

**SAS DRAKENSBURG'S FIRST 25 YEARS:
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE SA NAVY'S
FOREMOST GREY DIPLOMAT,
1987–2012**

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Abstract

The South African Navy (SAN)'s first (and thus far only) purpose-built combat support ship, SAS *Drakensberg*, was commissioned on 11 November 1987. In this study, the ship's first 25 years of service (1987–2012) to the SAN (and the people of South Africa) was analysed, with special reference to her role as a grey diplomat (i.e. the flag-showing cruises she undertook and her concomitant role in strengthening diplomatic and other ties with many countries). The *Drakensberg*'s other peace-time roles were also reviewed, including –

- humanitarian and related relief expeditions;
- her role during exercises with other SAN warships as well as ships and submarines from other navies, both in South African waters and across the globe;
- her role as a training ship;
- ceremonial duties; and
- lately also in anti-piracy patrols.

Throughout the study, the *Drakensberg*'s activities were evaluated against the background of the changing political and other developments in South Africa, as well as internationally. In the article, it will be indicated how and why a ship that was conceived, designed and built in the apartheid era, in due course became the most prominent, most visible and most successful warship that thus far has been in SAN service.

Introduction

<p><i>Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies</i>, Vol 41, Nr 2, 2013, pp. 116-141. doi : 10.5787/41-2-1071</p>

November 11, 2012 marked the 25th anniversary of the South African Navy (SAN)'s only surviving combat support ship, SAS *Drakensberg*. Proceeding from the

assumption that the SAN needs at least one large combat support ship, and that SAS *Drakensberg* was, for most of the first 25 years of her service, the SAN's foremost ship, it is the purpose of this article to provide a review and analysis of the *Drakensberg*'s role in the SAN, with special reference to her role as a grey diplomat (i.e. the flag-showing cruises she undertook and her concomitant role in strengthening diplomatic and other ties with many countries). Attention is also given to the exercises in which the ship took part, her role in humanitarian relief expeditions, as well as several other peace-time activities, and her role in anti-piracy patrols. Questions that will be addressed include the following:

- Why did the SAN acquire a second combat support ship in 1987?
- Did the *Drakensberg* do any pioneering work as a grey diplomat?
- To what extent has the *Drakensberg* lived up to expectations?

Throughout the emphasis will be on the ship as such, and not so much on her crew, albeit that it goes without saying that without a well-trained and disciplined crew, there will be no such a thing as a successful ship.

In this article, the story of the *Drakensberg* is told against the background of changing political and other developments in South Africa, as well as internationally, in the years 1987 to 2012, and it will be indicated how these changes affected the way in which the ship was utilised and deployed by the SAN and the South African government – from the last years of the apartheid era, through the years of transition, and in the post-1994 era of newfound democracy and new opportunities for South Africa in the international arena.

The birth of a ship² – and the end of an era, 1987–1990

Each year, on 11 November, Armistice Day is commemorated in many countries across the globe. Originally instituted in 1919 as a day of remembrance and to commemorate the end of the Great (later First World) War (1914–1918) at 11:00 on 11 November 1918, and the more than eight million soldiers, sailors and airmen of all participating countries who died in that conflict, it later became the day on which those who died in all wars were commemorated, including the Second World War (1939–1945), the War in Korea (1950–1953) and – in the South African context – the Namibian War of Independence (1966–1989, also referred to as the Border War or the Bush War). Wednesday, 11 November 1987 was the 69th anniversary of the end of the First World War, and the usual wreath-laying ceremonies were held at several cenotaphs – including in South Africa, with members of the then South African Defence Force (SADF) involved. But on this day, the SADF's main focus was elsewhere – on an event held in Cape Town

harbour, namely the commissioning of the SAN's newest warship, the combat support ship SAS *Drakensberg* (pennant number A301).

This was indeed a memorable milestone in the history of South Africa's naval forces, a history that dates back to 1 April 1922 when the South African Naval Service (SANS) was established.³ The great depression (1929–1935) led to the virtual demise of the SANS, but it was resuscitated at the outbreak of the Second World War, becoming the Seaward Defence Force (SDF) in 1939 and the South African Naval Forces (SANF) in 1942. During the war, South Africa's "little ships" (converted whalers and fishing trawlers) played an important role along the Cape seaway, and also in the Mediterranean, and in 1944–1945, the SANF acquired its first major warships, namely three frigates.⁴ In the 1950s followed two destroyers, a large frigate, ten coastal minesweepers and five small patrol boats,⁵ and in 1962–1964, three Type 12 frigates were commissioned.⁶ In the meantime, in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre on 21 March 1960, international pressure was mounting against the country. On 31 May 1961, South Africa became a republic outside the Commonwealth. In the light of growing isolation, and the fact that SAN warships were no longer welcome in many ports, there was a need to extend the range of the SAN's warships and to enable them to deploy at sea for long periods, independent of port refuelling facilities. Thus, on 10 August 1967, the SAN commissioned its first replenishment ship, the 25 300-ton (full load), 170,62 m long SAS *Tafelberg*, formerly a Danish tanker (built 1957–1958).⁷ For 20 years, the *Tafelberg* replenished the SAN's destroyers, frigates and other ships at sea, and accompanied them on several flag-showing cruises.⁸ The *Tafelberg* also provided assistance to SAN ships that took part in operational patrols along the south-west coast of Africa during the Namibian War of Independence.⁹

