

Book Review

A Century of South African Naval History: The South African Navy and its Predecessors, 1922–2022

André Wessels

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This year marks the centenary of the establishment of a small, nascent, permanent naval service in South Africa, to which the modern South African Navy, which serves all the people of a vibrant, democratic South Africa, owes its direct ancestry.

To commemorate this significant milestone, Professor André Wessels has produced his latest book, *A century of South African naval history*, which was launched at the South African Naval Museum in Simon's Town on 31 March 2022. Professor Wessels is a senior professor emeritus and a research fellow in the department of history at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein. The history of the South African Navy and its predecessors is one of his main research focus areas, and he has published extensively on the subject over many years.

While the SA Navy is neither one of the oldest nor one of the major navies in the world, it does, however, have a fascinating and proud, albeit chequered history serving the nation and its people. And while there are several books on the history of the SA Navy and its fighting ships, including those of this reviewer, this impressive new book provides a timeous, comprehensive and up-to-date history of the SA Navy and its predecessors over the 100 years of its existence.

This new work by André Wessels builds on the author's 2017 Afrikaans book, *Suid-Afrika se vlootmagte 1922–2012* and, understandably, there is overlap between the two publications. His latest book is, however, not merely an English translation of his previous work. In this new book, based on more than four decades of research and writing, Wessels adopts a fresh approach to both content and presentation, with much additional material and historical and political context to provide a more comprehensive review of the rich history of the SA Navy. He also updates the history of the SA Navy since 2012, which was the cut-off date for the author's 2017 publication. Importantly, in addition to recognising its many operational achievements, this book provides considerable insights into the all-important diplomatic role fulfilled by the SA Navy throughout its existence. The book concludes with some perspectives on 100 years of naval developments in South Africa.

The history of SA Navy ships has also been incorporated into a single chronological narrative, rather than being dealt with by ship type in separate chapters. This has prevented repetition and greatly improved the flow of this new publication. Moreover, while the 2017 book only provided a broad history of the South African naval forces from 1922 to the establishment of a permanent post-war navy in 1946, two new chapters are now dedicated to this important formative period.

Wessels contends that, in the first century of its existence, the South African naval forces have, on several occasions, undergone a process of transformation, and have grown and contracted depending on the whims of government, the vagaries of the economy, and the perceptions of the largely 'sea blind' nation.

With the global predominance of British maritime power and the long-standing presence of a squadron at the Cape, which safeguarded South African shores and protected trade and sea communications, no South African government after unification of the four South African colonies in 1910 showed much interest in South Africa as a maritime nation. Moreover, with South African maritime defence largely in the hands of the Royal Navy – which could be counted on to maintain a substantial presence in South African waters – there was, despite the establishment of a small, short-lived permanent naval service in 1922, a distinct lack of interest by politicians and the predominantly army hierarchy in having a navy at all. This situation would repeat itself during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

Almost thirty years after the Union, and just five years after the disposal of the last vessels of the fledgling South African Naval Service (SANS) during the Great Depression (1929–1939), the outbreak of war in 1939 provided the necessary impetus for South Africa to finally embark on the voyage of establishing a permanent, credible and enduring navy for the nation.

The SANS became the Seaward Defence Force (SDF) in January 1940, which in turn, was transformed in 1942 when it amalgamated with the South African Division of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve to become the South African Naval Forces (SANF). Under the leadership of the South African wartime Prime Minister, General Jan Smuts, the Union Defence Force was expanded considerably, including its naval forces.

While the end of the Second World War saw the Navy established as a full-time, albeit much reduced service, it remained the 'Cinderella' service until the mid-1950s, by which time it had been renamed the South African Navy in 1951. The transfer of the Simon's Town Naval Base to the South African government in 1957 and the commissioning of many new ships under the terms of the 1955 Anglo–South African Simon's Town Agreement for the Cold War defence of the sea routes round the Cape, led to the unprecedented expansion of the fleet and the professionalisation of the service, culminating in the successful establishment of a submarine squadron in the late 1960s.

The impact the growing international isolation of South Africa due to its apartheid policies had on the Navy is analysed together with the years of almost total isolation from 1977 to 1979, during which time the SA Navy entered the missile age but largely lost its blue

water capabilities and increasingly became involved in supporting regional clandestine special forces operations. Wessels then discusses the opportunities that the new political dispensation had on the SA Navy after 1990. He contends that, while en route to a new South Africa, the SA Navy took full advantage of the opportunities presented to it to build a new, transformed navy, for a new South Africa.

Looking to the future, Wessels argues that, in accordance with the core business of the modern SA Navy, 'to fight at sea', its mission 'to win at sea', and its vision 'to be unchallenged at sea', it is of the utmost importance for South Africa to have a well-equipped, well-balanced, well-trained and disciplined navy. He argues that what has been achieved since 1994 has been built on the solid work done over many decades, and that the centenary of the Navy is an opportunity for all South Africans to reflect on the proud history of the SA Navy, to take stock of the present state of the Navy, and to look to the future, clearly understanding that South Africa is a maritime nation.

Professor Wessels should be congratulated on producing a very comprehensive, readable and up-to-date history of the SA Navy and its predecessors over the 100 years of its existence.

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