these three groups will be discussed separately in the following chapters. These groups are important because they all served as active combatants, contrary to sexist and racist official policies, and contrary to similar myths that have been perpetuated ever since. This chapter aims only to give a brief account of the people who lived and worked on the Island during the war period.

MILITARY PERSONNEL

There had been no military garrison on Robben Island during the early 20th century, with the exception of a detachment of Cape Town Highlanders in 1915, [1] and at least one exercise by a part-time Citizen Force Unit in the early 1930's. [2] During the period of the Second World War, however, the Island was home to thousands of men and women from the South African Armed Forces. Most of them were young, and enjoyed life on the Island immensely. The roles played by the military personnel on Robben Island during the Second World War, were not particularly high in profile or in glory, but were nonetheless of vital importance.

The first group of military personnel to arrive on Robben Island in September 1939, were representatives of the Directorate of Coastal Works and Fortifications, members of the South African Engineering Corps (represented by the No.16 Field Company), and gunners of the South African Permanent Garrison Artillery. Other military staff soon followed. By far the biggest and most significant group (apart from the women's units) to arrive on Robben Island, was the detachment of "coloured" gunners. Some of whom were to serve on the Island itself, and hundreds who were trained as coastal and anti-aircraft gunners on the Island. Chaplains, medical and hospital staff, and the Military Police were resident on Robben Island as well. Finally, SANF personnel to operate the degaussing range and other naval fixed defences arrived.

THE WOMEN'S AUXILIARY FORCES ON THE ISLAND: The employment of women in the South African Military, and the Army in particular, went along with the greater political influence of women. Women over 21 years of age were given the right to vote in 1931, and by 1939, with the outbreak of the Second World War, a few women had won seats in the Union Parliament. [3] All the women's auxiliary services were formed with the purpose of releasing white men for duty in North Africa. Collectively the

women's auxiliary services were referred to as the Women Auxiliary Defence Corps (WADC). At the start of the Second World War, the Permanent Force was all male, with the exception of 19 matrons. [4] By 1944, the WADC consisted of some 16 000 women serving in a full-time capacity. [5] The WADC included the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) established in 1940, the Women's Auxiliary Army Service (WAAS) 1940, the Women's Auxiliary Naval Service (SWANS) 1943, and the Women's Auxiliary Military Police (WAMPC) 1940. [6]

Contingents of both WAAS and the SWANS served on Robben Island. The WAASies, as they were affectionately called, arrived on Robben Island in 1942. It appears that the female personnel of both WAAS and the SWANS were the only active combat units, consisting of female soldiers in the forces of the Empire at the time. [7] They did work of tremendous merit and have never been accorded the tribute they deserved.

All the operational personnel finally left the Island in January 1944, and the batteries where thereafter placed under care and maintenance.

THE CIVILIANS

The lighthouse keeper, his assistant and family continued to live on Robben Island during the period of Military Occupation. Work at the lighthouse was conducted independently and as a civilian concern. There were at least 2 000, mostly African labourers resident on Robben Island, until 1942. These men were involved in the construction of the gun batteries, and other buildings on Robben Island. The Department of Public Works also had a number of representatives on the Island. They were responsible for sanitation services, road maintenance and other municipal functions.

In 1942, when the Japanese threat was at a height, all civilians were evacuated from the Island.

THE PRISONERS

One of the reasons often cited as to why this period in the Island's history is so fundamentally different, is that there were no prisoners on Robben Island during the time. This is simply not true. During the war, French Vichy prisoners of war were incarcerated on the Island. After the war, while the Island was still a military station, criminal prisoners with indeterminate sentences were held on the Island. (see Chapter 16).

In August 1941, operation Kedegree was launched with the aim of intercepting a Vichy convoy on its way to French West Africa from Madagascar, and cutting France's seaborne links with her colonies. [8] Five minesweepers of the Seaward Defence Force and two additional cruisers were sent to intercept the convoy. The convoy was sighted and shadowed, but was then lost in heavy fog. A second operation with a similar purpose was launched in October. Operation Bellringer, as it was called, met with greater success. South African minesweepers shadowed the convoy until heavier Royal Navy units arrived the next day. After several warning shots were fired, the Vichy ships were

escorted back to South African Ports. [9] One of these Vichy vessels that was intercepted, the Cap St Jacques, was converted into an Allied Hospital ship. [10]

Early in November 1942, the accommodation problems caused by the surrender of the Vichy convoy, was partially solved, by placing the French prisoners behind wire on Robben Island. Captain Anderson, who had received orders to provide lighting and security for the prisoner of war enclosure on Robben Island, remembers that the Vichy prisoners, who were nearly all renegades who had changed sides along with Marshall Petain, were very hostile. "*They had to live with the knowledge that their fellow country men, would have no love for them on their return....I remember cat calls and crude epithets flung at me when passing the enclosures or working near them*". [11]

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CHAPTER 13

THE CAPE CORPS

Men from the Cape Corps have been serving in defence of this country for more than two centuries. 1 The Corps had originally been formed by the Dutch East India Company to serve against the British at the time of the first capture of the Cape in 1795. 2 During the First World War the Cape Corps served as an infantry regiment – active combat – that had distinguished itself in the campaigns in East Africa and Palestine. These men have never really received the recognition they deserve.

There is, however, no period in which the contribution made to the defence of South Africa, by these men, has been more neglected and distorted, than that of the Second World War. At the same time, there is no place more likely to provide us with the truth, and the Cape Corps with the recognition it deserves, than Robben Island.

Since 1915, until the end of the Second World War, the badge of the Cape Corps, with a few variations has remained the same. The insignia depicts the lady of Good Hope. Supporting with her left hand an inclined anchor, and leaning with her right forearm on a rock. The scroll beneath is inscribed: Cape Corps. 3

THE UNION GOVERNMENTS POLICY ON "NON-EUROPEAN" AND MILITARY SERVICE

The basic, underlying reason for the neglect and distortion of the Cape Corps' contribution during the Second World War, was the Union government's policy on "non-European" military service.

Although the original defence Act of 1912 had been amended in 1922, the provisions of Section 7 remained unaltered. Accordingly, "non-whites" could only be called up for service in a non-combatant capacity. 4

When suggestions were made that "coloureds" could be called up, to release white men for service outside the Union, the Nationalists in Parliament became enraged. Pressing "non-whites" into military service was totally unacceptable. For the Nationalists it was already bad enough that South Africa was fighting a war on the side of the hated British. As a result the Nationalists opposed any devolution of authority or responsibility to "non-whites", whether in the civil or military service. Although General Smuts was in favour of enlisting "non-Europeans", his policy was not significantly different. Since Smuts still opposed arming "non-whites", lest civilization itself be placed in jeopardy. 5

Reality, however, made adherence to ideology impossible. South Africa had very limited manpower resources, and it soon became apparent that many units could not be maintained, unless "non-European" manpower was utilised. Chronic manpower shortages continued to be a problem which, in fact, grew gradually worse due to illness

and casualties. More and more units needed to be formed, and the pool of white volunteer recruits was fast drying up.

When the pressure became too much, Smuts announced that due to "*circumstances prevailing in South Africa*", he had no other option than to bring "non-Europeans" into the armed forces. He insisted, nonetheless, that "*it was out of the question to arm them*". [6] In fact, under Nationalist prompting, Smuts promised unequivocally that "non-whites" would not be armed. [7] "*I cannot conceive of anything which would have the effect of creating even greater discord among us, even greater quarrels and greater division among the people, than arming of coloured people, or the native population of the Union*". [8]

By 1942, with the threat of Japanese invasion, Smuts made his famous "retreat from segregation" speech. "*I shall see to it that every native and every coloured man who can be armed, will be armed....I will train and arm any non-European prepared to help defend South Africa*". [9] Despite this speech, and although the danger from Asia was real, and South Africa could not defend its 500 mile coastline with white manpower alone, no official policy changes took place. [10]

Not everyone was opposed to "non-European" enlistment. In some quarters at least, confidence in the "coloured" community was expressed. For example, when Col E.T Stubbs was asked by the Union government for his opinion on obtaining "coloured" manpower, he said that he "*knew the response would be great...from all callings....from all corners...*" [11] Also, as early as May 1939, the Cape Corps association released a statement saying that they were willing to serve in the Defence Force of the Union, but preferred to do so as active combatants. [12]

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CAPE CORPS

On May 25th 1940, the Union government officially gave permission that the Cape Corps be re-enlisted for service in the South African Armed Forces. The Cape Corps was to be headquartered in Kimberly, under command of Col C.N Hoy. Col Hoy had received orders in May 1940 to begin recruiting for the Coloured Corps and to form five battalions. [13] Hundreds of recruits responded. After lengthy negotiations with the Mayor of Kimberly, Councilor M.E Doherty, and with De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd, a compound at Bultfontein was acquired as barracks for the troops. [14]

The majority of the recruits were received and classified at the Wesselton Depot. Here they were expected to have undergone a six weeks basic training course, which would have included PT, squad drill and disciplinary courses. Due to extreme shortages in manpower, very few of the recruits actually underwent the full six weeks training course. [15]

It was also in 1940, June 26th, that the Adjutant- General, by virtue of authority A.G 154/42.103 authorized the establishment of the Indian Service Corps, in terms of Section 7 of the South African Defence Act of 1912. [16] The Indian Service Corps would be under

command of Col G.A Morris, and headquartered at Crown Mines in Johannesburg. Due to a chronic lack of volunteers it was decided in September 1940, to admit Malay persons into the Corps as well. Accordingly, it became known as the Indian and Malay Corps. Recruiting remained difficult, and thus, on October 13th 1942, the Indian and Malay Corps became part of the Cape Corps. 17

As has been mentioned, official government policy at the time was that "non-Europeans" could only serve in non-combatant positions. Officially then, the Cape Corps did not serve as a combat unit, but rather in supportive and logistic capacities. Members of the Cape Corps were involved in practically every regiment of all three Arms of Service of the South African Defence Force. Officially they were to serve as pools from which personnel could be drawn for service as drivers, stretcher bearers, mechanics, maintenance personnel, convoy work, medical orderlies, cooks, engineers and hygiene personnel. In these capacities they would be attached to white units. Actual control of the Cape Corps was placed under the Director of Native Labour, Defence Headquarters, Pretoria.

Unofficially some Cape Corps men were armed and trained to use arms to serve as garrison troops, and to guard prisoners of war. Coloured units also served in the South African Naval Service. Over 8 000 coloured man were trained and used both ashore and afloat (principally on minesweepers and examinations vessels). 18

THE MYTH

The Official policy, of "non-Europeans" as unarmed, non-combatants, was formulated in an attempt to allay white fears in the early years of the war. It was a myth. Coloured soldiers were both armed and served as active combatants. Despite vast amounts of evidence to the contrary, both sides of the political spectrum, but for different reasons have perpetuated this myth ever since. 19

At least 45 000 coloured men served in World War II. At least 2 678 Cape Corps men lost their lives in the war, another 1 500 were wounded, and 615 were taken prisoner. 20 Available evidence suggests that thousands of these men were serving as active combatants. This at a time when many whites were actively supporting the Nazi government in Germany. 21

There is, for instance, ample evidence of hundreds of coloured men who actively fought in North Africa. In November 1941, facing the German Afrika Koprs, with captured Italian rifles, the Cape Corps fought alongside the rest of the 5th South African Infantry Brigade during the fierce struggle at Sidi Rezehg in Libya. 22 At the final battle of Alamein in October 1942, Cape Corps men attached to SAAF squadrons were acting as ground gunners in defence of forward airfields under German and Italian attack. 23

As far as the myth of unarmed coloured troops is concerned, all Cape Corps recruits underwent training in musketry and the use of the rifle, as it was foreseen that they would have to be armed when serving with combat units outside the country's borders. 24 As

from July 1942, Cape Corps men were issued with cabines intended primarily for use as guards in prisoner of war camps. [25] Unofficially they were armed for other purposes also. In fact, in 1942, with the threat of a Japanese attack, Sir Pierre van Ryneveld informed his staff that there would no longer be any restrictions on arming Cape Corps battalions, nor on their training as combatants. [26] By August 1943, only 44% of Cape Corps men were serving in identifiable Cape Corps Units. The rest were attached to European units, regiments or other formations, and swallowed up in the army as a whole.

ROBBEN ISLAND

As I have argued, there is no place in South Africa, which could more perfectly contest this myth, than Robben Island. In fact, the 2 000 best, and historically most neglected Cape Corps men were trained as anti-aircraft and coastal gunners on Robben Island. On completion of training, they either served as gunners – active combat- on Robben Island, or were sent to North Africa as active combatants.

Once again, it was manpower shortages that led to the formation of this unique establishment on Robben Island. Hundreds of white gunners were irritated by being kept back to man coastal batteries. The problem became more acute, when the two Light Anti-Aircraft Regiments already in the field in Egypt and Cyrenaica started crying for reinforcements. A policy for the dilution of coastal defences was thus decided on. Accordingly, the Director of Coast and Anti-Aircraft Artillery, Col A.H.K Jopp was ordered to accept Cape Corps men for training as coast gunners. By September 1942, approximately 2 000 coloured men were concentrated at the Anti-Aircraft Training and Reserve Depot on Robben Island, ostensibly to release white gunners for a third Anti – Aircraft Regiment. [27] On April 15th 1942, the Depot was redesigned Coast Artillery and Anti-Aircraft Depot. [28]

These men were handpicked by 2nd Lt H.E.P (Jack) Watermeyer, in close co-operation with the recruiting officer, Capt C.A Hillary, at the Drill Hall in Cape Town. Together they visited the country's towns, arranging for potential recruits to go to Cape Town which, they did in ever increasing numbers. Once they passed a medical exam, these men, representing the elite of the Cape Corps, were sent to Robben Island. By implication then, these men did not come from, or attend the Cape Corps Depot at Kimberley, and were never under direct control of the Depot.

At the Anti-Aircraft Training and Reserve Depot on Robben Island, which began operations on April 9th 1942 under Maj Chisholm, some 2 000 men of the Cape Corps, were thus given thorough training in basic small arms as well as gunnery. [29] The training, like the recruiting was done independently, and by the Coastal Artillery. The training officers were men under whom the troops would serve in combat, a method that inspired keenness and co-operation. The Cape Corps troops on Robben Island, had no vehicles for MT instruction and considered themselves, quite correctly, as gunners. As Col F.B Adler, Director of Artillery Training wrote to the Deputy Chief of Staff: "*...no number of a gun crew can be considered as non-combatant ...and as the training of gunners as such is, it is misleading to suggest that they {Cape Corps on Robben Island}, are not being*

used as combatants". [30] The Training and Reserve Depot on Robben Island has since been commended for the manner in which it was run, and for the strict discipline that prevailed there.

After the extensive training received on Robben Island, these men from the Cape Corps were deployed as garrison troops inside and outside the Union's borders. Approximately 1 000 Cape Corps men were selected to serve in the Seaward Defence Force, as ratings on minesweepers and harbour defence launches on the South African coast. There were also some 350 Cape Corps men stationed on Robben Island itself, manning the two gun batteries on the Island. Before the end of 1941, hundreds (at least 600) Cape Corps men who had been trained on Robben Island, had been drafted to join the 2nd Division Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment in the Middle East, just in time for the battle of Bardia. [31] Another 300 Cape Corps men trained on Robben Island, joined South Africa's only two Anti-Aircraft Regiments ever to see any real action against the German Luftwaffe. [32] Others served at twin Lewis gunners, in Bofors gun detachments, and even in manning captured German 88 guns. [33]

LIFE ON ROBBEN ISLAND

Until May 1945, Col Summer was in command of the Cape Corps on Robben Island. Lt Col H.L Silberbauer, who took command of the 10th Cape Corps unit on the Island, then succeeded him. Silberbauer had returned from "up north" for a few weeks leave. When he subsequently reported back for duty, however, he was bluntly informed that "*no person over 47 would be allowed to go north again*". [34] He was thus watching cricket at Newlands, as a civilian, when an old SAS mate, Maj Gen Pierre de Villiers asked him what he was doing out of uniform. It was this encounter that led to Lt Col Silberbauer's appointment on Robben Island. [35]

Of all the groups on the Island (excluding prisoners of war) during the Second World War, members of the Cape Corps seem to have had the most negative experiences. Although they had few grievances, "*their grievances were real*". [36]

On a more mundane level, the Cape Corps khaki uniforms, made of thick sege, were ill fitting. In addition, they had brown boots, a "*most unattractive*" cap, a grey coat and overalls. Lt Col Silberbauer describes these uniforms as "*designed to destroy the morale of anyone wearing it*". [37] Initially the Cape Corps members on Robben Island did not have their own Mess. This was eventually sorted out when the white Artillery section on Robben Island, lent half their mess hall for use by the Cape Corps. As far as housing was concerned, the Cape Corps did not have barracks in specially constructed buildings like the white male and female Artillery personnel on the Island. They lived in tents near the Murray's Bay Harbour, clearly separated from the white "village" area on the Island. Given the extreme cold and constant wind on the Island, their accommodation could hardly have been adequate. I argued in my introduction that the Cape Corps men were placed and trained on Robben Island, because being on the Island meant that they would

1) Emblem of the Cape Corps (Tylden, The Armed Forces of South Africa)
2) Col. Silberbauer (Harris, Copey's Castle)





be removed from the public eye. An example that illustrates this vividly occurred in May 1941. There was a serious outbreak of influenza on Robben Island, and it was deemed necessary to move the Cape C ps and other personnel off the Island. The Chairman of the Western Province Agricultural Society was approached with a request to temporarily accommodate these Cape Corps gunners at Rosebank. The request was turned down flatly, with the justification that it was not appropriate to use the Rosebank Show ground, which was in a white area to house "coloureds". 38 Official Military policy decreed Robben Island an ideal place for training Coloured gunners, because the Island was removed from "*women and liquor*". 39

One fundamental cause of discontent, was that soldiers of the Cape Corps could only be promoted to temporary rank. Effectively, this meant that they would do the work and assume the responsibility of the given rank, while still being paid as privates. Lt Col Silberbauer complained about this on an almost weekly basis to the Brigade, and even took the matter to the Minister of Defence. 40 Not surprisingly, nothing was done to rectify the situation. As Lt Col Silberbauer wrote; "*It was a lousy trick to play on soldiers who were doing good work*". 41

As if such blatant discrimination was not enough, the conditions of ser ice in the Non-European Army Service were not on par with those of the white units. The highest rank a coloured soldier could aspire to was that of Warrant Officer 1st Class. 42 To make matters even more unjust, related provisions built inferiority into these arrangements. A Gazetted Amendment of the National Emergency Regulation, No.35 of June 23rd 1944, laid down the way in which formal relations between white and non-white troops were to take place. This amendment stated that non-white officers and NCO's, held their rank within the Non-European Service only. Coloured soldiers could thus not exercise any command or authority over any white member of the South African Armed Forces, regardless of rank. On the other hand, white soldiers, could exercise command or authority over any non-white member of the South African armed forces, by virtue of rank or race. 43

Discrimination took place on many other levels as well. For instance, the rule governing pension awards, was that coloured pension scales would amount to three fifths of the rates applicable to Europeans. As it was applied, it frequently fell below even this meager stipulation. Discrimination was particularly acute with regard to disablement pensions, widows pensions and children's' allowances. 44

As can be expected, overt discrimination and double standards had a negative effect on the morale and motivation of the Cape Corps. In due time it also led to resentment. When the threatened Japanese attack did not take place, some Cape Corps units were immediately disbanded, and the men realised they would not be sent to Burma. The result was a complete collapse of discipline.

