

MORE WARSHIPS FOR SA NAVY ?

Although a tragic aircraft crash overshadowed the recent international defence exhibition at the Ysterplaat Air Force Base near Cape Town, South Africa, the expo was a remarkable gathering of manufacturers of military hardware, electronic systems and aircraft for both military and civilian use.

Despite the focus on aircraft, there was a distinct maritime flavour, especially in hangar number one where several shipyards displayed their capabilities to build vessels ranging from the most sophisticated warships to fisheries research vessels.

In the latter category was the display stand of the local yard **Farocean** that specialises in building small tugs for both the navy and the **National Ports Authority**, a variety of pleasure craft, and vessels for fisheries patrol. These patrol vessels have infra-red cameras

that can locate poachers at night, including, I am told, those about their nefarious activities on the beach.



The German-built SAS Isandlwana sailing from Simon's Town, South Africa.

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Currently under construction in one of Farocean's large grey sheds in Cape Town harbour is the replacement for **Sardinops**, the fisheries research ship that I saw launched sideways into the yacht basin by **Globe Engineering** in 1958. Remarkably, she is still in service, a testimony to her builders and to those who have maintained her over the years.

Sporting a bulbous bow and all the mod-cons, the new **Sardinops** will be in service early next year, although moving her from the shed to the water will be an engineering feat worth watching.

With scale models of a variety of vessels and other visuals to attract attention, exhibits by the German builders of the new South African frigates and submarines were also prominent at Ysterplaat, amid reports in local and foreign media that the navy could be signing for a fifth frigate. Mention has also been made of an additional auxiliary vessel and even a helicopter carrier that also has a capability to launch landing craft. Although a formal announcement regarding further naval expansion has not been made by the South Africans, Spanish, French and German yards are said to be making proposals regarding the latter vessel.

As the only credible navy in Africa – apart from the Egyptians - the South African navy could be requested to extend its operational area to include the sub-Saharan coastline and to participate in anti-piracy patrols off the Horn of Africa. To be effective in such a role, military observers believe that the navy will need more units, including a greater helicopter-carrying capacity. However, several issues need clarification before the country embarks on further military expenditure, especially if the hardware is to be used on behalf of foreign countries.

Taxpayers will want to know the source of funding for additional vessels, especially as two submarines – part of the original deal - are still being completed and the cost of any further orders will probably be higher. *Will the navy, they ask, be compensated for deploying its ships along foreign coasts ?*

Some observers wonder whether the navy will be able to crew additional vessels as shortages already exist in the current executive and engineering complements. A large body of efficient, experienced and highly trained officers and senior ratings will be needed if the navy is to participate with fully equipped and operational vessels on a larger scale in international operations – a different scenario to occasional training cruises from Simon's Town to Durban. And it takes years to train such people to levels – in navigation, engineering and combat operations – that conform to international requirements.

Others may wish to see the counter-trade deals that formed part of the original purchase agreement be fulfilled before further orders are placed.

A year ago, this column pointed to the urgent need for a squadron of dedicated, hi-tech maritime reconnaissance aircraft that, apart from routine coastal patrols, could be scrambled in the event of an accident at sea. Such aircraft were sorely missed during the search last year for the missing yacht **Moquini**, and also for the crew of the bulk carrier **Alexandros T** that sank south of Port Elizabeth earlier this year.

In Ysterplaat's hangar number one, models of such aircraft were on display, and elsewhere, numerous surveillance systems – useful in air-sea rescue or in routine maritime patrols - were being peddled. Since long-range reconnaissance planes should be a priority among military procurements, one hopes that serious research into their acquisition will follow.

Around the stalls at Ysterplaat there was talk of dozens of vessels – mainly fishing craft, small launches, patrol vessels and rig tenders – under construction in Chinese yards for Angola. Once completed, the smaller vessels will have to be piggy-backed on heavylift ships from China to Angola, while the larger ones face arduous delivery voyages, lasting several weeks.

Although most of these vessels are being constructed in terms of Chinese aid packages to Angola in exchange for oil deals, the demand for small vessels should provide a market for shipbuilding in South Africa – a matter of a few days' steaming from Luanda, rather than the slow-boat voyages from China.

I understand that one of the highlights of the air display was the fly-past by a South African Airways Airbus, rather like those memorable flights associated with World Cup rugby or cricket. Now, in line with my comments in this column last week, wouldn't it be wonderful if a shipping company would follow suit and have one of its vessels do a circuit of False Bay at the height of the holiday season this year?

Perhaps the extremely well organised air show and its attendant defence expo will be the catalyst for significant developments in the maritime field.