With the war in Namibia and Angola escalating,¹⁰ the SADF/SAN identified the need for a second (and purpose-built) combat support ship (as this type of ship would in due course be known). Even in the 1970s the idea was to acquire a second replenishment ship, which would in due course replace the *Tafelberg*. By the 1980s, there was also pressure on the Navy to provide work for the shipyard in Durban. In the course of time, the ship's design was modified, for example to include a Special Operations support control centre. The result was a unique ship: the locally designed (by Liebenberg and Stander Marine, Cape Town) and built (to this day, the largest ship of any kind built in South Africa) *Drakensberg*: 146,3 m long, with a beam of 19,5 m, draught of 7,9 m; full-load displacement 12 500 tons; maximum speed approximately 20 knots; crew of ten officers and 86 sailors (plus space for ten helicopter aircrew and 22 spare berths); armed with four single 20 mm guns and

several machine-guns; equipped to handle two Air Force Puma (today Oryx) helicopters and two landing craft utility (LCU) assault boats for amphibious operations (being able to put marines and/or Special Forces ashore). As a support ship, the *Drakensberg* was obviously only lightly armed. She was and is not a weapons platform, and is dependent on combat ships like frigates or strike craft to protect her against surface, air and submarine attacks. The ship was laid down at the Bayhead shipyard of Sandock Austral in Durban on 30 August 1984, launched and christened on 24 April 1986 by Mrs Elize Botha (wife of Pres. PW Botha), handed over to the SAN by the builders on 30 October 1987, sailed from Durban on 1 November to Simon's Town (arrived 3 November), and from there to Cape Town, for the commissioning ceremony that took place on 11 November 1987. The ship cost R76 million to build. The first commanding officer was Capt. NM Smit, who was the *Drakensberg*'s project officer. The design changes, to which reference has already been made, brought about top-weight problems, which were addressed by adding fixed ballast.¹¹

By the end of 1987, South Africa was a troubled land. As a matter of fact, the country had experienced growing problems ever since the National Party (NP) came to power in 1948 under the slogan of apartheid and then gradually implemented this racially based discriminatory policy, which alienated the vast majority of black, brown and Asian inhabitants of the country. Reference has already been made to the Sharpeville event. In its wake, the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned, but they went underground and respectively formed uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) and Poqo as their armed wings, which launched attacks against various targets.¹² In 1976, the Soweto riots broke out, spread to several other so-called townships, and led to a renewed international outcry and intensified boycott actions, culminating in the mandatory United Nations arms embargo against South Africa (1977).¹³ The 1980s saw an increase in violence in South Africa, and the SADF now had to fight on two "fronts", namely "up north" and "on the border" (in Namibia and in Angola), as well as to deploy troops in the black townships on the "home front".¹⁴

The SAN now had two combat support ships, but no longer any destroyers or frigates to replenish, because the Navy had been drastically downsized both in terms of ships and personnel in the mid-1980s, being reduced to a 24-hull navy, and having its last frigate withdrawn from service in 1985. The war "on the border" meant that more and more funds were canalised to the land and air forces, at the expense of the SAN.¹⁵ Initially, the idea was that the *Drakensberg* would supplement and then replace the *Tafelberg*, but in practice the SAN would retain two

combat support ships until 2004. The *Drakensberg* soon undertook its first missions for the SAN.¹⁶ At the beginning of February 1988, the *Drakensberg*, 14 other surface ships of the SAN as well as a submarine, took part in the Dias Festival at Mossel Bay, which included a fleet review (3 February) – the first of its kind in the SAN’s history.¹⁷ Then, on 15 February 1988, the *Drakensberg*, accompanied by a small missile-carrying strike craft, left Simon’s Town and sailed across the South Atlantic and through the Magellan Strait to Valparaiso in Chile – the latter country being one of South Africa’s few remaining naval friends. South African-manufactured weapon systems were off-loaded to be exhibited at the FIDA’88 International Air Show. The SAN ships also visited a number of other Chilean ports and arrived back in Simon’s Town on 16 April.¹⁸ This was the SAN’s first flag-showing cruise in more than nine years. South Africa broke the international military isolation and demonstrated its ability to deploy a naval task force, and project power, over a long distance. Furthermore, it seldom happens that only three months after being commissioned, a new ship and crew undertakes such a long trip.

From 28 July to 2 August 1988, the *Drakensberg* visited Durban.¹⁹ Then, from 15 August to 26 September 1988, both the SAN’s combat support ships, together with other surface ships and a submarine, took part in Exercise Magersfontein in and around Walvis Bay (then still a South African enclave) along the coast of Namibia. The SAN’s combat support ships underlined the SAN’s (and SADF’s) ability to project force over long distances, sending a clear message to Angola’s MPLA government and its Cuban and other allies.²⁰ This exercise also underlined the *Drakensberg*’s value in joint operations, and her value as a helicopter carrier. Towards the end of 1988, the *Drakensberg* visited Beira on two occasions (28–29 November and 6 December) to off-load non-combat military equipment that the South African government had donated to the Mozambican government to assist them in protecting the Cobora Bassa power lines that carried power to South Africa.²¹ In September 1989, both the *Drakensberg* and *Tafelberg*, together with other SAN ships, took part in Operation Grand Slam in the vicinity of Saldanha Bay, which included night-time amphibious exercises.²²

After protracted negotiations, the SADF withdrew from Angola. Elections were held in SWA, and the territory eventually and at long last became independent, as Namibia, on 21 March 1990.²³ On the “home front” in South Africa, there were general (albeit excluding black people) elections in 1987 and 1989, which the National Party (NP) won. But its policy of separate development (apartheid) was in decline, as the government made ever more concessions in a desperate effort to

appease the black majority in the country. After Mr FW de Klerk replaced Mr PW Botha as State President (20 September 1989), matters quickly came to a head.²⁴

In the meantime, communist regimes in Eastern Europe were toppled one after the other, which also led to the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989) and the re-unification of Germany (midnight 2–3 October 1990).²⁵ The once mighty Soviet Union broke up into 15 independent states (26 December 1991). The Cold War was no more. These events in the international arena, as well as on the home front, would redefine the SAN's future role. The dramatic political changes that would soon follow in South Africa, would create new opportunities for South Africa and all its people, as well as for the SADF, in particular the Navy – more specifically, for the *Drakensberg*.

