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SOUTH AFRICA, PORTUGAL AND THE POLITICS OF NAVAL ACQUISITIONS DURING THE NINETEEN SEVENTIES

Thean POTGIETER (South Africa)

Abstract

Due to the historic link with Britain, the South African Navy received its ships and equipment from Britain. However, South Africa's apartheid policies resulted in relations between the states systematically worsening, and when South Africa decided on a fleet upgrade in the early seventies it was impossible to purchase warships from Britain. Since South Africa saw Portugal as an ally in Africa the choice fell on an upgraded version of the Portuguese *João Coutinho*-class. The Spanish shipyard Bazan was the leading yard, and the Portuguese shipyard in Viana Do Castelo would act as the shipbuilder. A South African project team was established in Lisbon in 1972 and the design phase commenced, but due to various challenges, the project lagged behind schedule. The final tender date was November 1974, but due to the coup d'état in Portugal (*April 1974*) the project was cancelled before the building phase could commence. The South African Navy subsequently purchased strike craft from Israel and planned to procure corvettes and submarines from France. The French projects were also cancelled due to the United Nations Security Council's compulsory arms embargo against South Africa in November 1977. The failure of the corvette and submarine projects was a grave blow to the South African Navy. The paper's purpose is to examine the Portuguese corvette project of the South African Navy with specific reference to the political context of the time. Due to the uniqueness of the theme, archival and primary sources were mostly utilised.

Keywords: South African Navy, frigates, corvettes, colonial Portugal

Introduction

South Africa's strategic location between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, and astride the sea route linking East and West has made control over the southern tip of Africa sought after in the time of empire. South Africa's easy access to the sea has led to colonial conquest, economic growth, industrialisation, and political transformation. British naval involvement in South Africa goes back to the British occupations of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795 and in 1806. Since then, to the abrogation of the Simon's Town Agreement in 1975, the British Royal Navy has maintained a constant presence in South African waters.

Although South Africa created a small indigenous navy after the First World War, it did not have full responsibility for maritime defence as the Royal Navy was still around to protect British imperial interests and assist the fledgling navy. As South Africa received all its vessels from Britain, after the Second World War it had a medium-sized, typically Western navy, strongly aligned to the Royal Navy and suited for supporting the maritime defence requirements of the British Empire. Due to the development of the South African naval establishment and political changes after the Second World War, South Africa took over control of the Simon's Town naval base. It shared the maritime defence responsibilities with Britain.

However, the political changes in South Africa and the apartheid policies of its government led to the British link being severed which made the acquisition of new ships from Britain impossible. This severely affected its naval establishment, and maritime defence became a solely South African responsibility. With a mixed measure of success, South Africa commenced with various projects aimed at purchasing naval vessels from Portugal, France and Israel. But how did this change from colonial naval protection to national maritime defence occur? How did South Africa's Navy forge a new role for itself and address its vessel requirements in a difficult political environment overshadowed by anti-apartheid sentiments?

This paper examines how the changing political environment affected the vessel acquisition projects of the South African Navy during the 1970s, with specific reference to the Portuguese corvette project. Due to the classified nature of the original project documents, the uniqueness of the theme and the lack of a well-researched collection of published sources, archival and primary sources were mostly utilised in compiling this paper.

Maritime Defence Becomes a South African Responsibility

For centuries, the maritime defence of South Africa was a Dutch and British colonial responsibility. The British Royal Navy used Simon's Town as a naval base between 1795 and 1803 (*during the first British occupation of the Cape of Good Hope*), and again after the

British conquest of the Cape in 1806. It became the home to the Royal Navy's South Atlantic Squadron in 1814.⁽¹⁾ The South African Division of the part-time Royal Naval Voluntary Reserve (*RNVR*) existed before the country had a navy, while South African volunteers served in the Royal Navy during the First World War.⁽²⁾