Although I do not mean to suggest that the following incident is a consequence of the afore mentioned, it does give an indication of the extent of negative experiences Cape Corps members must have had on Robben Island. One day, while sitting in her office, Bridgette Oppenheimer received a disturbing call. A Young coloured soldier had shot

himself in the head, on a beach on the Northern side of the Island. [45] Since there were no ambulance staff on the Island at the time, Bridgette and another young male officer, neither of whom had any medical training set of in the ambulance. He was still alive when they arrived and carefully lifted him into the ambulance. "*Drive carefully*", he said. "*I am in great pain*". [46] Minutes later, before they reached the village, the young man had died.

Despite all these negative factors, the Cape Corps troops on Robben Island were dedicated and disciplined. Many ex- Robben Islanders remember how these men continued to drill themselves long after they were required to. Lt Col Silberbauer has nothing but praise for the men he trained and commanded on Robben Island. He describes them as "*good soldier material*", "*experienced*", "*very keen*" and as having "*pride in themselves*". Their keenness showed itself in September 1941, when the first draft of 400 Cape Corps gunners were ferried to the mainland to entrain to Durban. [47] From there they would leave for the Middle East. Speculation in Cape Town at the time was that most of these troops would abscond before they even got to Durban. In fact, bets estimating the number of absconding men were made. On embarkation at Durban there were indeed not 400 men. There were 401. [48] Those who served on Robben Island along with these Cape Corps soldiers, are also full of praise. In 1942, tribute to the excellent work done by Cape Corps men trained on Robben Island and serving in the 2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, was given by Lt Col C.T Howie who had been in command of this regiment. At the time, Lt Col Howie and his Cape Corps men were prisoners of war.

Not all of life on Robben Island was unpleasant either. Lt Col Silberbauer explained, that because the island was far removed from the Fortress, and because he was in sole command of the 10th Cape Corps division on the Island, they could engage in all sorts of pleasant, unorthodox and useful activities. He recalls, for example, being very worried, since the Mess accounts showed that they were short of 500 empty beer bottles. Since it was "*a serious matter indeed..*", Silberbauer had ordered a "*Bottle finding parade*". [50] The 10th Division of the Cape Corps accordingly scouted the Island and returned with 950 empty beer bottles. "*I made the mistake of showing the surplus in my accounts, which was just as serious as a shortage...one learns the hard way*", remembers Lt Col Silberbauer. [51]

AFTER THE WAR

In 1949, the Cape Corps was again disbanded. It would only be re-established in 1963, at Eersterivier, as the South African Coloured Corps. [52] In 1972, the name was changed back to the original Cape Corps.

The importance of "coloured" and other "non-white" participation in the defence effort should not be underestimated. In terms of personnel, the "non-Europeans" accounted for 35% of the war time Union Defence Force. Many served outside the borders of the Union, but as was the case with the whites, the majority did their service within the borders of the Union. At home, the Cape Corps was responsible for handling the sophisticated coastal guns, and operating the batteries securing South Africa's ports,

harbours and coastal towns. The carefully selected Cape Corps men trained on Robben Island proved their ability and courage many times over during their period of service.

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CHAPTER 14

ARTILLERY SPECIALISTS OF THE WOMEN'S AUXILIARY ARMY SERVICE

ESTABLISHMENT

The Artillery Specialists (ASWAAS) was established as a branch of the Women's Auxiliary Army Service (WAAS). When WAAS was first established, as a branch of the South African Army, it wasn't with a very ambitious program in mind. Initially women were to be recruited to serve in WAAS as transport workers only. The response to the recruiting call was magnificent, and hundreds of women were trained in this capacity. It soon became apparent to Army Officers, that women could be useful in other capacities as well. It was consequently decided to begin recruiting women for clerical and administrative jobs, these included shorthand typists, clerks and so forth.

By the end of 1944, WAAS personnel had proved themselves efficient in more than 30 musterings. These included, clerks, cooks, dieticians, draughtswomen, entertainers, mess caterers, photographers, physical training instructors, sickbay orderlies, telephonists and many more. In addition, a group of women were serving as active combatants as coastal battery specialists and radiographers. This group of women came to be known as the Artillery Specialists WAAS. They served at various coastal batteries and defence locations right around the South African coast, and were trained on Robben Island.

In accordance with UDF policy at the time, ASWAAS was formed in order to release white men for service in North Africa. It all began in 1941, when the Directorate of Coastal Artillery decided to experiment with the training of a small group of women as range-takers at Simon's Town, for possible service at the newly completed coastal batteries, extending from Saldanha Bay to Durban. Only 20 women were recruited for the first ASWAAS course, 10 from Cape Town and 10 from Durban. If the experiment were successful, these women would take over the range-finding operations (i.e. providing the range and bearing of prospective targets for the coastal guns). This would include close and long range coastal defence. Close defence regarded the protection of the waters surrounding Cape Town and the other harbours and ports. Long range defence was aimed at attacking the enemy further out at sea.

The first course took place form June to September 1941, and training was conducted mainly at the newly completed Scala Battery at Simon's Town. This battery was ideal, since it consisted of 9.2" guns, a plotting room, and a Battery Observation Post. The Chief instructors were Major Moodie, and Captain Airey. S/M Van der Merwe and S/M Van Rooyen taught disciplinary courses and drill. [1] Throughout the course, the Directorate of Coastal Artillery continued to express doubts at the ability of women to hold the responsible jobs at the coastal batteries. In an attempt to undermine this doubt, the instructors of the first experimental course decided that one member of the course,

should on completion thereof, give a lecture to the officers of the 1st Heavy Brigade. The topic would be the Fire Direction Table of the mark 3 gun, which few of them had as yet seen in action. 2 Private Hill was selected since it was assumed that her civilian qualification as a mathematics teacher made her the best suited to *"explain the inexplicable to the skeptical"*. 3 When Private Hill arrived at the door of the lecture room, she panicked at the sight of *"the rows of shoulders loaded with pips and crowns and Major Moodie (and his dog) looking a trifle apprehensive in the front row"*. 4 S/M van der Merwe waiting to escort her quickly did away with her fear by saying: *"Don't worry Hill, they don't know no more about the FDT than that bloody dog of the Major"*. She managed fine.

In fact, this first experimental course was so successful, that some of the newly qualified trainees were immediately posted to Robben Island. Here they would serve as instructors for the second course of Artillery Specialists, at the Gunnery School on Robben Island, starting in October 1942. Others were posted to Scala Battery to commence service immediately. As a consequence of this success, the Coastal Artillery Headquarters, decided that a further 300 women would be trained and used as Artillery Specialists. They would "man" all the countries coastal batteries, with the exception of the Battery at Saldanha Bay.

A growing number of recruits for this elite unit were thus required. Accordingly, at the end of 1941, and again at the beginning of 1942, two ASWAAS officers, Lt M Hill and Lt S Robertson were sent on recruiting drives around the country. Two further recruiting drives were undertaken in the Western Province in the latter half of 1942. In the end the number of 300 was considerably exceeded, since more than 400 women were trained on Robben Island, and a further 40 or so at other coastal batteries. 5

THE NECESSARY QUALIFICATIONS: A letter was sent to all the relevant officers commanding WAAS detachments, specifying the necessary qualifications, as well as the "type" of women they were looking for. The requirements included: 6

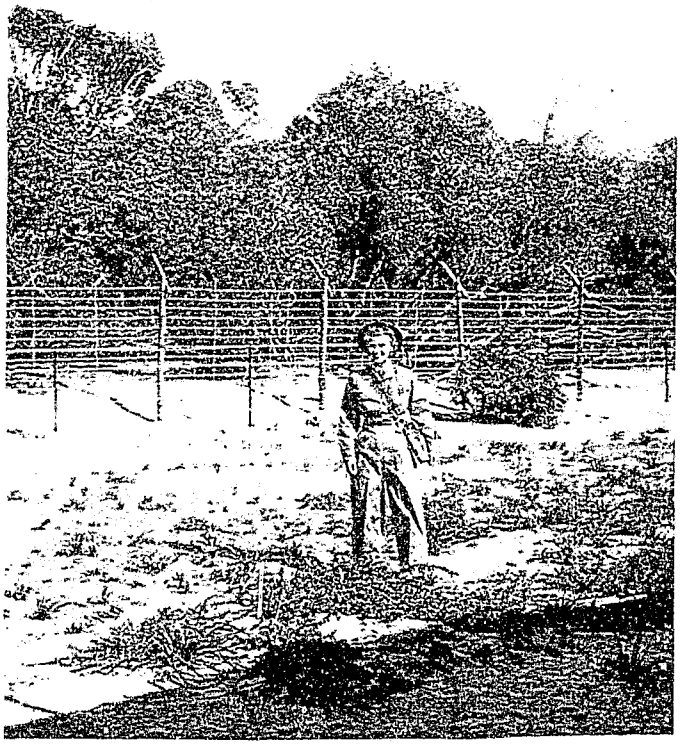
a) recruits had to be between the ages of 19 and 32, and they had to be physically fit
b) recruits had to be free from family ties
c) recruits had to have a matric certificate. (This was later lowered to a J.C, provided that the applicant appeared to be an "intelligent type")
d) the ideal recruit would be a well educated women, of a good class, possessed of self-reliance

UNIFORMS: Although the ASWAAS uniforms included the usual Artillery badges and buttons, they were not allowed to wear these badges until June 1942, as a sign of their acceptance as full members of the Coastal Artillery. 7 The buttons were of the dull bronze used for front line defence, which meant that *"Thankfully there was no polishing of brass buttons to be done"*. 8 Their working clothes consisted of khaki slacks, a windbreaker, a shirt, a peaked cap, and a gas mask. 9 Heavy coats were a must, particularly in the icy cold of the Robben Island winter. The Dress Uniform included a khaki tailored shirt and Jacket. The uniforms were rather ill fitting, and as a result, *"...one of the first things we did, was to go to a tailor in Cape Town, and have properly*

1) Dress uniform of ASWAAS taken in Adderley Street Cape Town (Photo: donated by Mrs M.P Shinn)



Right: ASWAAS Khaki working dress, including gas mask (Photo: donated by Mrs M.P Shinn)
Below: Dress uniform of ASWAAS, taken in Adderly Street, Cape Town, on two- day "pass" (Photo: donated by Mrs M.P Shinn)





fitting uniforms made". 10 The women of ASWAAS had signed on for duty anywhere in Africa, and were thus allowed to wear the appropriate orange flashes on their epaulettes.

RANKS: On completion of their training as range-finders, they were given the automatic rank of Lance Bombardier. The women of ASWAAS could not attain any rank higher than that of Major. All higher ranks would be held by males.

ASWAAS TRAINING ON ROBBEN ISLAND

The Coast Artillery Specialists did their training on Robben Island, at what was then known as the Robben Island Gunnery School. The first artillery course for women on the Island (the 2nd coastal artillery course for ASWAAS) took place in October 1941. This was also the first ASWAAS course to have a formal passing out parade. Meta Orton, who was as member of the first group of about 60 girls to be trained on Robben Island in gunnery and range-finding, remembers that they were told that at the end of the course, they would have to give a lecture on what they had been taught, to all the officers and ratings on the Island. "*This made us study very hard*". 11 Meta eventually had to give a lecture on the operation of the plotting tables. The third and forth courses for the artillery specialists were held in January and May 1942 respectively. The seventh course was started in July 1942, and consisted of approximately 50 women. Between 1942 and 1943 altogether nine courses for artillery specialists were held on Robben Island. In 1943, additional training courses in close defence and signaling were started. By early 1944, ASWAAS personnel had been trained for, and were operating the Robben Island searchlights as well. The training of Artillery Specialists on Robben Island continued until 1944, when the School of Gunnery was closed down. After that, ASWAAS instructors conducted training at other coastal batteries.

By the end of 1942, women serving as Artillery Specialists in WAAS, had been posted to Scala Battery in Simon's Town, Robben Island Battery on Robben Island, the 1st Heavy Battery at Wynyard Docks, Lion and Apostle Batteries, as well as to Port Elizabeth and East London. By 1943, ASWAAS personnel were also serving at The Bluff Battery in Durban and Cornelia Battery on Robben Island.

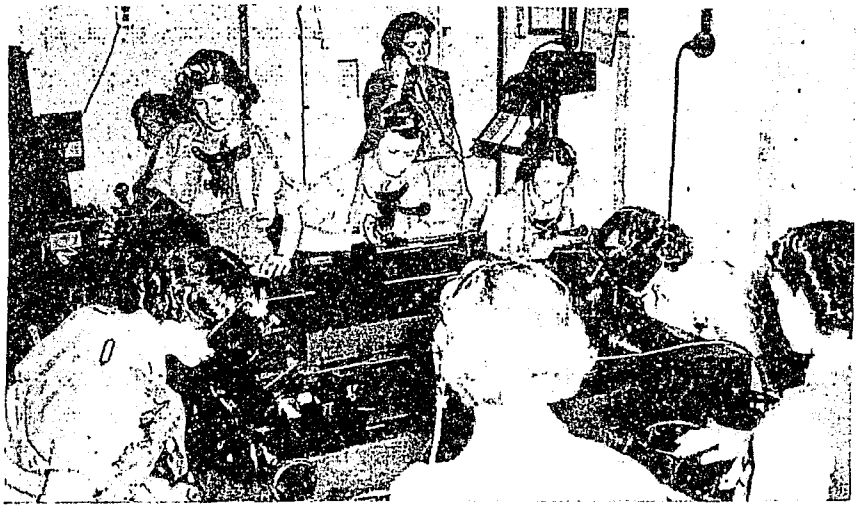
The women were trained by Permanent Force NCO's. The instructors of ASWAAS women on Robben Island were Major Moodie, Captain Airey, Captain Borcheras, S/M Nortje, S/M Pullman, Sgt Brough and Sgt Pearce. There were also a few female ASWAAS officers. Some of the male instructors were a trifle apprehensive at the thought of training women, others were downright hostile. Major Moodie remembers being "*rather concerned*" when he was told for the first time that "*a bunch of women*" would be coming to Robben Island for artillery training. 12 Major Moodie decided to "*cope with the women*", by treating them exactly like he treated male soldiers. "*Never did I call them angel or girlie or anything like that. They were gunner so and so... they did not walk from place to place, they marched... and they took to it like ducks to water. They really were first class soldiers*". 13 S/M Nortje was apparently very apt at making witty military style comments. On one occasion, he promptly ordered a young girl with too much make-up to "*reduce the camouflage*". 14 Cynthia Malan remembers a formidable

Sergeant Major, who called them "*Blue Eyed Monkeys*" for no explicable reason. [15] Daisy Smith remembers that there was one Sergeant Major, who really hated training "*these bloody women*". On one particular day, this Sergeant Major had taken them for gun drill. After he had ordered them to fall back and take up their positions behind the guns, for what must have been the 29th time, they decided, that when his next command for "fall back" came, all eight of them would disappear into the gun recess. [16] The command came, and all eight of them went into the shell recess under the gun, where they stood listening to shouts of, "*co...e out you bloody bums*" and so forth. [17] Strangely enough, after this incident, the particular Sergeant Major was far more flexible and relaxed in his attitude to the "*bloody women*".

The coastal artillery course these women underwent was complicated and demanding. The course and responsibilities laid upon them, were exactly the same as those the men had undergone before them. They were trained to man the guns, and to give the relevant orders, and "*they were remarkably efficient and disciplined*". [18] The only exception being that it was not required of them to lift the 100-lbs. shells of the 6" guns. Nevertheless, they did, even though, as Meta Orton recalls, it took two women to lift a shell. [19] They had to learn to operate all the technical instruments pertaining to the guns, as well as operation of the actual 9.2" and 6" guns. Training also included squad drill before breakfast, route marches, and target shooting. Mary Shinn recalls, that "*the route marches could not have been longer..they were 7km long, and that was the perimeter of the Island*". [20] Cynthia Malan vividly recalls squad drills on very bright white parched sand. The sand was so bright that they had to wear sunglasses at 6:30 in the morning to ease the glare. [21] Apart from range-finding they were also trained in close defence and counter bombardment. [22] Accordingly, they had to learn about the types of ammunition used, be it high explosives or armour piercing. Mary Shinn remembers that "*training was intense in every respect*". [23] Breakfast was followed by lectures, which included subjects that were entirely new to many of them. The rest of the day would be spent in practical training on the instruments and the guns. Practical training on the instruments included going into the gun magazine. "*We had to take our shoes off and were informed in no uncertain terms, that a single spark could ignite it all and blow us to smithereens*". [24] Their evenings were spent studying.