The *Drakensberg* in a time of political transition, 1990–1994

In a watershed speech in parliament on 2 February 1990, State President FW de Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC, PAC and other organisations, and the freeing of political prisoners, which led to release from prison of, inter alia, Mr Nelson Mandela, and in due course, the start of multi-party negotiations on the political future of South Africa.²⁶ This took the form of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), which first convened on 20 December 1991. A whites-only referendum was held on 17 March 1992, in which 68,6% of the voters endorsed the continuation of the reform process. In the meantime, violence in the country continued, including the Boipatong massacre on 17 June 1992. The ANC and its allies suspended the negotiations, and talks only resumed after months of mass action. The assassination of Mr Chris Hani (Secretary-General of the South African Communist Party) on 10 April 1993, once again temporarily derailed the negotiations, but by June 1993, a date for the watershed 1994 election was announced. By now, most sports and cultural boycott measures against South Africa had been lifted, as the country moved closer to a political solution for its decades-long problems, and gained greater acceptance by the international community.²⁷

Less than a week after leaders of the ANC and NP met on 2 May 1990 for the first time for “talks about talks”,²⁸ the *Drakensberg* (under Capt. Fred Marais) sailed from Simon's Town on 8 May 1990, to Durban, and from there (accompanied by two strike craft) across the Indian Ocean, through the Strait of Malacca, and across the South China Sea, all the way to the Republic of China (ROC Taiwan) – a country with whom South Africa retained strong diplomatic and military ties throughout the apartheid era. It was the first time in 45 years that South African

warships visited the Far East. Exercises were conducted with units of the ROC navy. The return voyage took the SAN task force via the Sundra Strait and back across the Indian Ocean to Durban. The *Drakensberg* was back in Simon's Town on 28 June, having sailed more than 45 000 nautical miles. This ambitious flag-showing cruise was a huge success, and like all other cruises, afforded officers and other sailors important training opportunities.²⁹ The *Drakensberg* also proved that the SAN could deploy a task force over long distances without the need to visit ports en route to or from its destination.

From 1–20 September 1990, SAS *Drakensberg*, accompanied by two "River" class minehunters, visited several harbours in Zaïre (since 1997 known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo) – Banana, Boma and Matadi – during a diplomatic and relief cruise. Repair work was done in the harbours.³⁰ Even before South Africa was officially welcomed back by the international community, and before serious negotiations between political parties in South Africa started in earnest, the SADF – and in particular the SAN – was reaching out to other African countries. While in the international arena the First Gulf War (2 August 1990–28 February 1991) raged, the Department of Environmental Affairs asked the SAN for assistance and in January 1991, the *Drakensberg* was sent to the Antarctic to recover a South African National Antarctic Expedition (SANAE) helicopter that had broken down. The ship then rendezvoused with South Africa's Antarctic transport ship, SA *Agulhas*, near Bouvet Island, supplied the latter ship with fuel, stores and a Puma helicopter, and brought back to Cape Town nine German scientists and 57 SANAE and other staff.³¹

In the second week of June 1991, the *Drakensberg* raced to Marion Island to pick up an ill member of the South African weather team on the island and bring him back to South Africa.³² Operation Bob Cat (20 June–4 July 1991) took the *Drakensberg* on an astro-navigation training cruise for a number of students of the Military Academy, Saldanha Bay, to the island of St Helena.³³ The *Drakensberg*'s main cruise of 1991 took her from Simon's Town (15 July) to Cape Town (to load 35 tons of relief material, for example food, clothing, building material and medicine), Durban (to load about 750 tons of relief material for flood-victims), through the Suez Canal to Mersin in Turkey (to off-load relief material for the persecuted Kurds of northern Iraq who had fled to Turkey), and back through the Suez Canal to Nacala in Mozambique (to off-load the last of the relief material). The ship was back in Simon's Town on 8 September 1991. For this humanitarian relief work, the *Drakensberg* received the Navy's Sword of Peace for 1991.³⁴ During this very successful cruise, the *Drakensberg* berthed in several ports that had

never before been visited by a South African warship, making it a breakthrough diplomatic cruise.

In February 1992, the *Drakensberg* was sent towards the Antarctic to tow the SA *Agulhas* some 5 000 km back to Cape Town after the latter ship's rudder had been damaged.³⁵ With SA *Agulhas* undergoing repair work, the *Drakensberg* was tasked in March 1992 to take staff and stores to Marion Island.³⁶ On 3 April of that year, the *Drakensberg* and 13 other surface ships and two submarines took part in a fleet review in Table Bay to commemorate the SAN's 70th anniversary.³⁷ On 9 January 1993, the *Drakensberg* (under Capt. PC Potgieter) sailed for South America, acting en route as the guardship for the yachts that took part in the Cape to Rio race. SAS *Drakensberg* visited Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and then sailed to Montevideo (Uruguay), where she joined an SAN submarine and three strike craft that had in the meantime also crossed the South Atlantic, to participate in the first ATLASUR exercises with South American navies. The task force also visited the Argentinian ports of Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata. The *Drakensberg* was back in Simon's Town on 14 March.³⁸ On 17 March 1993, the SAN's first-ever combat support ship, SAS *Tafelberg*, was decommissioned for the last time. She was replaced by SAS *Outeniqua*, a former Ukrainian-built Arctic supply vessel.³⁹ Although, like the *Tafelberg*, the *Outeniqua* (at 166,31 m) was longer and (at 21 025 tons full load) larger than the *Drakensberg*, the latter would in more ways than one stay the SAN's busiest and foremost grey diplomat.

This was underlined by the fact that the *Drakensberg* was chosen to represent South Africa at the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Battle of the Atlantic. On 6 May 1993, the ship sailed from Simon's Town, then via the Canary Islands to Pembroke (Wales), and from there to Anglesey for the Fleet Review that was held on 26 May. Then it was on to Liverpool, and en route back to South Africa, port calls were made in Casablanca (Morocco), Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) and Libreville (Gabon). The ship was back in Simon's Town on 26 June, after completing a very successful flag-showing cruise.⁴⁰ In the meantime, the political negotiations between the various political parties drew to a close, and as 1993 gave way for a new year, South Africa was gripped by election fever. The new year promised to finally bring down the curtain on minority rule in South Africa, opening up the way for a new era – and new and exciting possibilities for the SAN, especially its premier warship, SAS *Drakensberg*.