On 1 April 1922 three small British ships were re-commissioned as South African ships, and on 1 February 1923 the newly created South African Naval Service (*SANS*) officially became a permanent unit of the Union Defence Force.⁽³⁾ However, due to budget cuts during the Depression, the ships and their crews were paid off in 1933-34. Only a skeleton staff remained. After South Africa became involved in the Second World War in 1939, a small ocean-going navy had to be created. As the *SANS* (*later to become the Seaward Defence Force – SDF*) had no warships, vessels were requisitioned from trade, whaling and fishing, and converted into anti-submarine vessels and minesweepers.⁽⁴⁾ Although the *SDF* had to protect and defend the Union's ports and coastline, South Africa's uncomfortable "little ships" also served with distinction in most phases of the sea war in the Mediterranean.⁽⁵⁾

South Africa's first purpose-built warships were three *Loch* class frigates it received from Britain in 1944-45. These ships were crewed by South Africans but had to remain available to Britain. Next, the South African Navy (*SAN*), so named in 1951, acquired two British ex-W&V class destroyers in 1950 and 1953. Due to the strong historical links with Britain, the ships, equipment and training of the *SAN* were typical British, and it was often in jest called the Royal South African Navy. Together with the Royal Navy it sat at the choke point of one of the busiest sea routes in the world and acted as custodian of the Cape Sea Route. Its ships were designed for Britain's imperial defence requirements and not for a small developing country. Contact between the two navies was very important, especially for the young, developing *SAN*.

The Simon's Town naval base legally became part of the Union of South Africa in 1910, but Britain was provided with a guarantee that it could continue to use it. When the National Party came to power in South Africa in 1948, its view was that South Africa should control Simon's Town as the country's maritime defence should be independent from Britain. Negotiations between the two countries resulted in the *Anglo-South African Correspondence*, of 1955, known as the *Simon's Town Agreement*. Although the *SAN* took

1. T.D. Potgieter, "Maritime Defence and the South African Navy, to the cancellation of the Simon's Town Agreement," *Scientia Militaria* 30, no. 2 (2000): 162, 164, 175.

2. Department of Defence Archive South Africa, hereafter DODA. South African Defence Act 1912. (Act 13 of 1912). Departement van Verdediging, Rapport voor het jaar, 30 June 1921, 4.

3. J.C. Goosen, *Ons Vloot* (Cape Town: WJ Flesch, 1973), 19.

4. DODA. Secretary for Defence, Group 2. Vol 9, Boxes 3204-7. See also DODA, SANF, Box 10. Reports on vessels registered at South African ports.

5. DODA. SD Box 59. SD10/10/14. SANF Historical Records. T.D. Potgieter, "South African Naval Vessels in the Mediterranean during the Second World War," *Journal for Contemporary History*, June (1998).

over Simon's Town in 1957, the agreement was favourable to Britain as South Africa became responsible for the expensive maintenance and modernisation of Simon's Town, while Britain retained full military access to the base. Britain and her allies were allowed, amongst other provisions, to use Simon's Town even in a war in which South Africa was not involved. It also provided for a strategic zone in which the two navies would operate under the operational authority of the British Commander-in-Chief South Atlantic as well as for an area under the direct responsibility of the SAN.⁽⁶⁾ Most importantly, in terms of the Agreement South Africa could purchase six frigates, ten coastal minesweepers and four seaward defence boats from the UK.⁽⁷⁾ Due to rising costs only four frigates were purchased: a converted W&V class destroyer and three type 12 anti-submarine frigates. Although the three type 12s were the first major warships ordered and built for the SA Navy, all the ships were from existing Royal Naval classes, and designed according to Royal Naval specifications.

When South Africa became a republic and left the British Commonwealth in 1961, the decolonisation of Africa was in full swing. Events in South Africa and the apartheid policies of the National Party Government generated ill will towards the country and it became increasingly isolated from the international community. As part of an international campaign against apartheid, numerous new states called for sanctions against South Africa. From 1960 onwards various United Nations resolutions called for South Africa to end apartheid, expressed concern with the arms build-up in the country being used to further the racial conflict, and requested states not to provide arms, ammunition and military equipment to South Africa.⁽⁸⁾