SERVICE ON ROBBEN ISLAND

As soon as training was completed, the women would be assigned to various coastal defence stations around the South African coast. Of the approximately 60 women, who completed the first experimental range-finding and gunnery course, 12 were assigned to Robben Island. One of them, Francis King was first posted to the Simon's Town Battery where she underwent a three months course. She then returned to Robben Island as an Assistant Instructor in gunnery. Being stationed on Robben Island, meant getting up before sunrise, and marching to the area at which one was on duty, be it in one of the two plotting rooms, or at the Battery Observation Post (BOP). Lorna Marinaki vividly recalls how it used to give her "*the absolute horrors to march in dusk*" to her place of duty, because "*one would make crunch-crunch noises with every step, as one crushed some of the hundreds of snails that came out at this time of the morning*". [25]



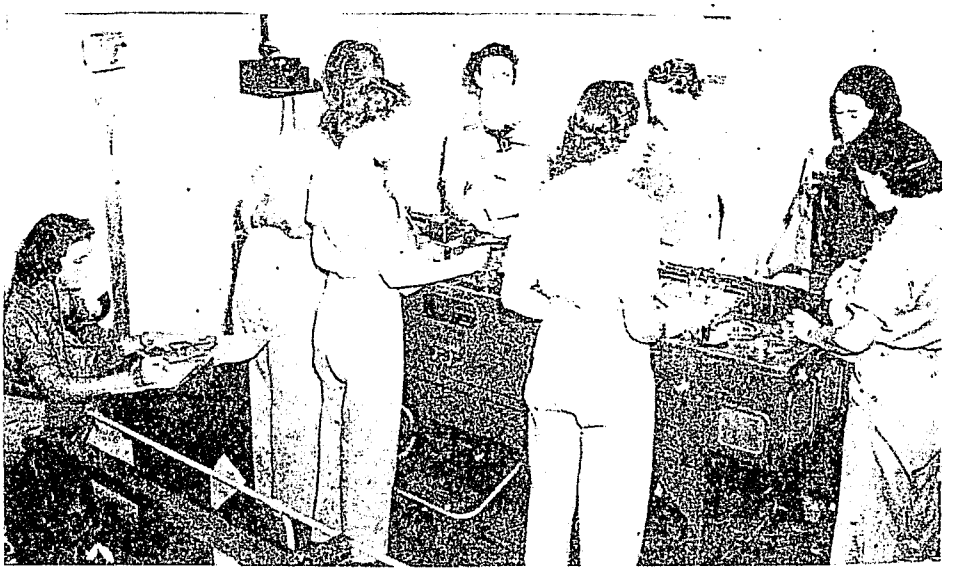


1) WAAS Artillery Specialists operating a battery plotting table in an underground plotting room. This is commo.1 to all 9.2" gun batteries for Coast Defence in South Africa during World War II (Photo: donated by Capt Anderson)
2) ASWAAS operating range-finders and other equipme·t (The Nongqui, Eve in Uniform, pg 267)
3) Rangetakers in plotting room (Hill, Look in after 40 Years)



Rangetakers in plotting room

Below: ASWAAS activity in Plotting Room (Hill, Look in after 40 Years)



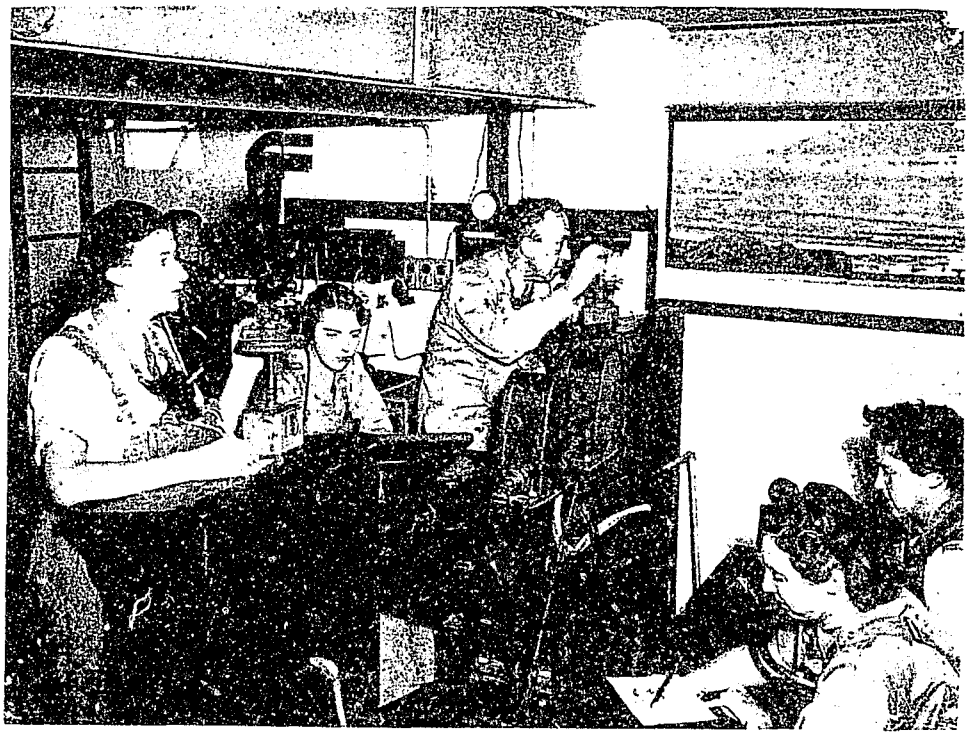


Duties on Robben Island and the other batteries were demanding and complicated. One of the most important duties performed by ASWAAS personnel, was working in the underground plotting rooms. These rooms, that were 30 feet underground, contained the plotting tables and all the other specialized equipment necessary for the conversion of the range and bearing information received form the Observation Posts, into the range and bearing for the guns. Approximately five persons, would stand or sit around the plotting table. They would wear earphones through which they could access the information provided by all the Battery Observation Posts and Fortress Observation Posts right around the Cape Peninsula. This vast amount of information, from a variety of sources, would then be processed by different persons operating different instruments in the plotting room, and by using the numerous dials on the plotting table. The co-ordinated information would then be sent to both the 9.2" and 6" gun batteries on Robben Island. At the 9.2" gun battery, the guns would automatically be set according to co-ordinated information received. The procedure at the 6" Battery was more complicated. Since these guns were not automatic they had to be set manually. This meant that the firing aim of the guns had to be reset continuously by the gun crew. Apart from passing on the usual co-ordinated information, ASWAAS personnel working at Cornelia Battery, had also to report and work out the rise and fall of the tide on an half hourly basis, so that the guns could be adjusted accordingly. [26] The two plotting rooms were the nerve center for the batteries. Climbing into these underground rooms was no small feat. *"One would climb down a steel ladder which was 15 foot long, onto a landing below. Another 15 feet down, one would reach a foyer from which the Battery Plotting Room left off."* [27] The larger room, was the Fortress Plotting Room, and contained the Fire Direction Table.

Incidentally, the ASWAAS personnel working at Cornelia Battery, which was situated on the part of the Island removed from the "white village" and occupied by the coloured soldiers, where issued with pistols for "self-protection". Lorna Marinaki recall, intensely disliking shooting practice, *"..it used to freak me out, because we would stand facing each other, and in one sweep, we had to aim at the eye of the person in front of us, usually a friend"*. [28]

The basis of their work on the Island was Cross Observation. This involved duties at the Fortress Observation Post and Battery Observation Post. Operators at the two Fortress Observation Posts, would track a ship with binoculars and rely its course to the batteries at regular intervals. Daily routine involved adjusting the observation instruments to sea level by means of a datum post. The datum post was a short pillar fixed to a rock in the sea, a short distance from the shore near the Observation Post. Then there was duty at the Battery Observation Post, this involved visual watch and range-taking. Range-taking was not a simple job, it involved estimating the range, course and speed of all shipping in view. This information would then be passed on to the operators in the plotting rooms, and in turn to the gun crews. Telephony was thus utterly important. In order to get the information to the plotting rooms as soon as possible, they were drilled in plugging the lines to the various contacts at maximum speed, at the three exchange centers next to the Battery Observation Post. Many teli the story of the old sea lion, which lay between the Island and Bloubergstrand every day of the year. Those on duty at the Battery

1) ASWAAS Rangetakers in BOP {Battery Observation Post} Robben Island (Hill, Look in after 40 Years)
2) ASWAAS Rangetakers on top of BOP (Hill, Look in after 40 Years)





Observation Post could always watch the sea lion sunning himself. He seems to have been the only seal in the area, and was certainly the only one ever observed. Watch duty at the Battery Observation Post also in some cases provided one with the magnificent opportunity to watch a school of whales. Daisy Smith recalls, that one day when she was on duty at the Battery Observation Post, she watched a ship that had been torpedoed off Cape Point sink, in an attempt to enter Table Bay. "*Watching it sink was the most dreadful feeling*". [29] When on duty at the Battery Observation Post, personnel were not allowed to use words like "ship" and "shipping". For security reasons they had to use code words, so that a major ship of war, for instance, was referred to as a block of flats. [30] These visual watches were referred to as "Look-Outs" and were conducted on a basis of four hour shifts 24 hours a day. Mary Shinn remembers "*staring at the dark sea for hours watching for anything that should not be there*". [31]

Other duties included Saturday morning "fatigues". This involved polishing and cleaning the instruments and their working areas. Furthermore, they were on duty an hour before sunrise for "Stand To". This included routine squad drill and accompanying procedures. This was repeated an hour after sunset at "Stand Down". Alarms were occasionally sounded, which meant having to rise from sleep, getting dressed, and reporting to their place of duty in the shortest possible time. In between all these duties, "*sleep was fitted in whenever we could*". [32]

LIFE ON THE ISLAND

At this stage, Robben Island was densely occupied. There was a group on Engineers, the South African Air Force Anti-Aircraft Gunners, some Naval Personnel, Artillery personnel (the battery gunners, and personnel and trainees of the gunnery school) and the Lighthouse keeper, his assistants and family. There was also a small contingent of the Military Police on the Island, possibly with the purpose of ensuring the safety of the ASWAAS personnel. There was also a man, whom Lorna Marinaki referred to as the "Pigeon Man". He was responsible for a large amount of carrier pigeons, which would be used in case of an emergency when all other lines of communication were down.

Life on Robben Island was spent mostly by hours of dreary watching, but the good times that everyone seemed to have had, made up for this. As Mary Shinn remembers, although life on the Island was strenuous and "*we were always kept on our toes...Life was also amazingly healthy, with plenty of exercise and fresh air*". [33]

Betsie Munro remembers arriving on the Island, expecting to find the fortress she had been told about. Instead she found that "*the communications did not work, and the guns did not fire... but it was a lovely Island.*" [34] Lorna Marinaki too, remembers the Island as being "*lovely*". She remembers hundreds of rabbits, snails, seagulls, and thousands of those "*little hairy worms*". [35] Lovely and abundant wild flowers also covered the Island.

In summer the Island was "*remarkably hot*", and everything, "*even the trees*" were covered in some "*sort of white dust cloud*". Although the winters were cold and rainy, the Island was "*beautiful in winter*". [36]

Eleanor Parrott arrived at Robben Island at the age of seventeen as part of the 6th course for Artillery Specialists. What she remembers best of her 18 months on Robben Island is the *"all to familiar command – Look In – which meant focus the telescope and look at the sea for enemy ships"*. 37

Usually they were on duty for eight days, with two days off. After lunch every day, they would also have two hours off. Francis King remembers being taken over to the mainland on Fridays, to spend a weekend pass in Cape Town. 38 The trip took approximately 45 minutes on the Isie, on seas that were occasionally very rough, resulting in many girls feeling seasick. On Sunday Afternoon, they would again report to the Cape Town Docks, for the return trip back to Robben Island. Sometimes they would not leave the Island on their off days, in an attempt to catch up with their washing and other similar time consuming duties Lorna Marinaki recalls that *"..it was hell trying to keep out clothes neat and ready for inspection"*. The washing itself was an arduous task, given the hard water and inadequate soap, *"...we used to scrub our clothes with a big scrub brush, just to get it clean. Once washed, however, it took forever to dry"*, and once this feat had been accomplished, the uniforms still had to be ironed. 39

Life on Robben Island could at times also be haunting and eerie. Cynthia Malan recalls that the *"vibes of the Island's past"* were sometimes felt by many of them. For many of them, as it does today, Robben Island remained synonymous with tragedy. *"There were times when I was there when a haunting sense of desolation seemed to pervade the atmosphere. One felt overcome with a deep sense of despair and compassion for the many tormented souls who had suffered so much on this little Island"*. 40

One of the most hated, and often cited aspects of life on the Island was the mournful and deafening blare of the foghorn in bad weather.

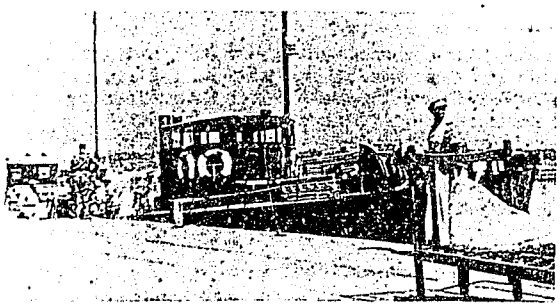
THE ISIE

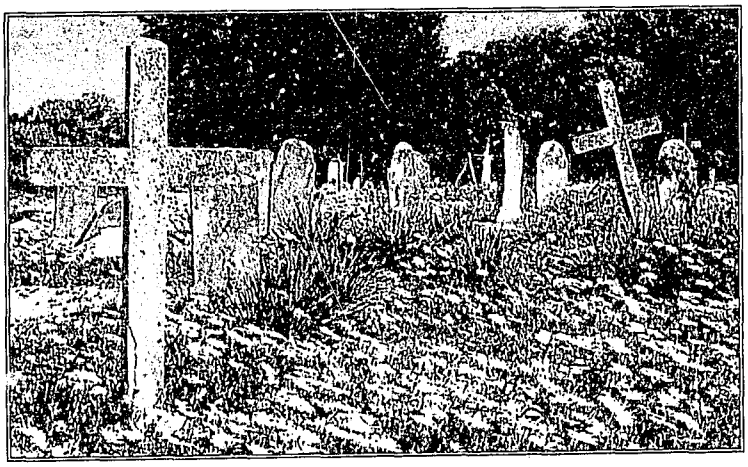
Life on Robben Island involved a lot of travelling to and from the mainland. As a result, one criterion for being posted to Robben Island, apart from very good results obtained after training, *"was being a good sailor, since crossing to the mainland and back was a frequent necessity of our lives"*. 41

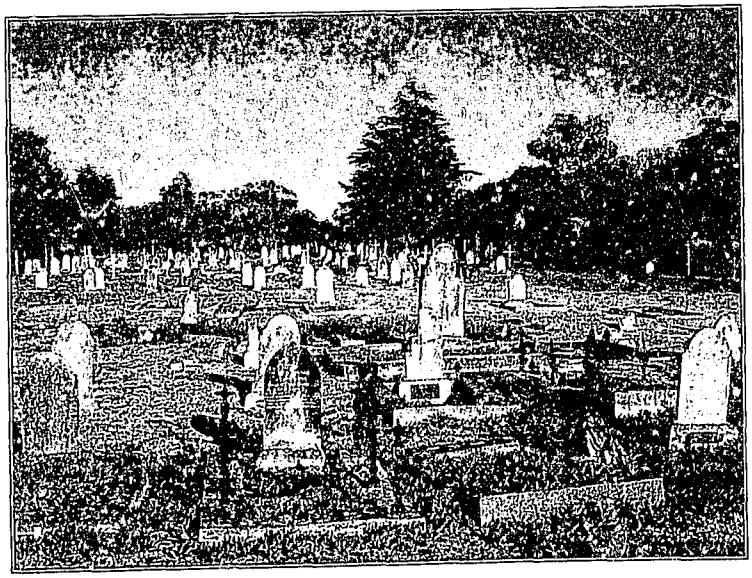
Trips across to the mainland and back were generally made on the Isie. In exceptional cases the Mae West, which was responsible for bringing supplies across on a daily basis, was used. In very bad weather, a minesweeper was occasionally used. The Navy had it's own transport in the form of sea-rescue crash boats.

Trips on the Isie were certainly not always pleasant. If the sea was rough the ASWAAS girls had to choose between remaining below deck, staying dry and getting seasick, or remaining on deck, clinging on for dear life and getting sopping wet. Lorna Marinaki remembers, how after a particularly rough crossing, she had remained on deck. On arrival at Cape Town, she caught a train at Cape Town station to Constantia where she would spend the weekend with relatives. *"I noticed that people on the train were staring at me. I*

1) The ISIE (Bisset, Navy News, Vol.6, 1987)
2) The leper cemeteries on Robben Island, where so many of the military personnel spent some of their "free" time. (C.Smith, Robben Island)







realized, that my Grey coat, although one could not see it because of the material of which it was made, was still sopping wet. I looked at my feet, and noticed that a big wet puddle had formed under my seat. I was terribly embarrassed.." [42] On another occasion, when the sea was extremely rough, Miss Molly Branford was seriously injured after a suitcase fell on her back. She spent ten days in the sickbay, believing she had recovered, only to become paralysed a few years later. [43]

The Isie had been named after Isie Smuts, wife of General Jan Smuts. The little boat had been built in Cape Town and was intended to be a fisheries protection launch. She proved unsuitable for this task and was taken over by the Royal Navy. The Isie could take no more than 45 persons at a time. There were no seats, and passengers had to stand, holding on for dear life in rough weather, as the Isie belching smoke and tumbling through swells would take an average of 45 minutes (in good weather) to reach her destination. [44] In 1960, the Royal Navy presented the Isie to the Prisons Department. When she was refurbished and registered in 1970, an extra "S" was inadvertably added to her name. That is how she became the Issie (as she is often referred to today), instead of the former Isie. The Isie had thus survived the evolution of the Island from army fortress to naval base, to maximum-security prison. She retired in 1976, after 34 years of service. It had been said, that when the Isie was finally ready to be pensioned, that the Prisons Department would mount her on Robben Island. [45] This would have been a fitting tribute to the gallant little vessel, but unfortunately the plan did not materialize. A vessel from Germany replaced her. Ironically R 24 000 was spent in transferring Isie's engines into her replacement. [46] Isie was finally bought as an amusement for children at a Cape Town nursery school, where she still endures their games. [47]

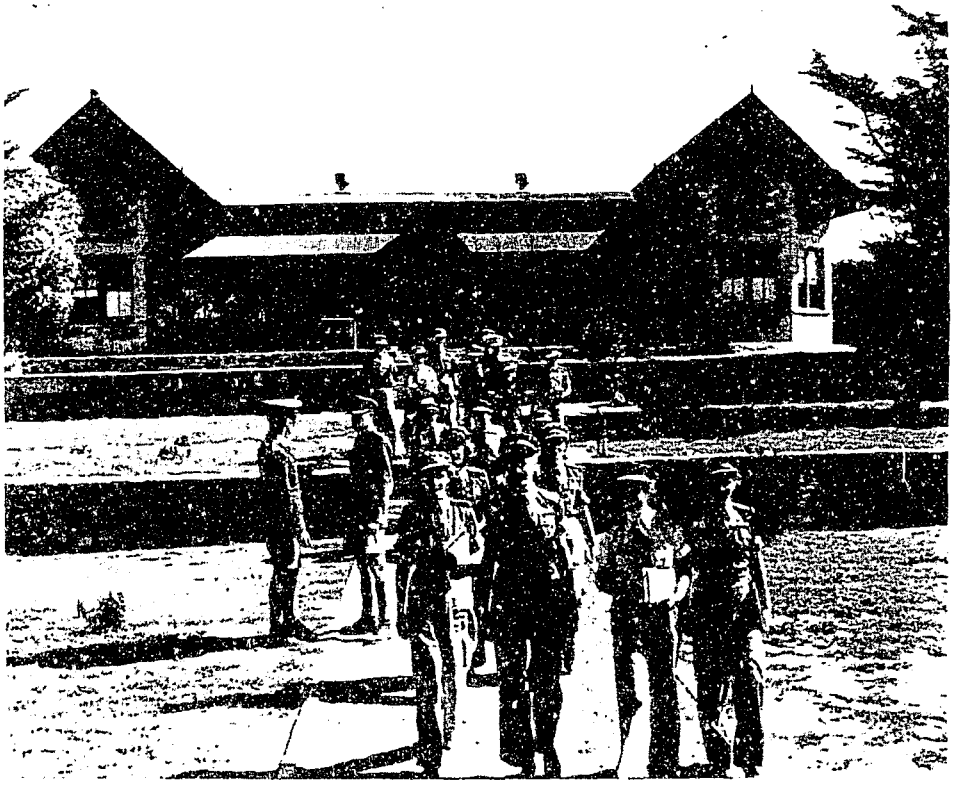
FOOD

During a spell of bad weather, supplies could not be taken over to the Island, and the ASWAAS girls would live on Bully-Beef for weeks. Using the Island's resources sometimes relieved the dreariness on this meal. Lorna Marinaki recalls, how after such a bully-beef period, "*..we went into the mess one morning only to find enormous bowls of crayfish and penguin eggs on the tables. It was such a treat, especially after being so sick of bully-beef*". [48] Daisy Smith remembers that although the food was "*really pretty awful...we would be so hungry that we would rush into the mess like animals to eat all kinds of stuff we wouldn't usually eat*". [49] Mary Shinn also remembers that the food was "*nothing to be enthusiastic about*", she remembers coarse war bread, and french toast made with powdered eggs. [50] There were no refrigerators on the Island, and accordingly the caterers used the stone floors to keep the food cool and fresh. The milk was brought over form Cape Town, where it would stand in large cans on the Cape Town docks, until the Isie was ready to bring it across.