The *Drakensberg*, as the Navy's premier warship, flies the flag of the new South Africa, 1994–2004

South Africa's first-ever truly democratic election took place in the last week of April 1994, and soon South Africa would be welcomed back by the international community. At midnight on 26–27 April (i.e. just before the first election day), the SADF's name was changed to the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The "new" Defence Force consisted of the "old" SADF, the defence forces of the former TBVC countries (i.e. the Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei) and members of MK and APLA.⁴¹ On 10 May 1994, Mr Nelson Mandela, as leader of the new ANC-led government of national unity, was inaugurated as South Africa's first-ever democratically elected (and black) president.⁴² Just more than a week later, SAS *Drakensberg* (under Capt. Preston Barnard) departed from Simon's Town (18 May) on a long deployment to show the new flag of the new democratic South Africa in several ports. For the first time in the history of the SAN, two women (public relations officers) accompanied a warship on a long deployment. The *Drakensberg* visited –

- Lisbon (Portugal) to take part in a naval review that commemorated the 600th anniversary of the birth of Prince Henry the Navigator;
- Rosyth (Scotland) to participate in a ten-day exercise north of Scotland (with naval units from seven countries);
- Copenhagen (Denmark);
- Rotterdam (the Netherlands);
- Zeebrugge (Belgium);
- Rouén and Le Havre (France), taking part in the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of France from Nazi occupation;
- London (the first-ever SAN warship to visit the British capital), to coincide with South Africa's re-admittance to the Commonwealth;
- Portsmouth (the Royal Navy's main base);
- Cadiz (Spain); and
- en route back to South Africa, anchoring off the islands of São Tomé, Príncipe and Bioko (Equatorial Guinea), and visiting Libreville (Gabon).

After exactly three months away from home, the *Drakensberg* arrived back in Simon's Town on 18 August.⁴³

This remarkable cruise strengthened the international military image of South Africa, enhanced the SAN's operational status, and on the diplomatic front, the *Drakensberg* visited more countries and ports than any other SAN ship had done before during a single cruise, and this renewed old friendships and forged new ones

– taking South Africa, the new SANDF, and in particular the Navy, into a new era of co-operation. Ironically, now that South Africa had been welcomed back by the international community, the SAN no longer had any traditional grey diplomats, like frigates, left, and consequently the *Drakensberg* (and to a lesser extent, the *Outeniqua*) by default became the country's most important grey diplomats.

By that time it had become customary to deploy the *Drakensberg* on at least one extensive flag-showing cruise every year. The ship left Simon's Town on 15 February 1995 and sailed to Durban, to load an armoured car, two armoured personnel carriers and two large multiple rocket launchers. From there she sailed to Port Mina Zayed (the port of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates) to off-load the military hardware, which was exhibited at the International Defence Industries Expo. The *Drakensberg* then sailed to Karachi (Pakistan), back to Port Mina Zayed, on to Bombay (now Mumbai) in India, back again to Port Mina Zayed to load the military equipment used at the exhibition and from there to Muscat (Oman), and via Durban back to Simon's Town (23 April).⁴⁴ It was the first time that a South African warship had visited the above-mentioned overseas ports. From 19–14 May 1995, the *Drakensberg* and other SAN units took part in the second ATLASUR exercise, this time in South African waters.⁴⁵ Towards the end of May/beginning of June 1995, while South Africa was in the grip of Rugby World Cup fever, the *Drakensberg*, two submarines and a strike craft took part in an anti-drug patrol between Cape Town and Tristan da Cunha.⁴⁶

Twenty years after a Type 12 frigate of the SAN (*SAS President Kruger*) was the last South African warship to visit the United States of America (USA), the *Drakensberg* (under Capt. Robert Myers) left Simon's Town on 14 June 1996 to cross the Atlantic to North America. After anchoring off Rio de Janeiro to take on board the SAN's yacht *Southern Maid* (which had been damaged during the 1995 Cape to Rio race), *SAS Drakensberg* sailed to the USA's naval base at Roosevelt Roads, near San Juan in Puerto Rico, to take part in a large naval exercise with some 25 other warships from 16 navies. Then it was on to Norfolk, Virginia, the USA's largest naval base, and from there to New York, and then to Newport. En route back to South Africa, South Africa's foremost grey diplomat visited Dakar (Senegal) and Tema (Ghana) and anchored off the island of Príncipe, arriving back in Simon's Town on 3 September.⁴⁷ From 28 September to 7 October 1996, the *Drakensberg* was once again underway, this time to transport personnel and equipment, at the request of the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, to Tristan da Cunha and Gough islands.⁴⁸ At the end of October/beginning of November 1996, the *Drakensberg*, together with other SAN units, took part in the SAN's annual

Exercise Red Lion, which on this occasion formed part of the SANDF's extensive Exercise Southern Cross.⁴⁹

In 1997, the SAN commemorated its 75th anniversary with an International Fleet Review in Table Bay (Saturday 5 April), in which the *Drakensberg* and 13 other major SAN surface ships as well as a submarine plus 22 warships from 13 other countries took part. These festivities were preceded by the third ATLASUR exercises between navies of South Africa, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, which took place south of the Cape (21–26 March), and in which several warships, including the *Drakensberg*, took part.⁵⁰ Later that year the *Drakensberg* left on Exercise Interop East. On 15 September 1997, she sailed from Simon's Town to Durban where she was joined by two strike craft, and then to Maputo, Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar (Tanzania), Mombasa (and exercises with the Kenyan Navy), Port Louis (Mauritius) and manoeuvres with the local coast guard, Pointe des Galets (La Réunion), Taomisina (previously known as Tamatava, Madagascar), exercises with a French frigate, and then via Durban back to Simon's Town (23 October).⁵¹