In reaction, South Africa substantially strengthened its armaments manufacturing industry. During the Second World War South Africa produced armaments (*including armoured vehicles, guns, ammunition*), while ship repair and supply facilities at Simon's Town and other ports contributed much to the Allied war effort. After the war, the capacity shrank fast as peacetime production patterns resumed. In 1948 the Minister of Defence, Frans Erasmus, created the Defence Resources Board (*DRB or Verdedigingshulpbronne Raad*) responsible for the procurement and manufacturing of armaments for South Africa's Union Defence Force (*UDF*). This function was placed outside the public service in 1964, and the Armaments Board was tasked with armaments procurements.⁽⁹⁾

After Harold Wilson's Labour Government came to power in Britain in 1964, the sale of weapons to South Africa ceased, except for contracts emanating from the Simon's Town Agreement. After Britain's cutback in her overseas defence commitments, its so-

6. Potgieter, "Maritime Defence," 175-176.

7. Armscor Archive, Pretoria, hereafter AA. RSA Verdragreeks no 2/1955: Ooreenkoms tussen Suid-Afrika en die Verenigde Koninkryk betreffende Verdedigingsaangeleenthede, 3 and 9.

8. The list includes United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1761 (1962), United National Security Council Resolution 134 (1960), 181 and 182 (1963), 190 and 191 (1964), 481 (1977).

9. T.D. Potgieter, "Die Geskiedenis van Projek Taurus en die Missielboot-projekte" (MA thesis, RAU, 1992), 33-35.

called retreat East of Suez commenced in 1965, and in 1967 the Royal Navy withdrew its frigates stationed at Simon's Town.⁽¹⁰⁾ Although the principle of the Simon's Town Agreement (*granting the use of the naval base in times of peace and war to the Royal Navy*) remained unchanged, relations between its signatories worsened as they doubted the value of the Agreement. In the opinion of the South African Government, Britain did not show much for their unilateral commitment to avail the naval base to Britain, while Wilson's 1974 Labour Government saw the Agreement as a political liability with marginal military value. On 16 June 1975, the two countries cancelled the agreement, effectively ending more than 170 years of constant British naval presence in South Africa. The SAN often exercised with the Royal Navy and even NATO ships visited SA ports, but after the cancellation of the Simon's Town Agreement, these ships stayed away.⁽¹¹⁾ As close relations with the Royal Navy were no longer possible the SAN was now *on its own* with regards to training, doctrine and equipment.

South Africa and Colonial Portugal

As the process of decolonisation swept through Africa apartheid was widely condemned and many of the new states in Africa provided support to South African liberation organisations. Yet, it was difficult to infiltrate South Africa due to the strength of its security forces and the protective cordon that the country's northerly neighbours (*Rhodesia the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola*) provided.⁽¹²⁾ As decolonisation swept through Africa and Portugal retained her colonies in southern Africa, South Africa saw Portugal as an ally in Africa. Within the Cold War paradigm, Portugal and South Africa shared mutual interests in the sub-continent and both countries were engaged in combating an increasing threat from liberation movements.⁽¹³⁾

Although both countries saw close interaction as mutually beneficial, it was not a direct alliance as political differences effectively prevented them from becoming strategic allies. Because of international condemnation of South Africa's racial policies, Portugal did not wish to be too closely linked to South Africa. Already in 1962, the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Franco Nogueira, emphasised that despite relations between the two countries being excellent, "basic differences" existed as Portugal viewed apartheid as "morally wrong and politically dangerous", while South Africa viewed Portugal's racial policy "as morally dangerous and politically wrong." A military alliance was therefore

10. DODA. VSH10/66/10/2(G). Die verwagte rol en taak van die Vloot, Operasionele vereiste, 2-4.

11. Potgieter, "Geschiedenis," 41.

12. Rocky Williams, "The Other Armies: Writing the History of MK," in *The Long March – The Story of the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa*, ed. Ian Liebenberg, et al. (Pretoria: HAUM, 1994), 25-26.