ACCOMMODATION

ASWAAS personnel lived in small bungalows that were intended to eventually serve as housing for Permanent Force members and their families. Each bungalow had two bedrooms, a kitchen (which was not used) and a lounge (which served as a third bedroom). Eight girls were assigned to each bungalow, three to each bedroom, and two to

1) ASWAAS trainees leaving the School of Gunnery on Robben Island (Hill, Look in after 40 Years)
2) Occupants of "K" Bungalow Robben Island, at leisure (Photo: donated by Mrs M.P Shinn)





the lounge. They kept their suitcases under the bed, and had to learn how to make up their beds "army style". This meant folding the blankets up on top of the bed. In terms of furniture, each girl had a metal box placed in front of the bed, and a tin plate with which they would queue at the mess for food. In order to have hot water for a bath, they needed to constantly keep a fire going in the kitchen, this was hard and time consuming work, which included scavenging the Island during their free time for wood. The bungalows were situated in a row on the road which led to the lighthouse. The first cottage in the row, belonged to the instructors, Capt (Mrs) Durham and Capt (Mrs) Mateer.

The entire camp was surrounded by barbed wire, and sentries patrolled the camp area at night. They also had to comply with very strict curfew hours, and once inside the barracks the gates would be locked. These measures were not particularly successful in maintaining separation between the sexes. As Francis King remembers, "*when the engineers caught crayfish they would slip a huge pan under the fence with two or three cooked crayfish*". 51 It seems that these security measures were necessary. I received confirmation of at least one incident, where a soldier was shot for trying to enter the ASWAAS camp with malicious intent.

The sick bay consisted of a similar bungalow, run by Sister Baxter and her dog. 52 The sickbay was necessary, if only because nearly everyone succumbed to diarrhoea within a short time of arrival. The 7th Artillery Course, of which Mary Shinn was a part, was also not immune to "*Island tummy*". The resident doctor, however, seemed to them to be causal and unconcerned with their plight. Consequently, filled with righteous indignation, the 7th Course started a petition to get the particular doctor removed from the Island. 53 "*It backfired. The ASWAAS Officer Commanding, a rather formidable person with the rank of Major, summoned us to the lecture room and told us that the petition was regarded as mutiny and if we persisted we would be charged and punished accordingly*". 54 The matter was thus left at that, but soon after the doctor was replaced.

They had outdoor toilets with buckets, and newspaper served as toilet paper. The toilet doors did not close properly, and could not be locked. Accordingly, women had to perform their ablutions while clinging to the door. One night a howling south easter ripped a toilet door out of the hands of a young radar operator. She could only watch in fascination as it was tossed around the Island. 55

When the fear of a Japanese air raid was at its height, it was decided to dig trenches outside the ASWAAS camp, to serve as shelter in case an air raid took place. Shortly after the digging was started, human bones and a skull with a dent in it was uncovered. As a result the trenches were filled up again, and new trenches were never dug. 56

ENTERTAINMENT

Many weekends were spent just walking around the Island, admiring the fields of Arum lilies on the Cape Town side of the Island, or the thousands of seagull nests on the other. "*The Island had the appearance of a big and wild garden, with a bit of history everywhere.*" 57 Apart from the fields of arum lilies, the Island was covered by a great

variety of scrubs, an vild flowers. At certain times of the year, the trees would be covered in yellow blossoms, which created the impression of "*great big floating yellow clouds*". 58 Considerable time was spent looking into the fascinating rock pools, picking up sea shells, or just watching the beautiful sunrises and sunsets. Some found walking in the leper cemetery with the "*interesting names that dated far back*" a pleasant past time. 59 Others would walk around the grave of the Indian prince, admiring the daisies, the masses of Narcissi, and the other wild flowers which grew so abundantly in the area. "*We would pick bunches of these flowers for our rooms, but never from the grave or closely surrounding area. This was forbidden, since the grave had been declared Holy Ground*". 60 Legend has it, that this grave was also haunted. Lorna Marinaki recalls an incident, where one girl had tried to pick flowers from the grave. As soon as she had plucked the first flower, "*...she received a slap in the face that sent her reeling..the slap had come from nowhere*". 61

Meta Orton remembers "*stripping off all their clothes and swimming in the nude*", in a rock pool that was private enough. The ASWAAS common room was a popular place for relaxation, here they could play darts, write letters home, or just listen to music on the gramophone. There was also a Sport's Committee, of which Francis King was the secretary for a while. The Committee organised hockey, swimming, tennis, badminton, netball and many other sporting events. ASWAAS personnel also formed their own Entertainment Committee, which was mainly responsible for organising the weekly dances in the John Craig Hall. The Floor of the hall would be sprinkled with mealie meal, and it was "*all terribly romantic...from inside the hall one could look across to Blouberg, and see the moon reflected on the water*". 62

The Anglican Church held services every Sunday. The Military Chaplain was the late Reverend Dr Andre de Villiers. He conducted all the services, with the exception of one Sunday a month, when the Anglican Priest would come over from the mainland. The small church had its own choir in which many ASWAAS personnel sang. Others, like Francis King, undertook to arrange flowers for the services every Sunday. The most memorable church services on Robben Island, are those that were held on Christmas and New Year's Eve.

Many of the ASWAAS girls also attempted gardening. Their efforts were not very successful, since the plants would wither in the scorching sun and sandy soil, in the absence of adequate water.

Once a week, there would also be an open-air cinema, at other times movies would be shown in the John Craig Hall. Communication between the sexes was not encouraged on the Island. Even at the cinema shows, men had to sit on one side of the hall, and women on the other. Some rules, however, are made to be broken. Cynthia Malan recalls how, "*at the end of the show there would no longer be any sign of segregation*". 63

In terms of "intellectual entertainment", the Information Officer, Lt Leo March, would give weekly lectures on current affairs and other matters of interest. There was also a well-stocked library, open six days a week. 64

Some even acquired "pets" during their stay on Robben Island. Two Officers, for instance, had kept a pair of baby seagulls. One of them, named Stanley, died of overeating, the other, Livingstone grew to be a big and handsome bird. [65] He flew off to join the other seagulls, but would occasionally return with some of his companions for an army biscuit or any other tasty morsels that were offered to it.

LOVE STORIES

WAAS Sgt Bridgette McCall, met a young man who had just returned from North Africa, while she was on leave in Cape Town. Consequently, Bridgette became the wife of one of the most eligible bachelors in the world at the time, Harry Oppenheimer. [66]

Elizabeth Wood, who was the WAAS secretary of the Garrison Engineer on Robben Island, had also met her future husband, Lionel Schenck on the Island. [67] The two of them had decided that it would thus be appropriate to get married on Robben Island. They were engaged on the 18th of February 1946, and almost immediately obtained permission to get married on the Island. The only drawback, was that they were only allowed ten guests. The marriage (possibly the only marriage ever to take place on the Island) occurred on the 14th of April 1946. [68]

DEMOBILISATION

When the Special Signals Service was established with the introduction of radar in 1944, the work performed so diligently by ASWAAS personnel, became obsolete. Major Rex Simpson held the final course for Artillery Specialists in January 1945, in Simon's Town. Although some of the former ASWAAS girls were transferred to the SSS, the majority were demobilised, or sent for service elsewhere. Finally, at the end of September 1945, the entire ASWAAS unit was disbanded. They had been the only women ever to serve as an active combatant operational unit in the South African Army. The next time this would happen, was only in 1994, with the establishment on the new SANDF.

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CHAPTER 15

THE SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN'S NAVAL SERVICE

ESTABLISHMENT

Like other Auxiliary Women's Services, the South African Women's Auxiliary Naval Service (SWANS) was established to release white men for active combat duty in North Africa. This unit was, however, only established very late in the war, on October 9th 1943. The delay was due mainly to die-hard attitudes in the South African Naval Forces and Military Establishment as a whole. Had it not been for the ever increasing manpower shortages, the SWANS might never have come into existence.

Great Britain, the other Allied countries, as well as Germany, at this stage already had women's auxiliary naval units. In Britain they were known as WRENS. Yet, when South Africa elected to follow this example, there was such severe opposition from die-hard conservatives, that the establishment of the unit was postponed several times. This, despite the fact, that for the majority, female enlistment in the naval forces and the military in general was a popular move. If only because it would release white males for combat in North Africa. What makes the resistance to the establishment of a female naval unit seem even stranger, is the fact that WAAS commander Captain (Mrs) Honibrook and later Major (Miss) Joan Wille, along with twenty other WAAS volunteers, were already serving in the South African Naval Forces (SANF) in a clerical capacity. [1] Furthermore, Captain Dalgleish had long been in favour of enlisting women into the SANF, arguing that there were at least 130 clerical jobs, and 100 other posts in naval fixed defences that could be filled by women. Captain Dalgleish had started pressing for the establishment of a women's naval unit as early as August 1942. All his efforts were, however, blocked by the Chief of the South African General Staff, Lt Gen Sir Pierre van Ryneveld.

An unedifying series of signals, following a report in the Cape Times on April 23rd 1943, that a women's unit of the SANF was to be established, illustrates the point. Immediately after this article appeared, the Chief of the South African General Staff (CGS), Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, demanded to know, "*...What is this all about?..Neither the Minister, nor I, know anything about a women's section on the SANF. Please explain at once...*" [2] A reply came form the Adjutant General, Major General Len Beyers. He assured the CGS that no special women's unit of the SANF was to be formed, but that he had obtained permission from the Defence Authorities Committee to replace men in the South African Air Force (SAAF) by personnel from the Women's Auxiliary Army Service (WAAS). These women would wear distinctive uniforms. He continued that the newspaper had clearly been misinformed. Sir van Ryneveld was not satisfied with this reply and informed Maj Gen Beyers in no uncertain terms that "*..matters of policy are to be referred to and decided by the CGS who, where necessary, obtains the authority of the Minister..*". [3] The very next day, Sir van Ryneveld, informed the Adjutant General, the Quartermaster General, the Deputy Chief of Staff, and the officers commanding Inland

and Coastal areas, that Minister of Defence, Gen Smuts, had instructed him to cancel all steps taken to recruit women for the SAAF wearing a distinctive uniform. He continued, that under no circumstances might a matter of policy be submitted to the Defence Authorities Committee, without the prior approval of the CGS and the Minister of Defence. 4 This was followed by yet another signal to Beyers, questioning rumours that women were being recruited to serve in the SANF. Sir van Ryneveld expressed, "*..grave concern about the obvious loss of control*", and continued that Gen Smuts was "*..very angry*". 5 Similar signals followed. As a result, on April 26th 1943, Maj Gen Len Beyers signaled to Sir van Ryneveld: "*I repeat that no separate unit..has been formed. A section of WAAS for employment in the SANF was authorised, but only a section, in precisely the same way as you have sections in the artillery, the signals and clericals....I viewed the granting of special badges to and wearing of a distinctive uniform by the WAAS section of the SANF as a routine matter to be dealt with sectionally, and not as a matter of policy to be dealt with by you or the Minister..*". 6 Beyers continued that his behavior had in fact been in accordance with the UDF's policy of replacing men with women, but that the order to cancel everything had nonetheless been carried out. Beyers also accepted full responsibility for the incident, followed by the unkind comment: "*If you mean that I have ceased to have your confidence, I shall be glad if you will so inform the Minister. with view to my replacement.*" 7 Nothing further is recorded of this unpleasant incident.

Strangely enough, only four months later, on August 10th 1943, on recommendation of Captain Dalgleish, in direct contrast to everything Sir van Ryneveld had said on the matter, Field Marshall Smuts approved the establishment of a Women's Auxiliary Naval Service. On August 13 1943, the order of precedence within the Women's Auxiliary Defence Corps , now numbering four units, was laid down as (1) WAAF, (2) WAAS, (3) WAMPC, (4) WANS (later SWANS) 8

It was thus only in August 1943, that the formation of a Women's naval unit was officially sanctioned. Once the official go-ahead had been given, former WAAS member, Lt Brenda Elizabeth Skyrme, was appointed to evaluate the flood of applications, as well as to organise the unit. 9 She was later succeeded by Second Officer S. Hattingh. Along with the new applications (far exceeding requirements) came numerous requests from WAAS and WAAF personnel to be transferred to the SWANS. This was not allowed since the UDF could not afford either to retrain personnel or waste the training it had already given personnel. In this early period a total of 316 women joined the new women's naval unit.

Initially there was some difficulty in determining a name for the new women's naval unit. The first suggestion was WANS, to conform to WAAS and the other women's units. It was argued, however, that the name savoured of sickly paleness. 10 The addition of an "S" for South Africa, made all the difference. From then on the unit was known as the SWANS.

The SWANS's uniforms consisted of bell-bottom trousers, seaman's jerseys, steel helmets, heavy coats and gas masks. After the first passing out parade, the SWANS were allowed to sow their killick and HDO badges on to the sleeves of their uniforms. The

HDO badge, had a coil, a harpoon and a lightning flash. The CM badge had a single torpedo.

The popular myth is that women in the South African armed forces served in clerical and administrative capacities only. As has been shown, this was certainly not true of ASWAAS, nor of the women who served in the SSS. Both of these women's units were, technically speaking, active combat units. Similarly, although some SWANS were clerical workers, much of their work demanded a high degree of technical qualification, and was also a form of active combat. [11] As it happened the SWANS measured up splendidly, soon performing jobs, that in other units would have been performed by male officers. They made a significant contribution to the effectiveness of the UDF, not only through their skills, but also by alleviating the alarming manpower shortages of the Union.

TRAINING

Specially trained, the SWANS rendered invaluable service as harbour defence operators on Robben Island, at Saldanha Bay, Umhlanga Rocks, and at Port Elizabeth. Technical training courses each running for four weeks were held for groups of 30 girls at a time, on Robben Island. To be accepted for training as a SWAN, the minimum qualification was matric. This would be followed by a thorough interviewing procedure conducted by Brenda Skyrme.

Before specialising all SWANS had to undergo a basic disciplinary and training course at HMSAS Unitie. Altogether fourteen of these courses took place from October 1943 to March 1945. Each course would include parade drill, gunwork, signals, live-saving and technical training. More specifically, the following subjects were included: [12]

a) A history of the South African Navy, its customs and its traditions
b) The Organisation of the South African Naval Forces
c) King's Regulations and Admirality Instructions
d) Naval terms, bells, watches and divisions of times
e) Signals procedure and communication
f) Types and Parts of Ships
g) High explosives and gas
h) Basic seamanship
i) The Theory of Minesweeping
j) General Discipline

Included in the General Discipline course was the so-called Higher Education Test (HET). Apparently, the purpose of the HET, was to determine the "mental ability" of each SWAN. Typical requirements of the HET were: [13]

- An essay on one of the following subjects; A Book I have Read lately, The Value of Music, Three Famous Women, War at Sea, and Notes on Celebrities
- A map of the Far East zone
- Sums and problems

Once this basic training and disciplinary course had been completed, SWANS could opt for specialised training in one or more of the following courses:

a) Harbour Defence Operator Third Class. This course was held on Robben Island, and included elementary electrics, magnetism, and instruction on harbour defences asdics apparatus and indicator loops. The course also included visual watch training.
b) Harbour Defence Operator Second Class. This course was also held on Robben Island. It was similar to the above with additional training on integrator equipment, LISA gear on patrol vessels, and transmitters for vocal contact.
c) Controlled Mining Operator. This course was held at the Northern Naval Barracks at Saldanha Bay
d) The Controlled Mining Wiremen course, also held at Saldanha Bay
e) The Higher Submarine detector course, held at HMSAS Unitie
f) The WADC Special Security Course at Voortrekkerhoogte in Pretoria
g) The UDF Army Education Service Information Course at Wynberg camp in Young's Field
h) The SAMC Nursing Course at Wynberg Military Hospital, Cape Town
i) Demobilisation Routines at the Dispersal Depot in Pretoria.