From January 1998, the *Drakensberg* underwent an extensive refit, which lasted several months.⁵² On 19 April 1999, the *Drakensberg* and two strike craft sailed from Simon's Town, across the South Atlantic to take part in the fourth ATLASUR exercises. The SAN task force visited Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, and was back in Simon's Town on 1 June.⁵³ At the end of October 1999, SAS *Drakensberg* took part in Exercise Red Lion '99 in the vicinity of Saldanha Bay.⁵⁴ The next month, *Drakensberg* was in Durban for a diplomatic visit to coincide with the Commonwealth conference that took place in that city. On 13 November 1999, a function in honour of the Commonwealth ministers of foreign affairs was held on board the ship.⁵⁵

On 8 June 2000, SAS *Drakensberg* sailed from Simon's Town, once again across the Atlantic Ocean, but now to Norfolk, Virginia, and then to New York, to take part in an international naval review (4 July). From there she sailed to Halifax – the first time ever a South African warship visited Canada. The *Drakensberg* was back in Simon's Town on 2 August.⁵⁶ The next month, the ship visited Mossel Bay (anchored in the bay), Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban and Richards Bay on a training cruise, which also served as a farewell cruise for Vice-Admiral Robert Simpson-Anderson (Chief of the SAN) and his wife who were also on board. Vice-Admiral Simpson-Anderson retired on 31 October 2000.⁵⁷ From time to time the *Drakensberg* also made cargo trips between Simon's Town and Durban.⁵⁸

The *Drakensberg's* premier 2001 cruise took her back to India. She departed from Simon's Town on 1 February, sailed to Durban to take on board 320 tons of relief supplies for the victims of a devastating earthquake in India, sailed up the east coast of Africa (and took part in exercises with the Kenyan navy), across the Indian Ocean to Mumbai (where the relief supplies were off-loaded and the ship also took part in the international Bridges of Friendship fleet review (17 February), took part in exercises with some of the other participating warships (for example, the Australian frigate HMAS *Darwin*), visited Kochi (Cochin), and returned to Simon's Town (14 March) via La Réunion (exercises with the French navy) and Durban.⁵⁹

In February 2002, the *Drakensberg* and other SAN ships sailed from Simon's Town to Cape Town, en route taking part in Exercise Dolphin. In Cape Town, the ships were open to the public during the local harbour festival.⁶⁰ Then, from 25–28 March 2002 (while, on the international front, the USA's war on terror started in Afghanistan), followed the *Drakensberg's* participation in the ATLASUR V exercises.⁶¹ From 9–24 June 2002, the ship was on a cruise to the island of St Helena to participate in the festivities that commemorated the discovery of the island 500 years ago.⁶² From 12–25 October 2002, the *Drakensberg* was one of several SAN units that took part in Exercise Red Lion 2002.⁶³ The next month, the *Drakensberg* (under Capt. Kevin Wise) and two strike craft visited La Réunion and exercised with the French navy.⁶⁴

Internationally, March 2003 is remembered as the month in which the USA started its second war in Iraq. In June 2003, the *Drakensberg* and other SAN units deployed to South Africa's east coast, from Simon's Town to Richards Bay, to participate in Exercise Red Lion (2–23 June 2003).⁶⁵ When, towards the end of August 2003, a Uruguayan fishing trawler that had illegally been fishing Patagonian toothfish, was chased by an Australian fisheries patrol ship, South African ships apprehended the trawler, and on 5 September Australian naval personnel were airlifted from the *Drakensberg* to the trawler.⁶⁶ On 6 December 2003, SAS *Drakensberg* sailed from Simon's Town all the way to Haiti in the Caribbean for the 200th anniversary of that island state's independence. The ship was alongside in Port au Prince from 22 December, and then in Kingston (Jamaica) from 6 January. She was back in Simon's Town on 28 January 2004.⁶⁷ In the meantime, the SAN was moving closer to the dawn of a new era in its history.

The *Drakensberg* and the new South African Navy, 2004–2012

On 18 November 1998, the South African cabinet announced the approval of an arms package in order to modernise the SANDF. Over and above jets and light helicopters, the package also included (for the SAN) three Type 209/1400MOD(SA) submarines, and four Meko A-200 frigates from Germany. The frigates were the first to arrive in South African waters (2003–2004), with the *Drakensberg*, together with other SAN ships, at sea to welcome them, after which they were fitted with weapons, and eventually commissioned as fully operational ships in 2006–2007.⁶⁸ This was at the same time a timely emergency buoy thrown at the SAN as well as an important investment in the future of the SAN. With the arrival of the new frigates, the SAN regained its blue-water capability, and for the first time in some three decades once again had major warships that could be employed as traditional naval grey diplomats. Their arrival also had implications for the *Drakensberg*, who until then had been, by default, the SAN's most capable naval ship: for the first time in her service life, she could now replenish SAN frigates at sea, but the more "glamorous" new arrivals would also steal the limelight of the SAN's combat support ships (that for nearly 30 years had been the SAN's major ships) and would relegate them to their traditional role of being auxiliaries – i.e. support ships for the frigates. In the years to come, the *Drakensberg* would no longer be the SAN's most prominent or visible SAN ship – neither as far as overseas deployments or operations in South African waters were concerned. However, this did not in any way detract from the importance of a ship like the *Drakensberg*.

The effect of the acquisition of the new frigates, however, had a devastating effect on the *Outeniqua*: the SAN had to reallocate financial and personnel resources, and on 30 July 2004, after only some eleven years in SAN service, the ship was decommissioned for the last time and sold.⁶⁹ This left the *Drakensberg* as the SAN's only remaining combat support ship, which meant that she was kept very busy. From 30 August to 23 September 2004, she was one of several SAN warships that took part in the annual Exercise Red Lion.⁷⁰ During that period, the last of the new frigates arrived, and before entering the Simon's Town Naval Base, a fleet review was held in False Bay (17 September), with Gen. Siphwe Nyanda, the chief of the SANDF, taking the salute from the *Drakensberg*.⁷¹ On 17 February 2005, there was another fleet review in False Bay in which the *Drakensberg* was a participant, this time to take leave of the retiring chief of the SAN, Vice-Admiral Johan Retief.⁷² And on 17 May 2005, when a sail-past took place in honour of the retiring chief of the SANDF, Gen. Nyanda, he took the salute from the *Drakensberg*.⁷³