13. DODA. VSH10/66/10/2. Aankoop van 6 korvette van Portugal. See also: AA. Memorandum 55/24, 2 December 71, 107. Attached to Minutes of Board of Directors of the Armaments Board, nr. 55.

not possible for Portugal, because “the moral condemnation of having to accept aid from South Africa would be too high a price to pay.”⁽¹⁴⁾

The two sides interacted more closely on financial and military matters, but recently declassified Portuguese military documents indicate the complexity of the relationship. During his visit to Portugal in 1967 P.W. Botha (*South Africa's Defence Minister*) described the *modus operandi*: no formal military alliance is necessary, but high-level discussions on common security issues would continue, while South Africa offered military supplies and assistance at a “nominal price”.⁽¹⁵⁾

Cooperation occurred on covert issues and immediate security threats. In the intelligence sphere information was exchanged on persons deemed a security risk. Although it was not an easy process due to mutual suspicions and the fact that Portugal feared it might impact negatively on the attitudes of the black population in Portuguese colonies, intelligence was shared from the early 1960s onwards.⁽¹⁶⁾ At the same time, South Africa also began to provide logistic and material assistance (*military equipment*) to Portugal in Africa. One of the first areas was spare parts for Portuguese Alouette III helicopters and by 1968 South Africa provided five Alouette helicopters and 33 Panhard armoured cars (*with spare parts*) as well as 283 radio sets to the Portuguese forces in Angola on a “free loan basis.” South Africa availed eight Alouette helicopters and four Cessna aircraft for operations in east and south-east of Angola, but to maintain secrecy the aircraft operated from Namibia with Portuguese Air Force markings and the crews donned Portuguese uniforms.⁽¹⁷⁾ As South African support for the costly Portuguese counterinsurgency campaigns in Africa was never on a significant scale, it had no decisive influence.⁽¹⁸⁾

As Portugal was on the brink of economic disaster, South Africa supported large Portuguese projects such as the Cabora Bassa hydroelectric project in Mozambique and partnered with Portugal to construct the hydro-electric projects at Calueque and Ruacana on the border of Angola and Namibia.⁽¹⁹⁾ As the discussion below indicates, South Africa decided to purchase new naval vessels from Portugal in 1971 to support an “economically and politically” weak Portugal.⁽²⁰⁾ In March 1974 the South African

14. Paulo Correia and Grietjie Verhoef, “Portugal and South Africa: close allies or unwilling partners in Southern Africa during the Cold War?”, *Scientia Militaria* 37, nr 1 (2009), 54.

15. Quoted from secret Portuguese Foreign Affairs Ministry document, 7 April 1967, in Correia, and Verhoef, ‘Portugal and South Africa’, 59-60.

16. Correia, and Verhoef, “Portugal and South Africa,” 56-59.

17. Dick Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle. The South African Air Force during the Border War* (Johannesburg: 30° South, 2008), 53. See also Correia, and Verhoef, “Portugal and South Africa,” 61-62.

18. Correia and Verhoef, “Portugal and South Africa,” 50.

19. Deon Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation, South African Foreign Policy Makers* (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1984), 75.

20. DODA. VSH10/66/10/2. Aankoop van 6 korvette van Portugal. See also: AA. Memorandum 55/24, 2 December 1971, 107. Minutes of Board of Directors of the Armaments Board, nr. 55.

Reserve Bank approved a loan of 150 million South African Rand to Portugal, of which only five million South African Rand was transferred by April 1974. South Africans also provided private support to Portuguese soldiers, such as the Mozambique Fighting Soldiers' Comfort Fund which provided Christmas parcels to Portuguese soldiers and bought two air ambulances for Portuguese military casualties. A scheme for South African medical specialists to treat Portuguese casualties in Mozambique free of charge failed due to fears that it might compromise Portugal and the secret nature of the military relationship between the countries.⁽²¹⁾

South Africa had good naval relations with Portugal and various visits to Portugal and its dependencies in Africa occurred. In 1960 the frigate SAS *Vrystaat* participated in a naval review with 35 warships from twenty countries commemorating the 500th anniversary of the death of Prince Henry the Navigator. South Africa gifted the compass rose in the forecourt of the Monument to the Discoveries (*at Belem*) to Portugal. Although most of the Portuguese naval vessels based in Angola and Mozambique were small coastal patrol craft, South Africa often provided logistic support and maintenance assistance to larger Portuguese naval vessels. The last official visit to Portuguese Africa occurred in March-April 1973 when two South African frigates and a submarine visited Lourenco Marques⁽²²⁾

Though the Portuguese appreciated covert material and logistical support, they were cautious for directly overt operational support. The fact that as a European colonial power, they still obstructed African liberation was already a serious political disadvantage, and to openly fight alongside apartheid South Africa would considerably complicate matters.⁽²³⁾ Despite receiving no direct *quid pro quo*, maintaining a so-called *cordon sanitaire* was benefit enough to South Africa.