Despite such intense training, only one SWAN ever fired a shot in anger. She was Sue Hodgkinson, who was stationed along with the rest of her unit at Saldanha Bay. Sue was on duty in the control room on the night of June 1st 1944, when she detected signals that a metal object had crossed the cables laid at the harbour entrance. She informed the Officer on Duty, and on his command, pulled the lever which detonated the controlled minefield. [14] It has never been confirmed that there had in fact been an attempt by a German U-boat or a Japanese submarine to penetrate the harbour defences at Saldanha Bay at the time.

On completion of specialised training the SWANS would become part of one of three branches, the Communications Branch, the Technical Branch, or the Clerical Branch. What follows is a brief account of the jobs the SWANS did during the Second World War in the various branches.

a) Duties performed by SWANS in the Communication Branch included the following
- Telephonists and switchboard operators
- Telex operators
- Signals operators

b) Duties performed by SWANS in the Clerical Branch included the following
- Stores assistants
- Accounts branch writers
- Clerks
- Shorthand typists
- Recording Officers' assistants
- SO Security assistants
- Regulating

The majority of SWANS serving in the Clerical branch were stationed in Cape Town.

c) Duties performed by SWANS serving in the Technical Branch, which was the active combatant branch, included the following:

- Harbour Defence Operators, working with indicator loops and harbour defence asdics
- Controlled Mining Operations. A total of 35 SWANS were trained and gave service in this capacity. They were, at the time, probably the only women's unit in the world with such responsibilities. [15] Controlled Mining was the fourth category of technical work done by World War II SWANS
- CM Wiremen at shore stations
- Visual watch, which included ship recognition
- Engine maintenance
- Repair of ship asdics
- Simulated Anti-Submarine attack

Almost all Technical training was conducted at what was known as Sub-Depot Robben Island.

TECHNICAL TRAINING AT SUB-DEPOT ROBBEN ISLAND

The threat of U-boat attacks on convoys rounding the Cape, had been the inducement persuading the Admirality to send out the original A/SFD (harbour defence asdics) to South Africa, to install it, and to train SANF personnel to operate it. This all took place at Sub-Depot Robben Island, which consequently became the alma mater of all SANF A/SFD personnel, male and female, and upper and lower deck.

The training of A/SFD Officers and ratings on Robben Island began in January and February 1943 respectively. The training courses for Officers lasted six weeks, and the courses for ratings took between three to four weeks. The first training course for technical SWANS on Robben Island was conducted in November 1943 The new recruits had responded to an mysteriously worded and understated recruitment call, "*Recruits ...must be prepared for service anywhere in the Union. They must also be prepared to perform duties other than those of a non-combatant nature*". [16] On attestation, the SWANS had to sign the Combatant Oath, consenting in writing to be employed in combatant duties. The total of successful A/SFD trainees, was as follows: [17]

- 54 Officers
- 83 ratings completing HDO3 (Harbour Defence Operators Third Class)
- 14 ratings completing HDO2 (Harbour Defence Operators Second Class)
- 156 SWANS completing HDO3
- 21 SWANS completing HDO2

After SWANS had been performing watchkeeping duties on Robben Island for only two months, Brigadier General H.S Wakefield informed the Chief of the General Staff in February 1944, that SWANS "*apart from saving manpower (were) more suitable for this type of work*" than their former male colleagues. [18]

The Commanding Officer on Robben Island was Lt Perkins (also known as Polly) of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. The First Lt, who was also the instructor on technical matters, such as, watchkeeping, electrical circuits and asdic equipment, was Lt Murray MacGregor (fondly known as Mac). Other Officers included "Legs" Bosman, "Bunny"

Bam, Bobby Green, Billy Muller, and Bob de Beer. Lt George J Perkins and Lt Andrew MacGregor, were in turn, the last two Commanding Officers of Sub-Depot Robben Island. MacGregor recalls that as soon as the SANF Headquarters found out, that he had been a school teacher by profession, it was immediately decided that he should be the one to train the technical SWANS. [19] He had agreed only to train the first few groups but ended up training all of them. He recalls that he had trained male ratings before the SWANS came to the Island, but that the SWANS "*..beat them absolutely*", and continued that "*..it was a real pleasure with them*". [20] Lt Perkins had been sent to South Africa in July 1942, along with a small party of officers and ratings. This small party had been involved in the installation of anti-submarine fixed defences around the Union's major ports and harbours until January 1943. On completion of the installation of the A/SFD equipment at Durban Harbour, Lt Perkins was appointed the Officer in Command of the Operational Station and Training Establishment on Robben Island. His first trainee SWANS, thirteen in all, arrived in November 1943. After completing the A/SFD training course with very good results, they took over watchkeeping duties. Further contingents of SWANS arrived at intervals, and on completion of training were posted to the various A/SFD stations around the South African coast, including Robben Island. More advanced courses were arranged for SWANS who had qualified in the early stages. Those presumed to have leadership qualities were advanced in rating to Chief Petty Officer, Petty Officer or Leading HDO. Training of technical SWANS on Robben Island, continued until VE Day in 1945.

The training courses for harbour defence operators conducted on Robben Island varied in technical complexity. The HDO3 course, for instance, lasted one month and covered elementary electrics, the theory of magnetism, the operation of indicator loops, harbour defences asdics and oral and written exams. The HDO2 course, on the other had, was a week or so longer, and covered all the above in slightly more detail, with additional training in the location of faults, cable testing, and operation of generators. Other, progressively more technically advanced, courses were introduced at a later stage. Some of these include: [21]

1) A Degaussing Recorders Course, which was completed by 13 SWANS, who consequently served at the Degaussing Range on Robben Island
2) A Dome Teacher Operators Course, which was completed by seven SWANS. This course lasted four and a half months, and included simulated anti-submarine warfare
3) The Controlled Mining Operators Course, which was completed by 35 SWANS
4) The CM Wiremen Course, which was completed by four SWANS
5) Six SWANS went even further, to complete the Higher Submarine Detectors Course at Cape Town Docks. The Course included repairs of asdic sets, knowledge of depth charges and other explosives, and anti-submarine war simulation.

Technical Training of SWANS on Robben Island included the following subjects:

1) Visual Watch at the Battery Observation Post
2) Ship Recognition. The first thing SWANS had to learn, was to identify the battleships and the cruisers. This required knowledge of armament particulars, radar fittings, the rake of masts, and the number of funnels on a ship. Next, SWANS had to learn to identify destroyers, frigates, sloops, minesweepers, minelayers, patrol ships,

and all other small sea vessels. The final skill to acquire, was the recognition of merchant ships.

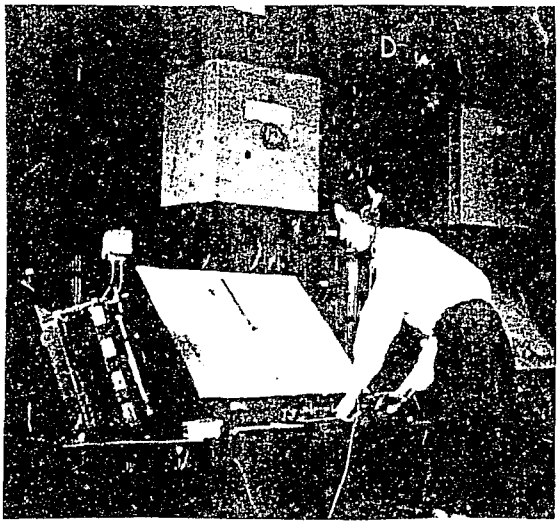
3) Elementary Electrics
4) Indicator Loops. SWANS had to learn to operate the instruments connected to the undersea cables, by interpreting the impulses registered through a delicately poised pen dotting its path over a slowly revolving paper roll. Any deviation from the center line would indicate a crossing. Lucy Ellis remembers that "*..the loop system was easy to understand since it was based on the principle of the galvanometer, provided of course that one did not become bogged down in the finer points of photoelectric* cells, *heterodyne valves and the like*". 22
5) Harbour Defence Asdics. In addition to the four indicator loops, there were four harbour defence asdic units set on tripods anchored to the seabed, and connected by multi-core cables to the Watch Room Repeaters. The repeaters would transmit an audible "ping". The SWANS on duty would listen for an echo on the "ping". This echo would be heard through the operator's headphones, when the sound of the "Ping" would bounce of any object in its path. Next to the repeater stood a special device for measuring the echoes. By using this elementary equipment, the SWAN operators could calculate the distance, bearing and speed of the object causing the echoes. 23

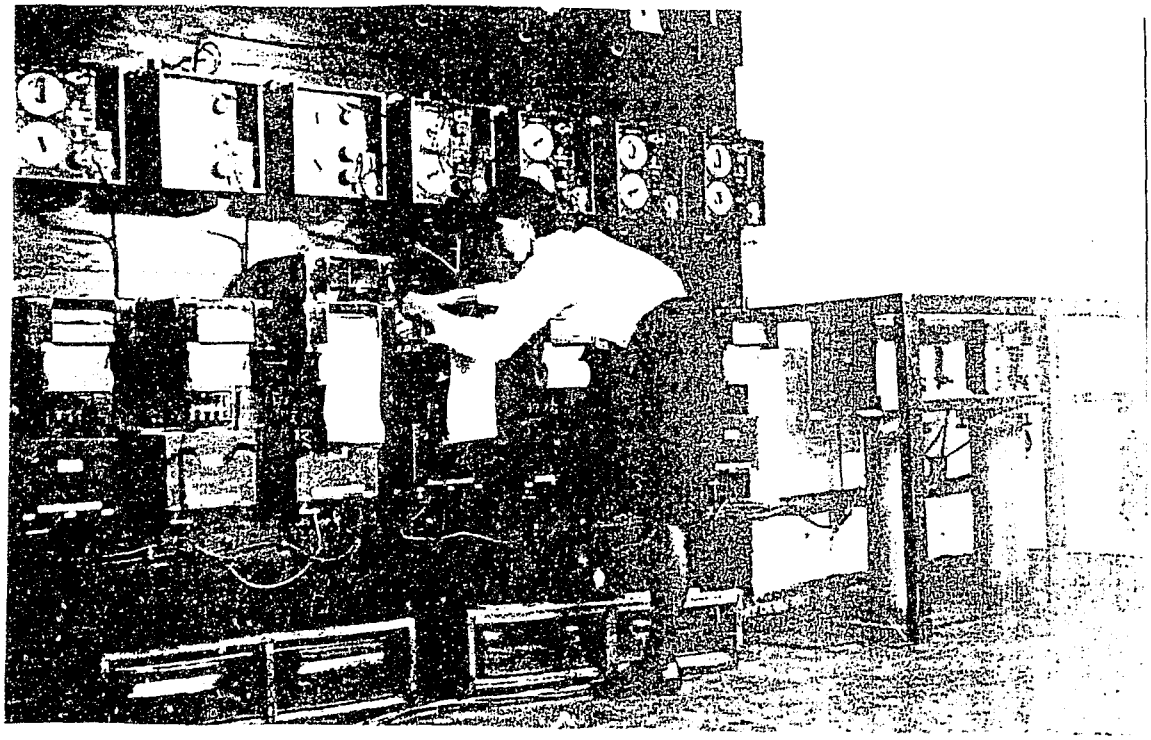
The routine laid down at the Naval Training Center at Sub-Depot Robben Island was largely based on Royal Navy routines for shore establishments. A few adaptations were necessary to conform to SANF procedures and standards. Adaptations included, the hoisting of colours, morning prayers, daily divisions, liberty rounds, and involuntary attendance at Sunday church services.

The Harbour Defence Asdic Station on Robben Island became operational on October 30th 1942, when the four main indicator loops of four miles each, between Melkhosstrand and Clifton on the outer western side on Robben Island were activated. Two shorter loops, each half a mile long, were added at each extremity in 1943. In 1942, four type 131 HAD (Harbour Defence Asdics) had been laid and connected up to the shore station on Robben Island. Other anti-submarine defences operated from Sub-Depot Robben Island, included the Degaussing Range. In total, three systems of harbour defence detection were used and operated by SWANS. These were, the indicator loop systems, the harbour defence asdics, and the type 135 horizontal echo sounder adapted to detect any attempts by small submarines to enter the harbour areas. 24

Sub-Depot Robben Island (SDRI) was also known as SDRI Cement. SDRI acquired this descriptive name as a result of the unpainted rough-casted exterior finish of the buildings, as well as from the cemented "deck", and the security fenced space in which it stood. Embedded in this cement "deck" were hundreds of seashells. 25 Tall and graceful Eucalyptus trees, which continuously cast leaves and seed pods, requiring unskimped cleaning efforts by the SWANS on daily Duty Watch, grew on the one side of SDRI. These trees were also marked with white rings to assist in walking and driving during black outs.

1) SWAN at a harbour defence asdic terminal at SDRI 1945 (Laver, Sailor Women, Sea Women, SWANS)
2) SWAN at the loop recoders at SDRI 1945 (Laver, Sailor Women, Sea Women, SWANS)





SERVICE ON ROBBEN ISLAND

Before the SWANS arrived, ASWAAS personnel had already experienced life on the Island. ASWAAS personnel, who had been range-finders, and who had worked on the coastal guns, had left the Island in late 1943, shortly before the disbanding of ASWAAS was completed in January 1944. In a way, the SWANS replaced the ASWAAS personnel. Changes in the Union Government's defence policies had brought this about. By late 1943, it no longer seemed likely that Cape Town would be attacked by surface raiders. The new threat seemed to come from submarines. The emphasis was accordingly shifted from coastal artillery defences to underwater vigilance.

Ruth Rundle describes life on Robben Island as "*very routine*" and adds that she had never "*experienced such supervision*" in her life. [26] Patty Ferguson remembers the Island as "*being clean and windswept, with the sound of the sea and the dismal groaning of the foghorn forever in our ears*". Moyra Slevin recalls that she "*..really loathed Robben Island, with its gnarled, dusty trees, shabby looking old buildings, and atmosphere of ghosts and decay*". [27] For Liane Howard, on the other hand, her time of the Island was "*..one of the happiest times in my life, although admittedly, the most tiring.*" [28]

Peggy Forbes and Sylvia White were in charge of the SWANS on Robben Island. Formal duties on the Island included the following:

1) Watchkeeping: "*It was our solemn and serious duty to see that those famous ships and valuable merchant and Liberty ships did not come to harm through U-boat action while they were in our area*" [29] In the Navy, the same words and terms are applied to shore stations as are used on ships. Thus the "ships company" on Robben Island, was divided into four watches, under command of a Petty Officer, and an Officer of the Watch. These watches came on duty in rotation, so that other chores could be undertaken by a watch on Duty, but not actually on watch. This always left one watch about to go ashore, and one watch about to return from shore leave. Another watch would be sleeping in preparation for night duty. The fifth watch, would be on actual visual watch duty. The watches were called the green, blue, red, white and yellow watch respectively. It was only towards the end of the war, when a big draft to Durban reduced the number of SWANS on Robben Island dramatically, that they switched to the six-hour rotation West Country watch system. As a result the yellow watch fell away.

   The most unpopular and most dreaded watch, was the middle watch (from 12:00 to 4:00am). Middle watch, meant being woken up in the middle of the night, often in freezing cold. As a result, SWANS would sometimes sleep fully clothed, on top of their beds, so that they would be ready when the SWAN duty-driver arrived. Liane Howard remembers that she "*..could never catch up the broken sleep..*". [30] The best watch, on the other hand, was from 4:00am to 8:00am, since this was usually followed by shore leave.

One of the most hated aspects of watchkeeping was Divisions. Attendance at daily divisions was compulsory for all those not actually on watch, including those who had just come of middle watch. Divisions consisted of prayers, inspection, and any special announcements from the Commanding Officer. The ceremony also included a march. The music for the march was always a recording by the Royal Marines' Band of "Life on the Ocean Wave". 31

Visual Watch: At the Battery Observation Post (BOP), pairs of SWANS would observe the traffic between Robben Island and Table Bay, identifying all passing ships, on a 24 hour basis. This duty was necessary, because the instruments used for the detection of midget submarines were very delicately set. A large ship passing over the detection cables and equipment, without prior adjustment, could give the instruments such a jolt, as to put them out of action for dangerously long periods. During such a time, ships in Table Bay harbour would be less effectively protected from underwater threats. The operators on Visual watch at the BOP, would thus phone through to the Watch Office at Sub-Depot Robben Island at regular intervals reporting all shipping activity. To enter the BOP, one had to climb up a steep steel ladder carrying a clipboard and a huge pair of binoculars, a difficult feat, made almost impossible, when the ladder became slippery in wet weather. At the top of the ladder, there was a trap door. Sheila Maspero recalls that, "*..once we were inside the other person had to put the trapdoor down, and nobody could get in without giving us warning. So we tended to take books and letter writing with us..*" 32

Visual watch was exciting at times. Ruth Rundle remembers watching as "*..huge convoys and well known battleships sailed majestically into Table Bay*". 33 Sheila Maspero remembers being on duty one day, when there was close to zero visibility. "*It was the thickest mist I had ever seen, one literally could not see five yards*". 34 Not long after going on duty, Sheila was phoned by the Leading Hand, who asked whether she could see anything. She answered that she couldn't. Only 15 minutes later the P/O phoned with the same request and received the same answer. The exchange was repeated five minutes later when the Officer of the Watch phoned. Half an hour later, Sheila couldn't even see the ground, when she heard a "*..thunderous bang on the trapdoor and up came the Commanding Officer. He marched in and swung his binoculars around the windows...He said he couldn't see anything and stomped of in a fury*" 35 What had in fact happened, was that all the loops and equipment were indicating that numerous ships were crossing. Since Sheila could not see anything, it was assumed that submarines were in fact crossing the loops, and as a result minesweepers and an anti-submarine fleet was sent out. Only to find the American task Force, a convoy of over a dozen ships, coming into Port. 36

The Battery Observation Post building was the same large concrete structure formerly used by ASWAAS personnel for Visual Watch. It stood near the lighthouse on the southern side of the Island. Lucy Ellis recalls that it had two levels. On the upper level, a large room with windows on three sides giving an unbroken view of the coast to the northwest and south, was located. In front of each window stood a swiveling stand for the binoculars. These stands were mounted on a base calibrated to the points

of the compass for speedy direction finding. [37] The room also contained a phone which was used for the regular reports on shipping to the Watch Offices at Sub-Depot.