From 9 June to 1 August 2005, the *Drakensberg* (under Capt. Colin Sharwood) was on an overseas cruise to participate in another ceremonial event, the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar. This included the International Fleet Review (28 June) in the Solent (i.e. between the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth, England) and the International Festival of the Sea (Portsmouth, 30 June–3 July). En route back to South Africa, SAS *Drakensberg* visited Lagos (the first-ever SAN visit to Nigeria) and Luanda (Angola).⁷⁴ In August–September 2005, the *Drakensberg* was one of several SAN ships that took part in the annual Exercise Red Lion, in preparation for the SANDF's Exercise Ndlovu, which took place in October.⁷⁵ In November 2005, the *Drakensberg* took divers and their equipment to Durban for DIVEX 2005.⁷⁶

On 16 January 2006, the *Drakensberg* left Simon's Town to sail via Cape Town directly to Kiel in Germany to escort the SAN's first of three new submarines, S101 (christened on 7 April 2006 as SAS *Manthatisi*) back to South Africa. The combat support ship and submarine departed from Kiel on 17 February, but on 11 March, the *Drakensberg* was diverted from Rota (Spain) to sail back northwards, to Antwerp (Belgium) to pick up a 210-ton rotor for the Koeberg nuclear power plant. The *Drakensberg* sailed from Antwerp on 21 March and directly to Cape Town where she arrived on 5 April, while the frigate SAS *Amatola* was sent out to accompany S101 to Simon's Town. For the Koeberg relief work, the *Drakensberg* received the coveted Sword of Peace award.⁷⁷

At the end of January 2007, SAS *Drakensberg* (under Capt. Charl Coetzee) visited Maputo to deliver 150 tons of surplus SANDF equipment to the Mozambican authorities.⁷⁸ Then, on 9 February, the ship sailed from Simon's Town to escort the second new submarine, SAS *Charlotte Maxeke*, on her maiden voyage to South Africa. The *Drakensberg* visited Walvis Bay, Luanda and Brest (France) en route to Emden (Germany). The voyage back to South Africa started in Emden on 16 March and took the ship and submarine via Rota to Simon's Town where the *Drakensberg* arrived on 24 April and the submarine on 26 April.⁷⁹ This was the *Drakensberg*'s last very long overseas deployment for the period under discussion in this study. (The ship's anti-piracy patrol in 2012 – see *infra* – was only longer in terms of the days away from her home base, but did not take the ship that far away from Simon's Town.)

In October–November 2007, the *Drakensberg* took part in the annual Exercise Red Lion. From Durban, the ship then sailed to Dar es Salaam to

participate in Exercise Interop East, together with the navies of the other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries.⁸⁰ Very important naval exercises in which the *Drakensberg* was involved also took place in 2008. First there was Exercise Good Hope III (February–March) with ships of the German navy,⁸¹ and then there was the first-ever IBSAMAR exercise (2–15 May) with ships from India, Brazil and South Africa taking part,⁸² followed immediately by the seventh ATLASUR exercise.⁸³ On 5 September 2008, the *Drakensberg*, 11 other SAN warships and two submarines took part in a presidential fleet review in honour of State President Thabo Mbeki.⁸⁴ The next month, the USA aircraft carrier *Theodore Roosevelt* visited South African waters (anchored in Table Bay), and she and a USA cruiser, a French frigate, the *Drakensberg* and an SAN submarine, frigate and patrol boat then took part in exercises along the coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The *Drakensberg* and the other participating SAN and French ships then visited Durban, followed by a visit to Maputo by the *Drakensberg* and the other SAN ships and a submarine. En route back to Simon's Town, the *Drakensberg* and the submarine also visited Port Elizabeth.⁸⁵ It was indeed a very busy year for the *Drakensberg*.

From 12 February 2009 until 9 February 2010, the *Drakensberg* was in the dry dock in the Simon's Town Naval Dockyard to undergo an extensive year-long refit.⁸⁶ From then, until 12 March 2010, she took part in Exercise Good Hope IV with units of the SAN and German navy.⁸⁷ In June–July 2010, the FIFA Soccer World Cup Tournament was held in South Africa for the first time ever (it was also a first for the African Continent), and the SANDF formed part of elaborate security measures, with the SAN providing ships and submarines to provide security in harbours and along the coast. For the duration of the tournament, SAS *Drakensberg* served as a floating base for a reaction force – but, fortunately, there were no incidents.⁸⁸

At the end of August 2010, the *Drakensberg* (still under the command of Capt. Charl Coetzee) and two other SAN ships visited Maputo.⁸⁹ Then, from 10–27 September, the *Drakensberg* was one of the ships that took part in Exercise IBSAMAR II.⁹⁰ The next month, SAS *Drakensberg* accompanied the submarine SAS *Charlotte Maxeke* across the South Atlantic to take part in ATLASUR VIII. The SAN units visited Mar del Plata, Porto Belgrano and Buenos Aires in Argentina, and Montevideo in Uruguay. On 20 November, a memorandum of understanding with regard to military co-operation between South Africa and Argentina was signed on board the *Drakensberg* while she was alongside in Buenos Aires.⁹¹

In January 2011, the *Drakensberg* was sent to the Côte d'Ivoire to be on standby in case South Africans had to be evacuated from the then strife-torn country. She was back in Simon's Town on 26 March 2011.⁹² In September 2011, SAS *Drakensberg* visited Dar es Salaam.⁹³ In November 2011, the *Drakensberg* and a minehunter took part in Exercise Ndlovu in Saldanha Bay.⁹⁴