Project Taurus: Corvettes from Portugal

The SAN's dilemma in terms of vessels was that by 1969 its W&V class destroyers, the Loch class frigates and the type 15 frigate dated from the Second World War and were 25 years old. The SAN would have to modernise its ageing fleet, including the newer type 12 frigates that would also require major refits. As the political relationship with Britain was clouded the SAN commenced with a thorough investigation of its perceived threat and examined the type of equipment necessary for maintaining a credible navy at the southern tip of Africa. The ideal surface combatant specified in 1969 was a typical frigate, big enough with sufficient endurance to stay at sea in the often-stormy South African waters and with enough firepower to deter possible future aggressors.⁽²⁴⁾

21. Correia, and Verhoef, "Portugal and South Africa," 67-68.

22. Allan du Toit, *South Africa's Fighting Ships* (Rivonia: Ashanti, 1992), 229.

23. Geldenhuys, *Diplomacy of Isolation*, 75.

24. DODA. VSH10/38/3/1. Memorandum. Stafvereistes Kuspatriolleivaartuie, 28 October 1969.

The SAN compiled a comprehensive plan describing its role and task, as well as its anticipated force structures for the last three decades of the 20th century. It stipulated (*very positively*) that the Navy would at least need a force of 10 frigates or corvettes, but in the light of chronic manpower shortages, smaller, more compact and formidable vessels was required.⁽²⁵⁾ Although opinions differed on the ideal size of such vessels, the one aspect emphasised was good sea keeping capability and endurance in South African sea conditions. Some sources indicated that vessels should be at least 84 meters long and around 1200 tons, but by the early 1970s, most of the staff requirements described corvettes or light frigates of roughly one to two thousand tons, with missiles and guns, as well as an anti-submarine and air defence capability.⁽²⁶⁾

With the international pressure mounting on South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s, armaments sales to South Africa were increasingly scrutinised and it became progressively more difficult for South Africa to purchase weapons from international markets. Despite considerable the growth of the local armaments industry, the know-how and industrial capacity to produce submarines and sophisticated naval vessels remained lacking. For the first time in its history, South Africa was completely responsible for its maritime defence. As the SAN could no longer rely on Britain for new ships (*submarines and frigates*) it had to find other avenues. Three *Daphne* class submarines were purchased from France in 1967 and delivered between 1970 and 1972.⁽²⁷⁾

In 1969 the South African Defence Force (SADF) granted principled approval for the acquisition of six coastal patrol vessels within five to ten years. The Commandant-General of the SADF, General Hiemstra, announced that South Africa should build “light frigates” in future.⁽²⁸⁾ In 1970 Cabinet decided that some of the required vessels had to be built abroad and the rest locally. In March 1971 a South African project team visited shipyards in Britain and France to explore new designs, timescales and costs. The first choice, probably due to history, was once again British ships. However, these vessels were very expensive and although Edward Heath’s Conservative Government was prepared to accept armament orders from South Africa, the Labour Party made it clear that it would cancel South African orders if it returned to office. Placing an order at a British yard was therefore too risky as it might be cancelled before the delivery date.⁽²⁹⁾

The project team then visited French shipyards and on the insistence of the Chief of the Navy they also inspected a 1400-ton Portuguese corvette. The French designs were impressive but expensive compared to the much cheaper Portuguese ships. The Portuguese ships (*of the Joao Couthinho class*) were smaller than the British and French

25. DODA. VSH10/66/10/2(G). Die verwagte rol en taak van die Vloot 1970-1980-1990-2000.

26. Potgieter, “Geschiedenis,” 33.

27. Du Toit, *Fighting Ships*, 176.

28. AA. Minutes of Armscor Board of Directors Meeting number 6, 3 February 1969.

29. Potgieter, “Geschiedenis,” 43-48.

designs with medium speed diesel engines capable of 24 knots compared the gas turbine engines capable of at least 30 knots in the British and French designs.⁽³⁰⁾