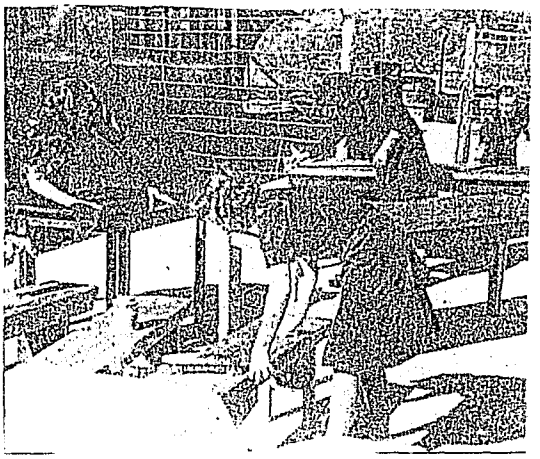
2) Dog Watch: This involved driving around the Island in a "troopy", lighting all the paraffin lamps which were placed at strategic positions on the Island, for the benefit of patrol vessels

3) The Hydrophone Watch: Hydrophone duty was commonly known as working in the "ears" of the station. Four operators wearing headphones, which isolated them from each other completely, worked in what was called the "Ha-de-Dah" room. Operators would listen to the sound of the asdic "pings", coming at regular intervals, waiting to hear an echo. Concentration was absolutely crucial when on Hydrophone duty. Schools of fish, and even layers of water at different temperatures, could return an echo. These had to be distinguished form the echoes produced by a submarine. The importance of concentration was emphasized by posters on the walls of the Ha-de-Dah room, "*..showing how if one spent one minute thinking and one minute drinking it might well end in a sinking*". [38] It was also possible to become slightly "*ping happy*", hearing echoes where there really had been none. [39] At the same time, remembers Lucy, it was remarkably difficult to stay awake in the wee small hours. "*We would try to keep awake with cups of cocoa, and cigarettes*". [40] An experienced operator could tell the type and size of a ship, simply by listening to the echo, and by the time it took the vessel to pass out of the Hydrophone range.

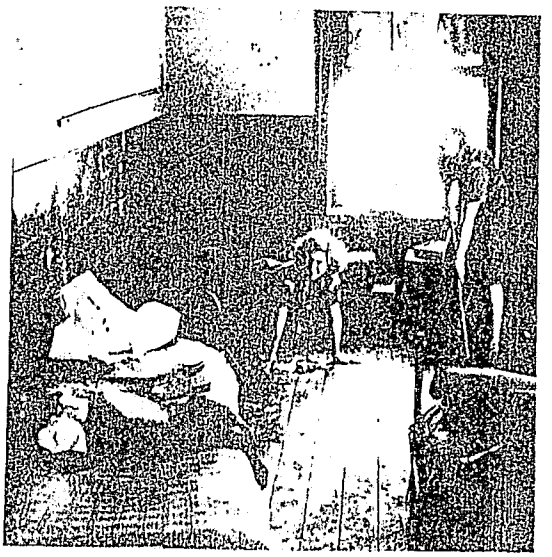
4) The Loop Room: The loop room was known as the "eyes" of the station. Here recorder rolls were placed along the one wall and operators sat in front of them visually checking the tracings of the recording needles. Lucy remembers that it was easier to stay awake on loop room duty, since one could talk to the other operators, and there was a greater deal of activity to keep operators alert. At regular intervals the command of "Perts Please" would come from the Petty Officer on Duty, who would then register the perturbations registered on each recorder. [41] The telephone would ring at regular intervals with information from the operators at the BOP. There was a loudspeaker suspended from the ceiling from which noises would sometimes come. There were also conversations with the patrol vessels, which at times could be rather hilarious, remembers Lucy. [42] To protect the instruments, adjustments known as "studding down" had to be made when a large ship was approaching the detection equipment. Persons would also be sent out to check the voltage of the generator, since even a slight variation in voltage could affect the instruments. In addition, as Meg Ball remembers, one had to be careful in operating the asdic keys, if not, one could receive a 200 volt shock. [43] Periodically it was also required of operators to switch from the regular engines to the emergency electrical equipment.

The Watch Rooms that I have referred to, were situated in an L-shaped building west of the Quarterdeck. This building also contained the Captain's Office, the Ha-de-Dah room, a large room containing the loop terminals and recorders, a small storeroom, a tiny room

The SWANS also had a list of less "significant" and less 'technical" duties. Top: SWANS cleaning mess tables and benches at SDRI, 1945. Centre Left: Cleaning near the ablution block. Centre Right: Preparing for Captain's Rounds in "Worse-to-Putrid".
Bottom: SWANS on Duty Watch sweeping the decks at SDRI. (Laver, Sailor Women, Sea Women, SWANS)









containing the radio telephone with which contact with patrol ships and the Port War Signal Station at Signal Hill was maintained, and a small room containing the electrical equipment that drove all the instruments. [44] The building also contained a direct line to the Battery Observation Post. The generator room was located just opposite this L-shaped building.

Patrol vessels were in constant contact with operators at Sub-Depot Robben Island. Marie van Rooyen remembers a particularly amusing incident with regard to this. On one of the first occasions, when a SWAN was talking to a ship on the radio, the ship called "*Hello Charlie, this is Sheila*", in a deep man's voice. The reply followed in a gentle women's voice, "*Hello Sheila, this is Charlie*". There was a dead silence at the man's end of the line. [45]

Less purposeful duties at SDRI included scrubbing decks and sweeping the cement surrounds of the buildings. To this was added endless scrubbing of mess tables by the SWANS on duty watch. Their cabins and other buildings providing accommodation, too had to be kept in a spotless condition. "*We really did a lot of cleaning*", remembers Ruth Rundle.

LIFE ON ROBBEN ISLAND

THE CROSSING

The usual method of crossing between Robben Island and the mainland was still with the Isie. In bad weather, the Clara, a vessel of sturdier build, would occasionally take the SWANS across to Cape Town. Occasionally SWANS would cross over to the mainland on the SAAF's crash boats. Since these boats, stationed at Murray's Bay, were intended for sea-rescue operations, this method of crossing was frowned upon, if not forbidden. Marie van Rooyen remembers actually steering one of these crash boats, an experience she describes as "*exhilarating*".

The crossing between Cape Town and Robben Island, for some meant getting seasick every five days. Since SWANS were on duty for five days, and then on shore leave in Cape Town for 36 hours. Furthermore, for reasons of morale, SWANS were dissuaded from spending their free time on the Island. "*Most of us were only to pleased to get a little bit of city life, especially the night life*". [46] Yet the trip across was a nightmare for most. Many were faced with the choice of staying below deck and getting seasick, or staying on deck and getting drenched.

Nan Sharples has kept a cartoon by John M. Jackson, titled "The Cruel Sea", which depicts a group of bedraggled and dripping wet SWANS coming ashore at Cape Town Harbour. Nan remembers an incident where this really happened. On a day when the sea was particularly rough, and the Isie had to be escorted by a minesweeper, Nan was sitting on the hatch cover, with some other SWANS hoping to escape getting sea-sick. She describes that the pitching was so extreme "*..that at times we were looking up at our feet, and at other times down at our feet*". [47] On arrival at Cape Town harbour, they were of

course sopping wet, "*..our hats flopped limply over our faces, and water dripped from our hair. People in Cape Town just stared and stared..*" [48]

On another occasion the sea was so rough that army personnel were not allowed to cross from Cape Town to Robben Island. Six SWANS were, however, allowed to make the crossing. Probably, as Athlene McGarr said, because the SWANS were "*expendable*". [49] The gale that was blowing was so fierce, that the skipper required the SWANS to sign an indemnity form, complete with names of next of kin, before agreeing to take them across to Robben Island. Liane Howard describes how they were thrown from one bulkhead to the other, their belongings falling on top of them. [50] In order to avoid getting seasick, they had gone on deck, where they were clinging on for dear life, despite repeated orders by the skipper to go below deck again. The crossing, which usually took 45 minutes, on this occasion took two whole hours. One of the reasons for this was that the Isie had been blown past the Island. When they finally arrived on Robben Island they were treated "*like heroines*", there were fires burning on the beach and they were revived with hot baths, cocoa and sherry. [51]

On days when the sea was calm the crossing was beautiful, with breathtaking views of Table Mountain. During some of the crossings, the women had the privilege of an exciting escort by a school of dolphins. Lucy Ellis describes how the dolphins would "*..suddenly appear beside the Isie, and the first we would know of it would be the rush of several sleek bodies curving through the air in perfect unison and down into the water again. This exercise would be repeated several times...and then the real performance would begin, leaping high into the air and returning to the water with an only to intentional belly flopper that showered us in spray, one moment racing alongside us...the next tail-dancing, seemingly suspended in the air..*" [52]

THE MESS

The Mess Deck contained long wooden tables and long hard wooden benches. Each SWAN had a tin plate and a tin mug, with which they would have to queue at the mess entrance before meals. The SWANS shared their Mess with the Petty Officers, although the Officers sat at a small table complete with a white damask tablecloth and crockery, separated from the rest of the Mess tables.

As far as the food at the Robben Island Mess was concerned, the SWANS seem to have been reasonably satisfied. Meg Ball remembers that the food was "*quite good and plentiful*". [53] One of the cooks on Robben Island had previously worked in a Muizenberg Hotel, and was thus very capable. Shelagh Ball recalls that another cook specialised in hot curry and "*tomato bredie*". [54] "*We had plenty of butter and cheese, jelly and custard featured largely on the menu, as did stewed fruit*". [55] In season they were also served large quantities of crayfish. There were, of course, some complaints. Meg Ball remembers that her "*pet hates were the eggs, pale green in hue, and the tinned meat and vegetable stew*". [56] The biggest complaint regarded the lack of drinking water, and the attacks of "*Island tummy*" that resulted from the brackish water.

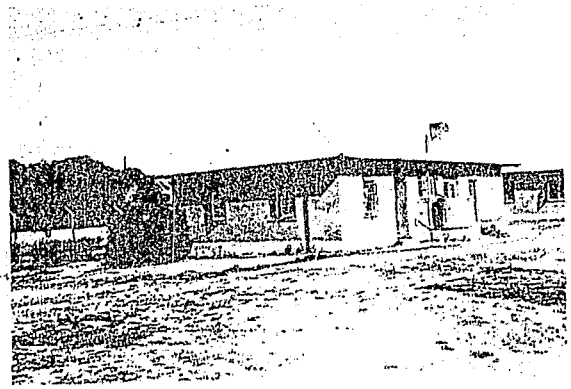
ACCOMMODATION

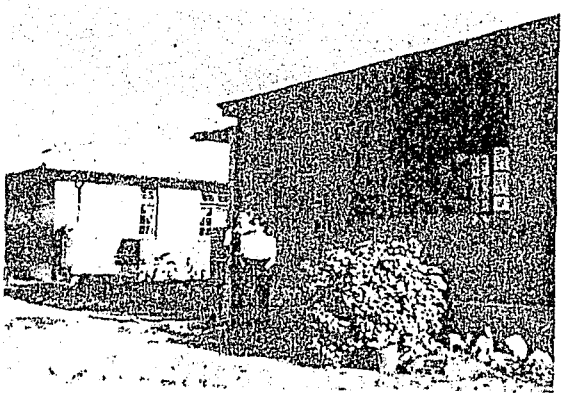
On arrival at Robben Island in 1943, Sheila Maspero and the rest of her small contingent were taken to their sleeping quarters at "Worse-to-Putrid". Its previous occupants had named the building "Worse-to-Putrid". The name was perpetuated by a painted sign over the entrance, boldly declaring the name. Sheila describes the building as *"rather appalling"*, [57] a sentiment shared by everyone. The living quarters were crowded, and there could be no talk of comfort. "Worse-to-Putrid" was really only a large room, with two windows at the one end, and another two at either side of the entrance. Iron beds with coir mattresses were lined up against one wall of the building. At the head of each bed, describes Lucy Ellis, stood a chair, and at the foot of each bed their grey metal "ditty boxes". Against the opposite wall stood two chest of drawers, continues Lucy, two girls would share one. Each SWAN also had a row of hooks on the wall, from which to hang the burberry, grey coat and hat. The windows were painted over in dark blue, as part of the black out measures that were being enforced by 1943. Every plank of the building's wooden floor was at a different level. The only advantage offered by the building, was that when Captain's Rounds came, there wasn't much to tidy up or clean.

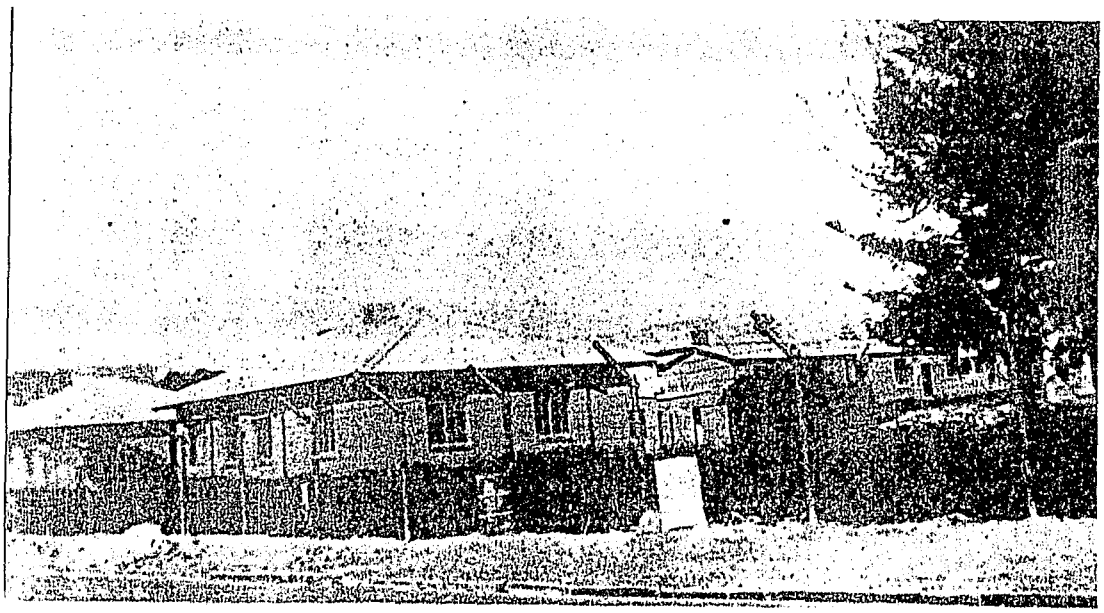
There were only a couple of outside toilets, which blocked up regularly. Old newspapers served in place of ordinary toilet paper. A further indication of their primitive living conditions was the dirty and narrow bath. Sheila Maspero recalls, that *"..when somebody broad like me sat in the bath, she never reached the bottom but was jammed halfway down and had to scoop the water up to wash"*. [58] Anne Henry remembers, *"..having to clear away spider webs before I could bath.."*. [59] Finally, since the ablution facilities, were quite a long walk away from their actual quarters, everything had to be transported back and forth.

From the time of arrival, SWANS had been told that the Island was haunted, *"that dogs barked at nothing with their hair raised"*, [60] and that strange things happened. "Worse-to-Putrid", with its painted windows and eerie atmosphere contributed to such beliefs. Particularly after sunset, when *"..a deep chill would descend on the building, bringing a very unwelcome sense of depression"*. [61] During the night there would be mysterious sounds of running water, doors and floorboards would creak, and the wind would moan through the openings and cracks of the building. Lucy Ellis describes, how in the first week or so, nobody slept. Only later, when exhaustion had set in, SWANS would fall asleep, only to be woken up every night at about 4am, due to some inexplicable sound they all thought they had heard. *"Often we would welcome a shower of rain, for it drowned out the other not so natural sounds of the wretched place"*. [62] A more amusing story concerns the "Ghost Walker". The rumour spread that a ghost was walking down the coir matting in the central passage of the dormitory at night. More and more girls heard the ghost, and since it was clear *"that they weren't fooling"*, the SWANS were soon in a state of fear. [63] The mystery was finally solved when a group of girls had built up the courage to follow the ghost, only to find it had been another SWAN grinding her teeth in her sleep. In the end, as far as can be ascertained, nobody ever actually saw anything uncanny, and *"..we all felt slightly foolish to be so spooked by such a nondescript ugly old building"*. [64]

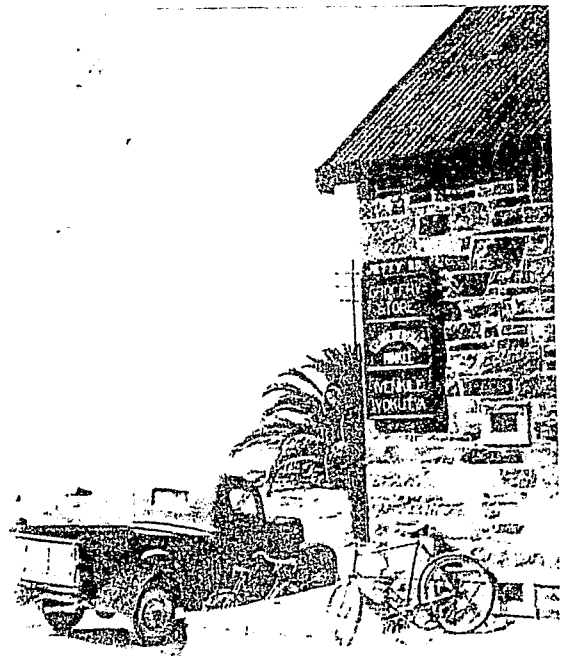
WAAS camp on Robben Island, that was later used as overflow accommodation for the SWANS. (Laver, Sailor Women, Sea Women, SWANS)