Since around 2005, piracy has become a problem off the coast of Somalia. In due course, warships from the USA, European countries and countries from Asia were sent to patrol this area. The South African government did not send any warships to participate in these patrols, but when some of the pirates moved south and even threatened shipping in the Mozambique Channel, the SAN was ordered to deploy frigates to the area, using the port of Pemba in the north of Mozambique as a base. The first frigate to be deployed under Operation Copper was SAS *Mendi* (February–May 2011).⁹⁵ Other frigates followed, but in the light of technical problems suffered by these ships, the Navy had to make other plans. Consequently, towards the end of March 2012, the *Drakensberg* was sent to Pemba to perform anti-piracy patrol duties. On board were an Oryx helicopter and members of the Maritime Reaction Squadron (MRS) and Special Forces (SF). One could argue that there are risks involved in deploying a lightly armed support ship against pirates that use fast boats. Nevertheless, by mid-April 2012, the *Drakensberg* became the first SAN warship to be involved in capturing Somali pirates in the Mozambique Channel, offshore of the border between Mozambique and Tanzania. Later, on 23 May, a member of the MRS drowned during the boarding of a suspicious vessel. His body could not be recovered. The *Drakensberg* returned to Simon's Town towards the end of June 2012.⁹⁶ Then, towards the end of November 2012, shortly after serving 25 years in the SAN, SAS *Drakensberg* sailed from Simon's Town on a second anti-piracy patrol in the Mozambique Channel.⁹⁷

Concluding perspectives

In accordance with the SAN's core business, namely "to fight at sea", its mission, "to win at sea", and its vision, "to be unchallenged at sea",⁹⁸ it is clear that the SAN's primary role is to conduct operations in defence of South Africa and all its people and, consequently, the primary role of an auxiliary like the combat support ship SAS *Drakensberg* is to support combatants like frigates and submarines. But in times of peace, the SAN has equally important roles to play, and the service record of the *Drakensberg* is proof of that. In the course of 25 years, the ship has lived up to her mission, "We provide logistic support for Naval and

Military operations at sea and on land”, her motto, “We provide the goods on time, every time!”, and her objectives, namely “to prepare and maintain our ship to be ready for deployment anywhere, any time; to conduct all operations with professionalism and efficiency; to develop our potential so as to perform our duty with confidence and competence; and to serve our ship with loyalty and pride”.⁹⁹

Since the end of 1987, when the *Drakensberg* was commissioned, until the end of 2012, when the ship was 25 years old, the SAN has sent warships on foreign deployments on at least 66 occasions. SAS *Drakensberg* took part in at least 27 of these deployments (more than any other SAN warship ever), including at least 15 cruises where the ship was sent out on its own. Not all of these deployments were planned as primarily flag-showing cruises, but in practice all of them were in one way or other a flag-showing exercise. All these cruises in some way or another contributed towards the establishment of better relationships between South Africa and other countries (for example, African and Middle Eastern countries), or to strengthen ties that already existed (for example, with several countries in Europe). In the world of diplomacy, warships indeed play a very important role, and the presence of a warship in a port is a tangible and visible sign of friendship. In her first 25 years, the *Drakensberg* has visited no fewer than 63 ports in at least 38 countries.

The *Drakensberg* also undertook several primarily humanitarian relief operations (for example, her 1992 visit to Bangladesh, Turkey and Mozambique) – the kind of trips that led to generating mutual trust and understanding, and the promotion of confidence-building measures. Then there were several voyages during which assistance was provided to a government department (for example the Department of Foreign Affairs visit to Haiti, end of 2003/beginning of 2004, or Armscor, taking military equipment to Chile in 1988 and the United Arab Emirates in 1995). Over and above the 29 foreign deployments (including two anti-piracy patrols) and concomitant naval exercises which often took place, the *Drakensberg* has thus far also taken part in most of the SAN’s Red Lion exercises, exercised with foreign warships in South African waters on many occasions (with warships and/or submarines from many countries across the globe), took part in two anti-piracy patrols in the Mozambique Channel, and also assisted in the apprehension of trawlers that were guilty of illegal fishing (see the 2003 assistance to the Royal Australian Navy). She also performed ceremonial duties on several occasions (for example during fleet reviews). Of course, budgetary constraints mean that the SAN can no longer really afford the luxury of tailor-made flag-showing cruises, and consequently, all cruises are also utilised as training cruises, as well as intelligence

gathering operations. All cruises are thus also cost-effective and of great value to the SAN. Many officers and seamen have indeed received training on board the *Drakensberg*. Several cruises also combine a number of roles for a ship like the *Drakensberg*, for example, where the main purpose for a visit to South America will be to take part in an ATLASUR exercise, but at the same time the trip across the Atlantic and back is a training cruise, a flag-showing cruise, which could also entail guardship duties (as was the case in 1993).

Since 1987, the SAN has used 27 of its 43 commissioned ships (and submarines) as grey (or in the case of the submarines, black) diplomats. The *Drakensberg* has been the most active of these ships, with – as has already been pointed out – 27 cruises. As grey diplomat, she indeed also did pioneering work by showing the South African flag in ports never before visited by SAN ships. This included 18 voyages in the years 1987 to 2003, i.e. until the SAN acquired four new frigates. Since then, the *Drakensberg* has been only slightly less active as a grey diplomat, even though budget constraints during the past few years have unfortunately limited all SAN ships' movements in this regard, with only three flag-showing foreign deployments in 2010 to 2012 (excluding anti-piracy patrols). The fact that the *Drakensberg* is the SAN's sole surviving combat support ship is also indicative of the tight budget constraints under which the SAN has to operate. But, ever greater demands are placed on the SANDF as well as on the SAN. The post-Cold War era is characterised by instability in many areas of the globe, with concomitant peace-keeping exercises being conducted in an effort to alleviate the plight of the innocent victims of conflict. Since South Africa has been welcomed back by the international community, the country is also expected to contribute towards peace-keeping and related operations. The fact that there is a mismatch between the required missions of and funding for the SANDF/SAN undermines the state's diplomatic and other initiatives.