Despite South Africa preferring smaller, cheaper and less sophisticated vessels to highly sophisticated and expensive frigates, the choice fell on the Portuguese vessels for political reasons. Botha, the Minister of Defence, wanted the ships to be bought from Portugal as it would support Portugal financially.⁽³¹⁾ The Spanish shipyard Bazan would be the leading yard and main contractor, while a Portuguese yard would act as sub-contractor. Admiral H.H. Biermann (*a former Chief of the Navy, now the SADF Commandant-General*) emphasised that the SAN required at least six patrol vessels, even if it implied buying less sophisticated vessels.⁽³²⁾ As East Block and Soviet vessels increasingly operated in Southern African waters, six corvettes would make it possible for at least two vessels to simultaneously patrol South Africa's East and West Coasts.

When the submarine *SAS Emily Hobhouse* arrived in Simon's Town in December 1971, Botha emphasised that the Cape Sea Route was of strategic importance to the "free world" as it handled about 20% of the world's and 30% of Europe's oil. He also announced that South Africa would purchase six missile corvettes from Portugal and investigate the possibility of building such ships locally.⁽³³⁾ The South African press reacted positively. Afrikaans newspapers reported that the procurement of six "ultra-modern corvettes" met with loud cheers (*"luide toejuiging"*).⁽³⁴⁾

The corvette project team (*designated Project Taurus*) was established in Lisbon, from February 1972 onward, while a technical team, responsible for weapon systems, was in Paris. Because of the decision to improve the basic *Joao Couthinho* design (*mainly with upgraded weapon systems*) it soon became apparent that the project would be more expensive than originally anticipated. Due to the upgrades and changes, the *Joao Couthinho* design with a displacement of 1300 tons, eventually became a much more sophisticated vessel of 1800 tons. It was also clear that the initial timescale (*to complete the project study phase by October 1972*) was unrealistic as the anticipated changes had implications for the whole design of the ship.⁽³⁵⁾ By September 1973, a new cost analysis indicated that due to the more complex design requirements, the ships became more expensive and only three instead of six ships could be afforded. Together with the higher price it reflected the lack of capacity in the SAN and the Armaments Board to design and do proper cost analyses.⁽³⁶⁾

30. AA. Produksievorderingsverslag (Production Report) vir die ses maande geëindig 30 September 1972, 15-16.

31. DODA. VSH10/66/10/2. Aankoop van 6 korvette van Portugal. See also: AA. Memorandum 55/24, 2 December 1971, 107. Attached to Minutes of Board of Directors of the Armaments Board, nr. 55.

32. DODA. VSH10/66/10/2. Notule van Vergadering te Simonstad in sake Projek Taurus, 24 January 1972, 7.

33. *Volksblad* and *The Star*, 10 December 1971.

34. *Volksblad* and *Vaderland*, 10 December 1971.

35. AA. Produksievorderingsverslag (Production Report) vir die ses maande geëindig 30 September 1972, 104.

36. Potgieter, "Geskiedenis," 58-62.

As it would be cheaper, placing the order directly with the main Spanish yard, Bazan, and not building the ships at a Portuguese yard was considered.⁽³⁷⁾ However, Portugal was under internal political and economic pressure and its industry pressured the Portuguese government to convince South Africa to continue with the project at a Portuguese yard. In late 1973 the final requirements for the vessels were completed. Contract negotiations with the Portuguese shipyard Viana Do Castelo and Thomson CSF commenced. The contracts had to be finalised within a year, which effectively extended the completion of the project by another year.⁽³⁸⁾

Viana Do Castelo had to complete the tender in cooperation with Bazan, but it soon became clear that the tender would not be completed before November 1974. The South African project team complained about a lack of support from the Portuguese Navy and that the constant changes the SAN made to the specifications negatively impacted the timelines. The constant changes and additions to the basic design, caused the size and price of the ship to “grow”, while time was running out!⁽³⁹⁾

After a bloodless coup d'état in Portugal on 25 April 1974 the authoritarian Estado Novo government was disposed in what became known as the Carnation Revolution. The process of granting independence to Portuguese colonies immediately commenced. Due to the changing political situation, Portugal notified the Armaments Board that it would no longer be possible for them to build the corvettes, or act as an intermediary with Spain. Spain was not prepared to accept responsibility for building the ships.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This effectively cancelled *Taurus*. Although the design of the corvette was being completed, the project failed before contracts for the building phase were finalised.