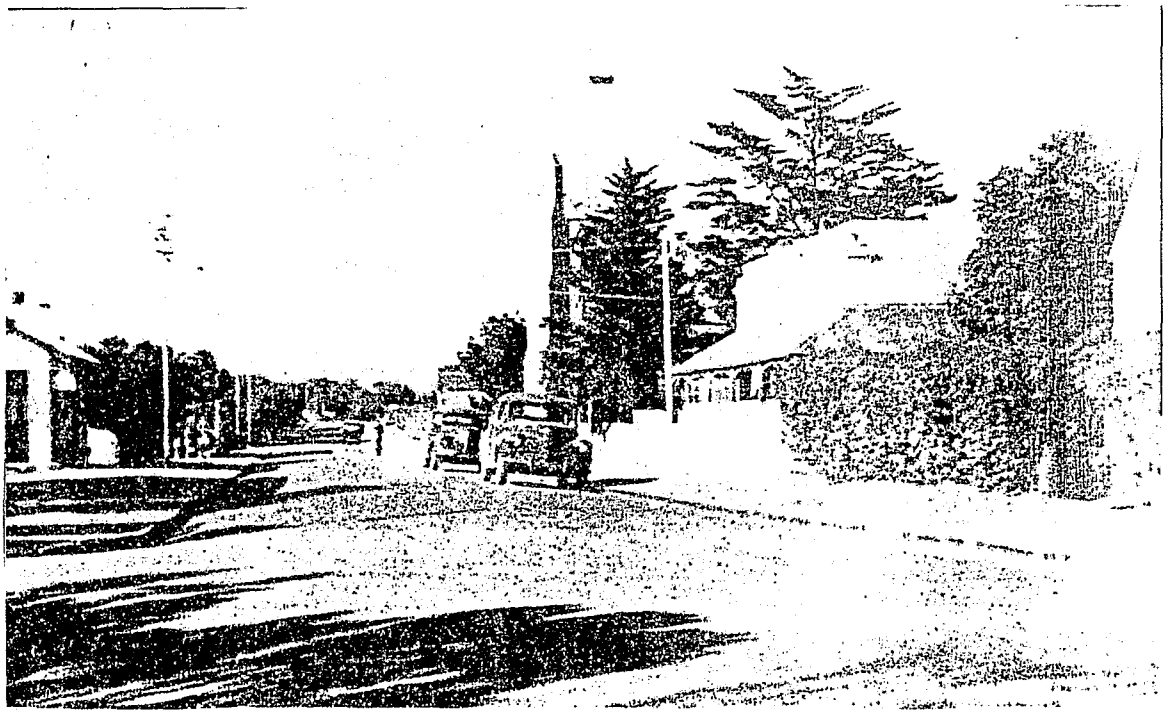






1) The shop in the village on Robben Island, CPGI 1944 (Laver, Sailor Women, Sea Women, SWANS)
2) The main street of the village on Robben Island 1945 (Laver, Sailor Women, Sea Woman, SWANS)





In May 1945, after completion of their training, the SWANS were moved to new quarters at Sub-Depot (formerly used by ASWAAS personnel). The new accommodation was in the main Naval camp, near the lighthouse, and was surrounded by barbed wire. It consisted of a row of bungalows, which stood down a gravel road called Shearer Avenue. Each bungalow had two rooms, a bathroom, a kitchen and a lounge. On average, five SWANS shared a bungalow, three in the large bedroom, and two in the smaller. Some bungalows contained bunk beds, in which case one would be *"doubling up"* with somebody. Others contained ordinary truckle beds, in which case one would merely share a room. The one major drawback, was that water for a bath had to be heated by a firing stove that needed to be stoked continuously. At the same time no shovels or scoops to fill the stoves with coal were provided. *"We found that the water took so long to heat up, that by the time it was hot enough for bathing it was almost time to go on watch...after that, absolute cleanliness lost a lot of its attraction and we settled for bathing on alternate days"*. [65] Although these bungalows were a significant improvement on the conditions at "Worse-to-Putrid", living conditions were still far from comfortable. A SWAN, who before attestation had been involved in housing issues, requested to speak to the Commanding Officer of Sub-Depot Robben Island. She informed him that the SWANS's accommodation did not comply with set regulations, such as the minimum cubic feet per person, nor to standards of hygiene. She was rather bluntly informed that the war demanded prioritization, and that accommodation for SWANS was rather low on the Military's list of priorities.

ENTERTAINMENT AND LEISURE

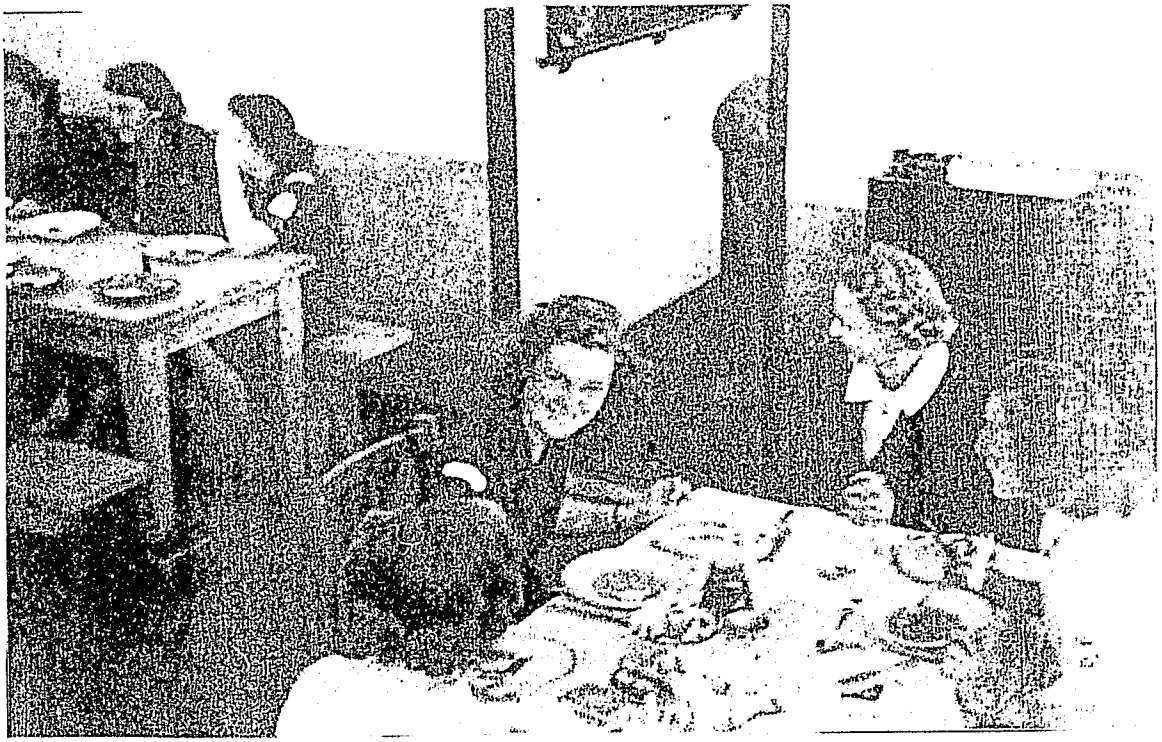
The beauty of Robben Island is described in almost every account of life on the Island. It is this beauty, more than anything else that filled the leisure time of personnel on the Island. Cynthia Smuts recalls, for instance, how *"on a beautiful spring day"* in August 1943, they went *"..marching up a low hill, with yellow mimosas weighing down wet trees and arum lilies and chincherinchees breaking through the damp grass..."* [66] Margaret Rae describes the *"thousands of arum lilies and narcissi blooming everywhere..the delightful views of the distant..mountains covered in snow.."* [67] Athlene McGarr remembers that the arum lilies on the slopes towards Cape Town, *"..grew shoulder height with flowers easily twelve inches across"*. [68]

In summer they would enjoy swimming from a small sandy beach. Cycling around the Island was a favorite pass time, although nobody seems to know where the bicycles came from. Another favorite summer activity was canoeing. On lazy days one could simply watch the hundreds of seagulls or penguins on the Island. In winter, SWANS undertook long walks around the Island. Some, like Suzy Keyzner learned to drive a three-ton truck on the Robben Island airfield. Shelagh Ball used her spare time to study French.

Once a week a film would be shown in the John Craig Hall. It was also in this Hall that the weekly dance was held. For some a pleasure and for others a trial. As Ruth Rundle describes it: *"..and these rather unsavoury looking types took pity on the long row of SWANS sitting round the sides of the hall. We gave them nicknames and exchanged gory*

1) SWANS' Recreation Room, SDRI December 1943 (Laver, Sailor Women, Sea Women, SWANS)
2) SWANS' Mess Deck, showing the contrast between senior and junior ratings' mess-traps (Laver, Sailor Women, Sea Women, SWANS)





details of our partners afterwards". 69 Anne Henry, on the other hand, felt that since the girls far outnumbered the men, "*..it was considered an honour to be asked for at least one dance during the evening*". 70 These dances were not just naval occasions, but were attended by army personnel and civilians as well.

Another form of entertainment was of course drinking. One of Joanne Mortimer's memories of Robben Island is that of her first drink. In celebration of the fact that she had passed top of her asdic course, she was "*forced*" to drink her first beer. 71 Similarly, determined not to spend a dismal Christmas and New Year on the Island, "*..the usual bath of very pleasant tasting, but highly potent punch*" was made, and the resulting party ran through the entire Christmas period. 72

The SWANS also had a spacious carpeted recreation room, furnished with easy chairs, some tables, a radio, a piano, an open fireplace, a dartboard, and a canteen. The canteen sold sweets, cigarettes, stationary, soft drinks, beer and sherry. Here the SWANS would play cards and darts, listen to music, write letters, or simply "*chat*". The recreation room was also occasionally used for church services or as a venue for visiting lecturers.

There was a small General Store on Robben Island, officially known as the Cape Peninsula Garrison Institute (CPGI). The store sold a wide variety of items, including canned food, clothes, shoes, tennis balls and knitting materials. 73 There was also a small bakery on the Island. "*We used to buy buns at the bakery or biscuits from the CPGI and bottled soft drinks, and then we would go to Whale Rock for an impromptu picnic on fine days*". 74

SWANS also participated in all forms of sport on the Island. There was cricket, tennis on the village courts, badminton in Craig Hall, Ping-Pong and swimming. The most organised sport for SWANS on the Island was hockey. They played in mixed teams, or against the male residents of the Island.

THE LAST DAYS ON ROBBEN ISLAND

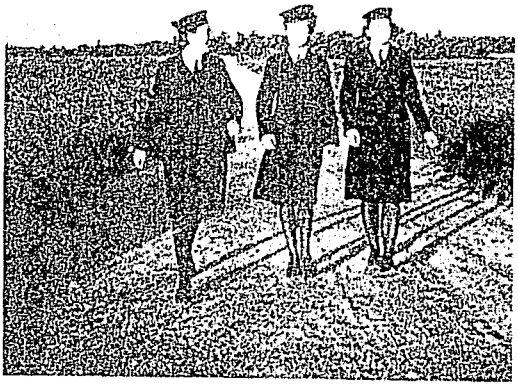
It all came to an end on Tuesday June 26th 1945. The last days on the Island were emotional and "*solemn*". 75 On the final day, the Commanding Officer and the First Lt W.F Muller of Robben Island, went to the generator room and switched of the power. The resulting silence was daunting, all that could be heard where their footsteps as they walked back to the Quarterdeck. The ceremony which followed, included the lowering of the flags and the release of a number of doves. "*You could hear the SWANS near you swallowing hard..*" as the SWANS were finally dismissed. 76

AFTER THE WAR

Demobilisation plans began to take shape in April 1945, and soon a network of 325 Discharged Soldiers and Demobilisation Committees had been set up in every city, town and village in South Africa. The immense task, of coping with the demobilisation of some 245 000 soldiers became the responsibility of only 8 000 Demobilisation personnel.

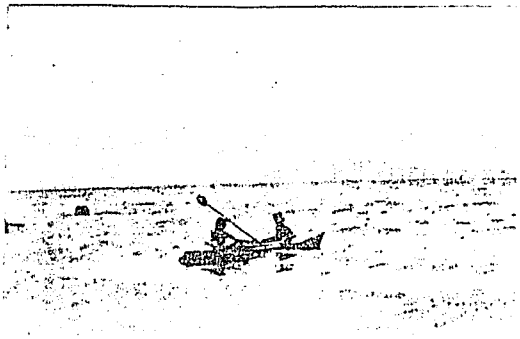
SWANS at leisure: Left (1) smoking and drinking (2) walking along the beach. Right (1) walking (2) cycling and (3) canoeing (Laver, Sailor Women, Sea Women, Swans)











77 Many of the SWANS, as well as women from the other Auxiliary Services were forced to serve on these Demobilisation Committees, despite the fact, that many of them had signed on as active combatants.

Today, women still play and important role in the South African Navy. The wartime women's Naval Unit (SWANS) was reestablished in the 1970's. All females serving in the South African Naval Forces today, receive the same basic training as their male counterparts. 78

NOTES

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CHAPTER 16

AFTER THE WAR

By May 1945, as the war in Europe was coming to an end, the military presence and military operations on Robben Island had already been scaled down. Most of the operational personnel, had in fact left the Island in late 1944. By August 1945, a new future for the Island had to be determined. In the meantime, while speculation and debate about the Island's future continued, a Coast Artillery Care and Maintenance Unit was given the responsibility of keeping the guns and the buildings on the Island in order. The Officer in charge was Warrant Officer H.J.R Kockett, and on his retirement, Warrant Officer Stowe took over. The small unit was run from Fort Wynyard, and staffed by persons from the auxiliary services. Personnel would go over to the Island occasionally to paint the guns traffic green (the official colour of maintenance). 1

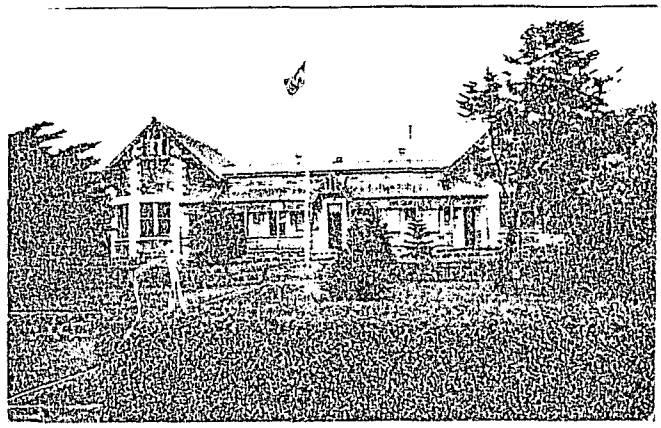
Robben Island was still perceived as the proper place for the coastal defence of the Peninsula, and concern was expressed that the Island would be abandoned in this regard. The Reverent C.F Miles Cadman, who shared this view, and who himself had served on the Island as an army Chaplain, in Parliament asked what the government's plans with the Island were. 2 The Minister of Defence accordingly assured him, and other concerned parties, that Robben Island would remain both "*the heart of our defences of this city*" and the Headquarters of the Coastal Artillery. 3

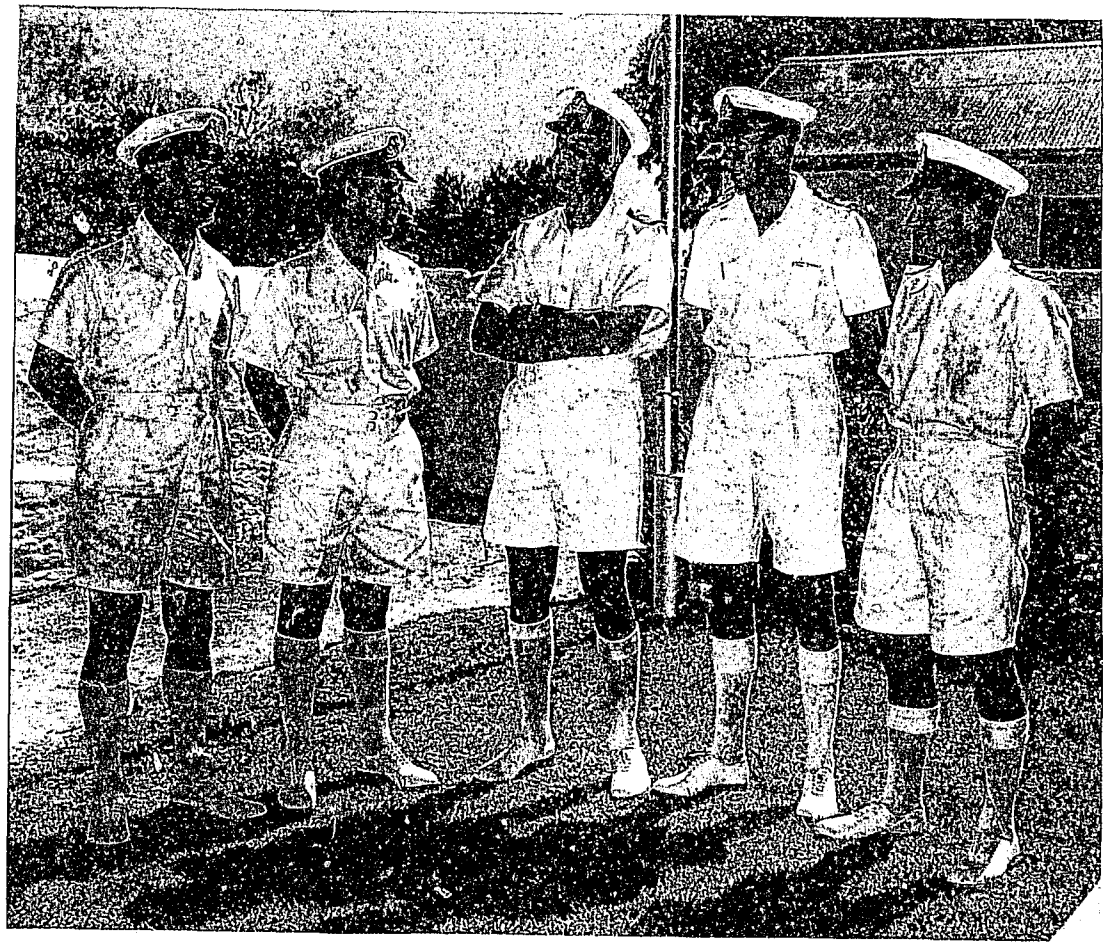
THE POST-WAR COASTAL ARTILLERY SCHOOL ON ROBBEN ISLAND 1946 - 1950

The Coastal Artillery School on Robben Island, thus, recommenced activities on February 1st 1946, under the command of Colonel L.T (Len) Klootwyk. 4 The Coast Artillery Brigade itself, was reestablished as a Permanent Force Unit, with Headquarters in the Castle in Cape Town, on the 31st of December 1946. A new period of the Island's history was ushered in when the first new occupants, gunners of the Permanent Force and their families settled on the Island in August 1946. This coincided with the first post-war gunnery course at the Coast Artillery School on Robben Island. (The Coastal Artillery School on Robben Island later became a branch of the School of Coastal and Anti-Aircraft Artillery quartered at Young's Field in Cape Town.)

