

Book Review

The Naval War in South African Waters, 1939–1945

Evert Kleynhans

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On 6 September 1939, the then Union of South Africa, under its new Prime Minister, General Jan Smuts, declared war against Nazi Germany. Similar declarations of war would later follow against Italy (11 June 1940) and Japan (8 December 1941). The Union Defence Force (UDF) was soon transformed into a formidable fighting force, with the Army deployed to fight in East Africa, in Madagascar, in North Africa, and eventually also in Italy, supported by aircraft of the South African Air Force (SAAF). SAAF squadrons also saw action in other war zones. The country's naval forces, established in 1922 as the South African Naval Service (SANS), had to be built up from scratch, because the three small SANS ships were withdrawn from service in 1933–1934, and when the Second World War broke out, the SANS only had a handful of staff – and, obviously, no ships.

Far removed from the main European, North African and Pacific war zones, South Africa was spared direct land and air attacks, as well as the concomitant destruction and civilian casualties, but in light of the strategic value of the Cape sea route, the war soon came nearer to South African shores. The SANS officially became the Seaward Defence Force (SDF) on 1 September 1939, albeit that in practice it only started to operate as such from 15 January 1940. On 1 August 1942, the SDF and the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (South Africa Division) amalgamated to form the South African Naval Forces (SANF). Several years later, on 1 January 1951, the SANF was renamed the South African Navy. In the course of the Second World War, the SDF, and later the SANF, operated in four operational areas, namely the South African coastal waters, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea, and (in the last months of the war) in the Far East. Most of the 88 South African World War II warships were small trawlers or whalers that were converted into minesweepers or anti-submarine vessels.

With the publication of Evert Kleynhans's *The naval war in South African waters 1939–1945*, extensive coverage is now at least given to the African local operational area. Previously, operations in South African waters were dealt with by LCF Turner *et al.* in *War in the southern oceans 1939–1945* (1961), by CJ Harris in *War at sea: South African maritime operations during World War II* (1991), and by HR Gordon-Cumming in the *Official history of the South African naval forces during the Second World War (1939–1945)* (2008). For chapters on the role of South African naval forces in the war, and for the history of the South African naval forces in general, there are, for example, the books by JC Goosen (compiler), *South Africa's navy: The first fifty years* (1973),

Chris Bennett and Arnè Söderlund, *South Africa's navy: A navy of the people and for the people* (2008), and two books by André Wessels, *Suid-Afrika se vlootmagte 1922–2012* (2017) and *A century of South African naval history: The South African Navy and its predecessors 1922–2022* (2022).

Based on comprehensive and solid archival research (see the source list, pp. 292–315, and the 675 endnotes), Kleynhans's excellent latest book provides a critical and an in-depth analysis of the naval war off the South African coast and in the adjacent oceans during the Second World War. After discussing the strategic context of the naval war in South African waters, providing a literature review, and discussing his methodology in the elaborate introduction to his book, Kleynhans indicates the strategic importance of South African waters in Chapter one. Chapter two deals with the South African coastal defence system in the years 1933–1945. This includes the establishment of radar stations, air patrols, anti-submarine operations, and minesweeping. Opportunistic Axis naval attacks are scrutinised in Chapter three, including the role played by German pocket battleships and other surface raiders, and mine-laying operations, as well as the limited Japanese submarine offensive in the Mozambique Channel in 1942. "The German U-boat operations, 1942-1945" is the title of Chapter four. In this period, a total of 105 merchant ships were sunk by the German submarines, as well as five by an Italian submarine, the *Leonardo da Vinci*.

Kleynhans devotes two chapters to the naval intelligence war. In Chapter five, early wartime contacts are discussed, including the role of Will and Marietjie Radley as wartime couriers, and Hans Rooseboom as secret agent for the Germans. In the next chapter, the Felix Organisation is discussed in detail, with particular reference to the role played by Lothar Sittig. Throughout Chapters five and six, the role of the Ossewabrandwag is referred to. "The naval counterintelligence war" is the title of Chapter seven. This includes wireless interception, security, and naval censorship. These chapters on intelligence and counterintelligence matters are of particular importance, and the author succeeded admirably in integrating these issues with the broader topic of naval warfare in South African waters. The anti-submarine war, 1942–1945, is discussed in Chapter eight, including the sinking of three Axis submarines in South African waters.

In his conclusion, Kleynhans correctly points out that his book "provides a critical, comprehensive analysis of the all-encompassing naval war waged in South African waters between 1939 and 1945. In doing so, it introduces a fresh, in-depth discussion of the topic" (p. 286), and indeed, "[t]he book is novel in that it provides a unique analysis of the Axis and Allied naval operations in South African waters during the war" (p. 290).

The naval war in South African waters 1939–1945 is based on Kleynhans's doctoral dissertation, "The Axis and Allied maritime operations around Southern Africa, 1939–1945", which he completed in 2018 at Stellenbosch University. The published version is Volume four in the *African Military Studies* series. The book reflects a solid academic study, and the target audience is in the first place specialists and peers, as well as serious students in the field of military (and in particular naval) history. However, the book

is written in such a way that anyone interested in the topic will find it of value. The publication contains 22 informative tables, 15 maps, four figures and six graphs, as well as 20 apt photographs. Unfortunately, there is no index.

South Africa is supposed to be a maritime nation. Regrettably, too many South Africans, from all cultural groups, suffer from what could be termed 'a land rat mentality', and from sea blindness. The strategic Cape sea route has always been one of the world's most important maritime choke points. The importance of the Cape sea route was, once again, emphasised in the course of the Second World War. The safeguarding of this sea route was indeed of crucial importance for the Allied strategy and war effort. This is one of the many important matters that come to the fore in *The naval war in South African waters 1939–1945*, in which Evert Kleynhans makes an invaluable contribution towards the South African military – and in particular naval – historiography. This excellent scholarly publication is highly recommended. Hopefully, it will stimulate debate and generate more interest in the South African naval history.

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