To project power, but also to send troops and equipment to participate in such operations, the SAN in most cases needs at least one and preferably two combat support ships. The 25-year-old *Drakensberg* will, hopefully, with the necessary maintenance and regular refits, be able to sail on for at least another ten to fifteen years. When she is eventually replaced, it will hopefully be with a larger multi-role ship of its kind, for example such as the Dutch *Karel Doorman* (which is scheduled to be commissioned in 2014). Over and above such a replacement ship, the ideal is that the SAN will also in due course (and sooner rather than later) acquire a dedicated amphibious combat support ship (either a landing helicopter dock [LHD] or landing platform dock [LPD] ship). One should take note of the fact

that, towards the end of 2012, there were approximately 570 combat support ships (fuel and/or stores replenishment ships, transports, tank landing ships, LHDs and LPDs) in 52 navies, most of them (some 160, or 28%) in the navy of the USA, the world's only remaining super power. As far as the BRICS countries are concerned, Brazil has seven such ships, Russia some 60, India 17, the People's Republic of China at least 56 – and South Africa only the *Drakensberg*.¹⁰⁰ The *Drakensberg* has for many years been the only dedicated combat support ship in all of Africa, and is also the continent's largest warship.

SAS *Drakensberg* was born out of the operational needs of the old SADF, and was then a product of the apartheid era, but has evolved with the rest of the SAN (and SADF/SANDF), and has become (thus far) the most prominent and most visible ship of the SAN, and also the foremost grey diplomat of the SAN, and in that sense, relatively speaking, the most successful ship of the SAN. She has indeed lived up to expectations. She has sailed longer distances than any other SAN warship, and has visited more foreign countries (at least 38) and more ports (at least 63) than any other SAN warship. Her history is a reflection of the history of South Africa since 1987, and as the country and the SADF/SANDF and SAN have been transformed, the *Drakensberg*'s roles have also changed. The ship's company composition is also a reflection of this transformation: when SAS *Drakensberg* was commissioned in 1987, most of her all-male crew was white. Twenty years later (2007), some 36% of the crew was black, 35% brown, 24% white and 5% Asian; with about 14% of the crew female.¹⁰¹

From this study it is clear that from 1987 to 2012 (and beyond), the *Drakensberg* has indeed been the SAN's most prominent and successful warship, and that from 1987 until the commissioning of the SAN's first new frigate as a fully operational ship in 2006, the *Drakensberg* was indeed also the SAN's foremost grey diplomat of the new democratic South Africa. With her ability to replenish and support other ships (and submarines), conduct search-and-rescue operations, patrol and surveillance work, troop transport and Special Forces insertion operations, and with considerable potential for disaster relief, SAS *Drakensberg* has added immense value to the SAN and the SANDF, enhanced the effectiveness of the SAN, and made the SAN more adaptable and useful. The SAN indeed needs at least one combat support ship. In the year the SAN commemorated its 90th anniversary, the *Drakensberg* turned 25. If the history of South Africa's naval forces since 1922 is analysed, the role of its grey diplomats stands out as its greatest achievement – and in this regard, the *Drakensberg* made the most noteworthy contribution. Since 1987, SAS *Drakensberg* has generated a sense of pride and on several occasions

underpinned South Africa's diplomatic efforts. She has practically demonstrated the importance of the SAN's diplomatic role as well as the other peace-time roles played by the SAN – in the process fostering mutual respect, bringing about co-operation between countries, creating joint training opportunities, supplying humanitarian and other assistance, whether it was to people who suffered from the consequences of natural disasters or from political upheavals.

In the course of the past 25 years, the *Drakensberg* has built up a proud reputation, thanks to well-trained, committed and disciplined crew members, ably led by very capable commanding officers. It is hoped that in the years to come, the crew members of SAS *Drakensberg* will build on this work and continue the tradition of service to South Africa and all its people.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The financial assistance provided by the National Research Foundation is gratefully acknowledged. Marilie Brink and Annèl Oosthuysen are thanked for the general research assistance that they provided. The sources consulted in writing this article are freely available. See in general the files on SAS *Drakensberg* kept by the archives of the SA Navy Museum in Simon's Town.
- ² The day when a ship is launched is sometimes regarded as the day the ship was 'born', but for the purposes of this article, the day that the *Drakensberg* was commissioned is used as the starting date; i.e. the article commemorates 25 years of service in the SAN.
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- ⁴ For the role of the SDF and SANF in World War II, see Turner, LCF, Gordon-Cumming, HR & Betzler, JE. *War in the southern oceans*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1961; Gordon-Cumming, HR. *Official history of the South African Forces during the Second World War (1939–45)*. Simon's Town: The Naval Heritage Trust, 2008; Harris, CJ. *War at sea: South African maritime operations during World War II*. Rivonia: Ashanti, 1991.
- ⁵ Du Toit, A. *South Africa's Fighting Ships Past and Present*. Rivonia: Ashanti Publishing (Pty) Limited, 1992, . 193–219.
- ⁶ For the role of the Type 12s in the SAN, see Bennett, C. *Three frigates: President Class frigates bring the SA Navy to maturity*. Durban: Just Done Publishing, 2006.
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- ⁸ Wessels, A. “Veertig jaar se ondersteuning ter see. Gevegsteunskepe in die Suid-Afrikaanse Vloot, 1967–2007 (1): SAS *Tafelberg* en SAS *Drakensberg*”. *Journal for Contemporary History* 32/2. December 2007. 164–174.
- ⁹ For the SAN’s limited albeit important role during that war, see Wessels, A. “The South African Navy during the years of conflict in Southern Africa, 1966–1989”. *Journal for Contemporary History* 31/3. December 2006. 283–303.
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- ¹⁴ See, for example, Stemmet, J-A. *Apartheid under siege, 1984–1988: Actions and reactions*. PhD dissertation. University of the Free State, 2002.
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- ¹⁸ Du Toit *op. cit.*, p. 320; *Navy News* 7. June 1988. 2, 7–10, 16; *Navy News* 11. April 1992. 27.
- ¹⁹ *The Natal Mercury*. 30 July 1988. 13; *The Natal Mercury*. 3 August 1988. 3.
- ²⁰ Du Toit *op. cit.*, p. 244; *Paratus* 39/10. October 1988. 67; Heitman, H. “Equipment of the Border War”. *Journal for Contemporary History* 31/3. December 2006. 107.
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- ⁴⁶ *The Mercury*. 2 June 1995. 3.
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