The successors of Project *Taurus*

After the cancellation of Project *Taurus* and in light of the Navy's urgent requirement for surface combatants, the focus moved to two other vessel acquisition projects: strike craft from Israel and corvettes from France. The genesis of the strike craft project is before the final cancellation of Project *Taurus*. In 1973 the SAN started with an assessment of the Israeli *Reshef* class missile strike craft. Botha decided to open negotiations with Israel for the acquisition of six missile strike craft. He informed the President of the Armaments Board of his decision on 17 April 1974.⁽⁴¹⁾ Due to timescale challenges experienced with the corvette project, the strike craft would be acquired as a “package deal” to prevent such delays.

37. AA. K15/5/8. Notule van die Eerste Kontrolegroepsvergadering, Simonstad, 13 November 1973.

38. AA. K5/19/1/12. Memorandum 75/28, 14 Feb 74 and Armaments Board Yearly Report 10, 1973-74, 20.

39. AA. Minutes of Board of Directors of the Armaments Board, nr. 78, 8 May 1974, 11.

40. AA. Minutes of Board of Directors of the Armaments Board, nr. 79, 27 Jun 1974, 4-5.

41. AA. Minutes of Armaments Board Executive Committee, nr. 29, 17 Apr 1974, 3 and Minutes of Armaments Board Executive Committee, nr 30, 19 May 1974, 1.

Botha's decision to acquire strike craft met with strong resistance in the Navy. Such vessels were regarded as too small with insufficient sea-keeping capability, they lacked endurance, had no anti-submarine sensors or weapons, and lacked anti-aircraft capability. The project nonetheless continued and made a crucial contribution towards the SAN's dire need for vessels. In line with the initial agreement, three vessels were built in Israel and three under licence in South Africa. In February 1977, the first strike craft was launched in Haifa, while the third strike craft sailed from Israel for South Africa in April 1978. The building programme for the three locally manufactured strike craft commenced late in 1975. Despite the complexity of the building phase and the lack of experience in South Africa, the project was successful, and the sixth vessel was delivered in March 1980.⁽⁴²⁾ Due to the urgent vessel requirements of the SAN two more locally manufactured strike craft were ordered in 1978 and delivered in 1983, while the ninth, and last, strike craft was commissioned in July 1986.⁽⁴³⁾

As the SA Navy planned to phase out all its Second World War destroyers and frigates during the seventies and the type 12 frigates were also ageing, corvettes or frigates remained an urgent requirement. This led to the acquisition of light frigates or corvettes from France. Fortunately for South Africa, the French Navy was building a new class of corvettes (*Aviso's*), to replace their older ships. Their design characteristics and weapon systems were broadly like the Project *Taurus* vessels. They were designed for coastal anti-submarine operations and were armed with anti-submarine weapons, *Exocet* surface-to-surface missiles and a 100 mm dual-purpose gun. It was a compact well-armed ship considering its displacement.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The contract for purchasing two fully equipped *Aviso A69* corvettes from France (designated Project *Picnic*) was finalised with the French shipyard, Dubigeon-Normandie on 26 August 1975.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Since the SAN urgently needed vessels, the French agreed to sell two of the ships they were building for the French Navy to South Africa. Consequently, *Lieutenant De Vaisseau Le Henaff* was renamed the SAS *Good Hope* and *Commandant L'Herminier*, renamed the SAS *Transvaal*. The *Good Hope* was launched in March and the *Transvaal* in September 1977.