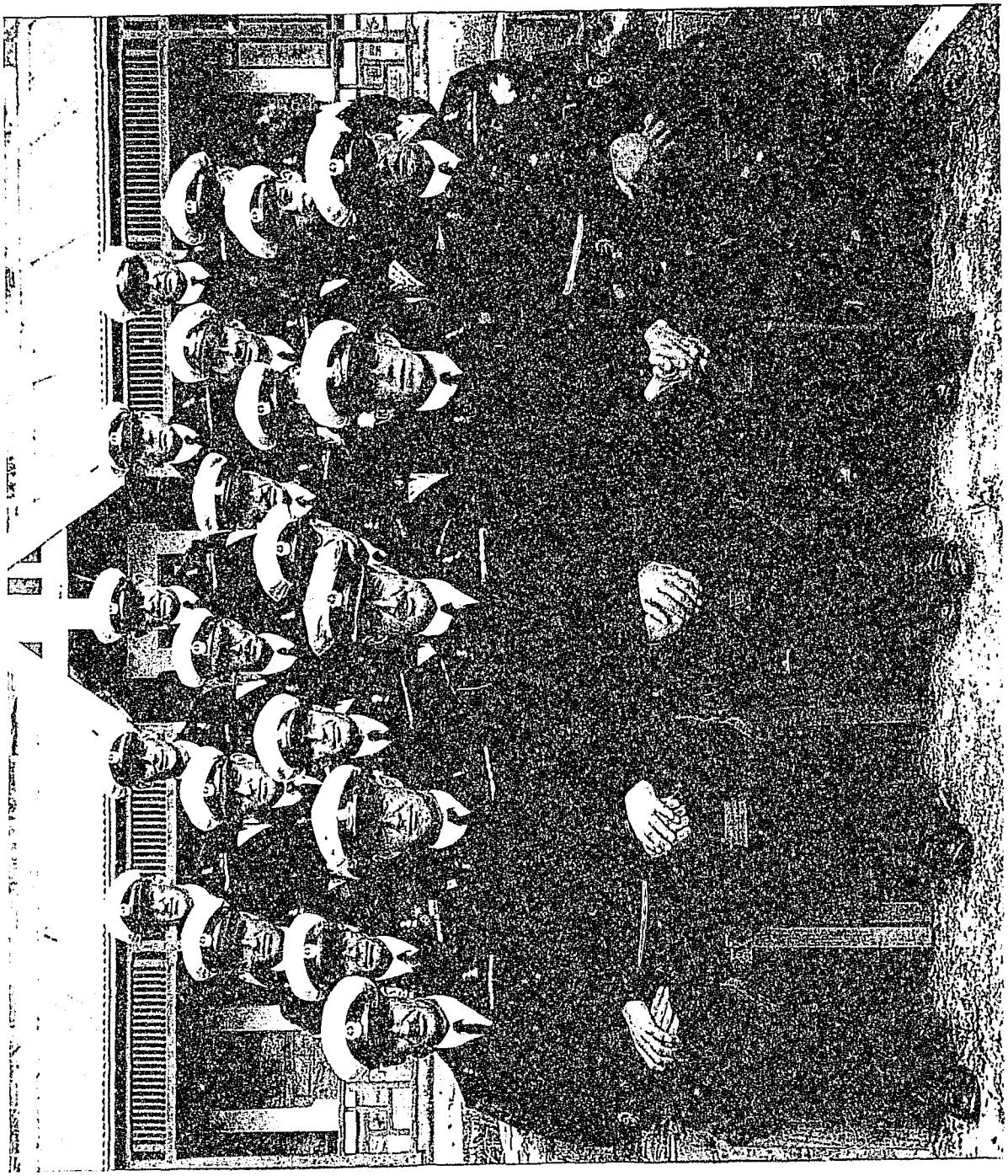
The Artillery School itself was started in a building that had been left behind by the leper administration, but was separated from the main leper area by a road known as Boundary Road. 5 he First courses at the Robben Island Artillery School were attended by Permanent Force Personnel only. It was only later that the school expanded, and Citizen Force members also began to receive their training on the Island. Apart from the coastal and anti-aircraft gunnery course, an additional repository course was offered. This course involved the dismantling of the big guns. The 30 ton gun barrels had to be moved, maintenance procedures applied, and then the barrels had to be reassembled and replaced. This course surprisingly, did not involve a lot of mechanical equipment, but was rather

1) The Coast Artillery School on Robben Island (De Villiers, Commando, August 1950)
2) The Instructors at the Coast Artillery School on Robben Island: From the left, Lt. A. Brown, Lt. W.R. Patterson, Lt. J.H. Wicht, Lt. R.A Edwards, Lt. O. Louw (Photo: donated by Vice-Admiral Edwards)





Trainees and Staff members of the first Coast Artillery Course at the post-war Artillery School on Robben Island. Front Row left to right: WO Brough, Lt. O. Louw, Capt. R. Edwards, 2Lt. M. Malan. Second row: L/BDR. v.d Poll, Sgt. Jordaan, S/Sgt. Barnard, L/BDR. Boshoff, Sgt. Conradie. Third row: L/BDR. Ackerman, Sgt. Vermeulen, Sgt. Badenhorst, S/Sgt. Van Wyk, Sgt. Ruthuen, Sgt. Van Rensburg. Back row: Sht. De Buys, Sgt. Pienaar, Sgt. Wainwright, Sgt. Rust, Sgt. Bezuidenhout. (photo: donated by Vice-Admiral Edwards)



based on applied math. From 1954 until 1955, one of the Instructors on this course was Sergeant Magnus Malan. The Citizen Force training courses lasted about three weeks.

When only Permanent Force members were trained, the lowest recorded number of trainees at the Coastal Artillery School was 30, the highest recorded number, when Citizen Force and National Force members were also trained there, was 200. 6

ROBBEN ISLAND AND THE MARINE CORPS 1950 – 1955

By 1950, a higher level decision was made to expand the South African Navy, which at that stage was disproportionately small when compared to the other branches of the South African Defence Force. As a result, various structural changes were made, and the Coastal Artillery School on Robben Island, which up until then had been a branch of the South African Army, became a branch of the South African Navy. The new unit on Robben Island was known as the Marine Corps. The South African Marine Corps was officially established on the 1st of July 1951, under command of Brigadier de Waal. 7 It was as a Marine that Magnus Malan volunteered in 1954, to become a coastal artillery instructor of Citizen Force members on Robben Island. He later became South Africa's Minister of Defence. Another Marine on Robben Island, who consequently achieved a high-ranking position in the South African Military Establishment, was Captain Edwards. He later became Vice-Admiral and Chief of the South African Navy.

In 1951, when the Island was under command of the South African Marine Corps, the Robben Island Battery was renamed. In a letter to the Chief of Staff in mid 1951, it was recommended that the Robben Island Battery be renamed the De Waal Battery, as a tribute to Brigadier de Waal who had contributed greatly to the expansion and development of coastal defence in South Africa. 8 Brigadier De Waal was born on the 31st of December 1899, and after obtaining a BSC from the Transvaal University College, he joined the Permanent Force and started his distinguished career. Some of Brigadier de Waal's appointments include; Commanding Officer of the South African Permanent Garrison Artillery from 1930 – 1931, Commanding Officer of the Cape Command in 1932, Commanding Officer Roberts Heights Command, Commanding Officer of the Special Service Battalion, Commandant at the Military College in 1933, Director Liaison Officer East Africa Command in 1940, Deputy Chief of Staff UDF in 1943, Quartermaster General of the UDF in 1952, and the Military Naval Attaché to the United States and Canada form 1953 – 1955. 9 Brigadier de Waal died in 1977. Eventually, on October 24th 1951, the Robben Island Battery was renamed the De Waal Battery.

By October 1955, the South African Marine Corps had come to be seen as an unnecessary adjunct, and was consequently disbanded. The enlargement of the South African navy, however, remained a pressing concern. Accordingly, when the Marine Corps was disbanded, half its members remained in the Navy, while the other half (all the anti-aircraft units) joined the South African Army (Artillery). In the short period of its existence the South African Marine Corps had become the ceremonial showpiece of the UDF, owing both to the tremendous pride and discipline built up within the unit, and their striking blue service dress uniforms embellished with orange trouser stripes. 10

SAS ROBBENEILAND 1955 - 1960

Robben Island now became a South African Naval Training Base. The Island, due to its lack of equipment, was certainly not an ideal location for the training of naval ratings. On the other hand, the Island did have a harbour, as well as solid and well-constructed buildings. The isolation of the Island, it was believed, would also contribute to the effectiveness of the training center (men would be removed from the ordinary distractions of women and liquor). 11 In December 1955, the new South African Naval Unit and Station on Robben Island became knows as SAS Robbeneiland.

SAS Robbeneiland consisted of a Headquarters that controlled all the Island issues, a training depot where the largest part of the Navy's Civil Force members were trained, as well as a supplies Depot. 12 During 1956, hundreds of Naval Citizen Force members were trained on Robben Island in Coastal Gunnery, seamanship and the like. Further responsibilities of the Naval Shore Station on Robben Island included towing targets, rescue work and daily trips to Cape Town harbour. 13

Despite the fact that long-range coastal guns had become obsolete by 1955 with the advent of rocketry and guided missiles, the Robben Island Batteries undertook fire practice with live ammunition occasionally up until at least 1956. Firing practices were, for example, scheduled to be carried out by the 9.2" coastal Artillery guns on Robben Island on August 21st 1951, and October 20th 1951. 14 It is clear that live ammunition was used, since residents in the vicinity were warned both, to keep their windows open during the practice, and of the danger of being at sea during these practices. Residents who did not comply with these safety regulations could in fact be prosecuted. 15 Provisions were also made for the lodging of complaints and claims for compensation. These had to be lodged with the Officer Commanding Cape Common at his office in the Castle, within three weeks after the firing practice. Also, in 1956, the Cape Town Highlanders, a Citizen Force Battalion, staged a sea and air mock attack on key points, including Robben Island. 16

The South African Navy was thus the last Defence Force tenant on Robben Island. The Chief of the Navy had already decided on the 12th of March 1953, that should the South African Navy leave Robben Island, the 9.2" guns would be left on the Island complete with mountings. (Hence, they can still be seen on the Island today). 17

POST-WAR LIFE ON ROBBEN ISLAND

As was the case during the war, the majority of the Islanders enjoyed the Island life style. Naval men and their families are reported to have said, that when they went shopping in Cape Town, they always found themselves eager to return to the quiet of Robben Island. 18 Children who had left the Island in 1960, were overheard in their nightly prayers to ask "*Please God, can we go back to Robben Island*". 19 Magnus Malan describes the Island as a "*phenomenal place*", and continued that he loved the Island very much, and

left it very seldom to go to the mainland. [20] Vice-Admiral Edwards remembers that he and his family "*enjoyed living on the Island*" and "*were sad to leave*". [21] This is not surprising given the rich community life, and the other benefits, such as a complete absence of crime, low rental rates, free schooling, the magnificent natural environment and so forth.

In terms of its natural environment, Robben Island was still a sanctuary for a great variety of sea birds and sea life. There were rabbits, tortoises, penguins, seals and so forth. The most notorious animal of the period was the mole snake, "*not a poisonous snake, but a snake that could give you a nasty bite*". [22] Many of the Island children kept mole snakes as pets, but they were not the only ones. Magnus Malan had a pet mole snake which "*loved being scratched under its chin*". [23]

The range of institutions and facilities on the Island were so elaborate, as to make the Robben Island community almost self-sufficient. A primary school with 31 pupils was established on the Island in mid-1947, by 1952 it had 57 pupils. By 1959 the school was attended by 70 pupils. [24] It was a parallel medium school with instruction given in both English and Afrikaans, up to standard six. [25] Although the number of teachers varied, there were normally four teachers and a headmaster. In 1954, the headmaster was Mr Pienaar. [26] Children went to school barefoot, and only had to run a couple of yards to get to school. [27]

The Island had its own permanent Doctor, as well as a qualified nurse and mid-wife. A vast improvement on war times, when pregnant women had to go to the mainland, making terrifying trips across on the Isie (particularly problematic in case of emergencies). In fact, the situation had improved so much, that three of Captain Edwards's children were born on the Island. There was also a sick bay with a couple of beds in an old building that had formerly housed the leper colony doctor. This was necessary because trainees sometimes brought diseases over from the mainland, which would result in minor epidemics. Captain Edwards recalls how his whole family and many others, for example, got chicken pox at the same time. In case of emergencies or serious illness, an ambulance aircraft from Ysterplaats would land on the Robben Island airstrip and take the patients to Young's Field. An ambulance landed approximately once every three of four months, either on a return or arrival trip. [28]

There was also a library, a post-office, a museum, a diary farm, various sporting facilities, a shop, and the John Craig recreation hall, which formed the center of all social activities on the Island. One could obtain almost anything from the shop, and if not, could order the necessary and receive it within two days. [29] The museum had been established by approximately 1957, by some 200 one time residents of the Island. [30] The diary farm on the Island was a military venture under the command of Officer Jacobs. The animals were of a very high quality and supplied the Island with all the necessary milk. [31] There were also three of four cars on the Island, as well as a bus that traveled to and from the harbour.

There were water works to serve the entire Robben Island community, civil and military. Although everybody had sufficient access to water up until 1960, water supply problems became apparent in 1956, when a hydrographic survey conducted, showed that the water table had dropped . 32 By 1959, three of the seven boreholes had, in fact, dried up. The available water was also very brackish, which negatively affected the health of the Islanders, and resulted in various stomach afflictions (particularly among the Children). At the time, there were two operating power stations on the Island, one providing electricity for household use, and the other for military purposes. The Island was telephonically linked to the mainland by underwater phone cables. The line was, however, not direct, and had to go through two switchboards, one on the Island and the other at the Castle, before a call could go through to the mainland.

It is not easy to determine exactly how many people were living on the Island during these eight years, since numbers varied continuously. The Robben Island community was a surprisingly diverse one. In 1955, for example, there was an estimated 1 200 people living permanently on the Island 33 By 1959, there were an estimated 700 permanent residents on Robben Island. The permanent residents on Robben Island after the war, could be placed in five categories.

1) The civilians which included the teachers and the shop owners.
2) Personnel to staff the lighthouse, which consisted of a couple of families.
3) Personnel from the Public Works Department who were responsible for the waterworks, the power stations, maintenance, sewerage, sanitation and so forth.
4) The Military personnel, which consisted of quite a large community of servicemen and their families, accounting for about 250 people in 1954.
5) Finally true to the nature and history of the Island, the fifth group were prisoners. These were persons with indeterminate sentences who had been sentenced to hard labour on Robben Island. There were approximately 60 prisoners and a jailer. Although there was a small jail on the Island, the prisoners were not confined to it. Their responsibilities on the Island included road maintenance and keeping the Island clean. They could also be hired by the permanent residents as servants, gardeners, or even to look after children. One particular person, who had been sentenced to hard labour on Robben Island, after being found guilty of murder, often had some of the children entrusted to his care. It appears that these prisoners were not treated very harshly, even though they remained subject to prison discipline and prison authorities. They were, however, given a very basic diet, consisting of "pap" (porridge) and pumpkin. The Edwards children developed a liking for the prisoner's food, and consequently often exchanged food with them.

During this period the Island was also more accessible than it had been during the war. Many visits by civilians were permitted. For example, in 1956, a group of boy scouts camped on the Island, and a party of final year engineering students conducted a topographical survey of part of the Island. 34 There was also a successful open day on the Island in November 1957, when 1 160 people visited the Island. 35

In terms of housing, the accommodation that had originally been built for ASWAAS and the SWANS were now used to house married couples. In these small houses married

couples prepared their own food, with supplies obtained from the Island shop. They also had to pay rent. A senior Officer would pay a rent of only six pounds for a large house, while others paid even less. [36] As the first unmarried officer on the Island after the war, Magnus Malan lived in a small flat close to the beach. Other persons and unmarried officers stayed and ate in the mess.

One of the interesting practices on the Island during the time, was the hoisting of either a pink or a blue flag, with a Stork embroided on it, when a child was born on the Island. [37]

Life on Robben Island could, however, be fairly routine, "*with nothing much to do*". [38] The community was also very tight knit. "*If you were not a very social and cooperative person, and if you did not play sport or read, or something, life on the Island could be very lonely*"" [39] One of the tasks laid before the Military Officers on Robben Island, was to devise methods of entertaining and keeping persons on the Island busy. This they did in a variety of successful ways.

Films were taken over and shown in the John Craig Hall once a week. This hall was also the venue for the weekly dances, and for the concert parties, with either the local Robben Island band, or a band ferried over from the mainland. There was a strong women's organisation, which engaged mainly in fundraising for the annual Christmas Party, and organising flower-arranging competitions in which the male military personnel also participated. Visiting Sports teams frequented the Island on a regular basis. Wednesdays were usually sports days, and if there were no visiting sports teams, Malan would take his troops for a 7km run around the Island. After such a run, they would catch crayfish and enjoy a meal outdoors. Regular netball games between the men and the women on the Island were held, with the women always emerging as the victors. Despite the cold water, some individuals swam on a daily basis, and several swimming competitions between the old jetty and the Murray's Bay harbour were held. Every morning, at about 10 o'clock the newspaper would be brought over on the Isie. (The Isie was still the regular means of transport to and from the Island). Sunday Church services were held, by ministers from the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Dutch Reformed churches, who came over from the mainland on alternate Sundays. Occasionally, a guest speaker would be invited to the Island to give lectures on various topics of interest. Yet another measure to keep the troops entertained, was the construction of a shooting range. Magnus Malan had initiated this venture. The Robben Island shooting team, took part in National competitions, representing Western Province.

Fishing was still a favorite and frequent activity. Crayfish, Perlemoen and mussels could be enjoyed on a daily basis, despite restrictions placed on fishing. [40] Magnus Malan remembers that crayfish was so abundant, "*that they covered the bottom of the ocean completely*". [41] At times when the Island was surrounded by huge schools of fish, entire families would spend the day fishing. The availability of such vast quantities of seafood delicacies, resulted in problems. Some of the troops undergoing training on Robben Island started catching large amounts of crayfish at night, and then proceeded to sell it in Cape Town. As a result, restrictions were placed on the amounts of crayfish the Military

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