However, on 4 November 1977, the United Nations Security Council accepted a resolution, making it compulsory for all its member states to implement an arms embargo against South Africa. The first South African corvette, *Good Hope*, was already under the South African flag on 17 September 1977 and had a SA Navy crew onboard. Ironically, the ship's sea acceptance trials also commenced on Friday 4 November, making it her

42. Thean Potgieter, "South Africa and maritime power in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 7, no 1 (2011), 64.

43. Potgieter, "Geschiedenis," 260-274.

44. Du Toit, *Fighting Ships*, 281.

45. AA. Register of Contracts. Contract nr 234.

only day at sea under the South African flag.⁽⁴⁶⁾ On 9 November, the French government announced that it would no longer supply weapons to South Africa. The corvette project as well as an *Agosta* class submarine project, also current at that stage, were cancelled.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The implementation of the UN embargo and the cancellation of the corvette programme effectively implied that only the strike craft project succeeded.

Concluding remarks

As maritime defence was a British colonial responsibility, when South Africa created a navy after the First World War it was in the mould of the British Royal Navy. It received all its weapons and equipment from Britain and South Africa's maritime defence responsibilities were more about British imperial interests than local defence requirements. In terms of the 1955 Simon's Town Agreement South Africa took over the costly upkeep responsibilities of the naval base, while Britain retained full military access. However, as South Africa became politically ostracised due to apartheid, it could no longer purchase warships from Britain and in 1975 the two countries cancelled the agreement. It effectively ended more than 170 years of constant British naval presence in South Africa.

As South Africa had to purchase surface warships from an alternative source, in 1971 it decided on an upgraded version of the Portuguese *João Coutinho*-class. South Africa saw Portugal as an ally in Africa and wished to support the country financially. The Spanish shipyard Bazan would be the leading yard, while the Portuguese shipyard in Viana Do Castelo would act as the shipbuilder. As the design and execution phase of the project quickly lagged behind schedule, it was cancelled after the April 1974 coup d'état in Portugal before the building phase of the project could commence. The delays with Project *Taurus* could be ascribed to the bad planning and execution of the project. Due to constant changes the initial *João Coutinho* design became a more sophisticated and larger vessel. This indicated that SAN planners were still suffering from the *Royal Navy syndrome* – in redesigning the ship it became more like a Royal Navy vessel. They also had little experience in designing ships, keeping to proper time scales and managing big integrated projects. In the end, this contributed to “sinking” the project.

An important lesson that was learned from the Project *Taurus* experience, was that future naval projects had to be tackled with more precision and urgency to produce quicker results. The two projects that followed (*purchasing strike craft from Israel and corvettes from France*) had much tighter timelines and were both executed with more precision. Yet, due to the political environment of the time, only one of the projects succeeded. The French corvette project was cancelled in 1977 because of a compulsory United Nations armaments boycott against South Africa. Despite the resistance to

46. Du Toit, *Fighting Ships*, 284.

47. AA. Armscor: Year Report nr. 1, 1977-78, 31.

strike craft project from within the SAN, it went ahead and was the most significant naval acquisition project between the failure of Project *Taurus* and the end of apartheid. In the end the strike craft were the only surface combatants the SAN received, and it essentially became a *small ship fleet*.

Because of apartheid numerous states refused to sell weapons to South Africa and its maritime defence situation looked bleak after the cancellation of the Simon's Town Agreement and the failure of the Portuguese and French naval vessel programmes. But with the dawning of the new South Africa in 1994, the requirement for corvettes or frigates was revived which eventually resulted in the commissioning of four Meko A200 frigates in 2006 and 2007.

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Author's short CV

Prof Thean Potgieter is the President of the South African Military History Commission. He is an Affiliated Professor, Public Administration and Management (*Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of the Free State*), and a Research Associate with the Centre for Military Studies (CEMIS), Stellenbosch University. He is the Chief Director Research and Market Intelligence at the South African National School of Government. Former appointments include Director of CEMIS, Chair of the Military

History Department (*at the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University*) and as an officer in the South African Navy. He has an extensive international teaching, research publication record and a wide-ranging research focus which includes maritime affairs, strategic theory, international and regional affairs, conflict and conflict resolution, application of technology, geopolitics, education and training, and research theory. He serves on numerous academic, community, institutional and editorial boards and structures, and is an experienced editor of scholarly books and journals.

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