

## EXCELLENT RECORD OF NAVY'S TYPE-12 FRIGATES

For last week's Naval Festival, the navy provided another excellent show for folks of all ages. It followed days after **SAS Mendi**, the fourth of the new frigates, was commissioned officially in Port Elizabeth.

It took me back forty-two years to a time when, from our training base at **SAS Simonsberg**, we had a ringside view of the three Type 12 frigates - named after Boer Republic presidents, of all people - moving in or out of harbour at Simon's Town.

With their radar scanners and other top-hammer, they contrasted to the sad profile of the obsolete Loch-class frigate **SAS Transvaal**, stripped of her weaponry and moored fore and aft at the buoys outside the harbour. Another war-built frigate, **SAS Natal** was the navy's hydrographical survey vessel at the time, while the third of the class, **Good Hope**, was also still in service, and sported the admiral's suite down aft, a waste of taxpayers' money, given the number of times it was used constructively.

I also remember getting a couple of hours' break from a communications course at the signal school atop Red Hill to watch two of the frigates "attack" the obsolete boom defence vessel **SAS Fleur** to the east of Roman Rock. An oppo who was on **President Steyn** told me later that their gunners and those from the Lower North Battery had scored several hits before the air force also had some target practice. As **President Steyn** moved in for the coup de grace, the old girl listed suddenly and sank.

I did not serve in the frigates, but visited friends aboard as often as possible and knew my way around. Thus I read with interest the recently published and thoroughly researched book *Three Frigates* that traces their respective careers, their exploits during the Angolan war, as well as the politics behind their acquisition and operation.

As the author, Rear Admiral Chris Bennett, served in the frigate squadron and through various other postings had insight into the background of the vessels' operations, he writes authoritatively on his subject.

The ships were built in accordance with the Simon's Town agreement between South Africa and Britain, in terms of which this country was obliged to assist with the defense of the Cape sea route. As the cold war became warmer, the anti-submarine capability of the frigates assumed greater importance, but the later political pariah status of South Africa caused the British to renege on the agreement and the locals adapted the navy for their own agenda.

Over the years, the frigates were modified several times so that their final silhouettes differed markedly from that photographed so readily when they first arrived, the product of the expertise of Simon's Town's dockyard personnel at that time.

Interesting voyages to the southern islands, or carefree days of showing the flag in South America, Australia and even in New York only days after the era-changing Soweto uprising in 1976, and exercises with various navies were punctuated by the ships occasionally arresting foreign vessels fishing in South African waters.

Those moments of the frigates showing their teeth were overshadowed by their clandestine operations - sans their pennant numbers and the springbok emblem on their funnels - during the Angolan war. Although they were engaged mostly in coastal patrols during which their communications departments worked overtime monitoring signals between various factions ashore, some operations required a bit more adrenalin.

Under cover of darkness, the frigates would land recce squads on secluded Angolan beaches, hasten seawards and, after the recces had completed their operations, the ships would close the coast to pick them up.

At the time, the South Africans were wary of an engagement with foreign warships, notably modern Nigerian vessels whose fire-power was superior to that of the South African ships. There was no need to worry, it transpired, as the Nigerians had insufficient trained personnel for their ships to put to sea.

Admiral Bennett chronicles the tragic sinking of **SAS President Kruger** after a collision with the auxiliary tanker **SAS Tafelberg** in February 1982, a dreadful accident that claimed the lives of 16 men. He draws on both official and anecdotal accounts of the collision to comment on the findings of the inquiry.

Two years prior to the loss of her sistership, **President Steyn** had been withdrawn, and **President Pretorius** followed suit in 1985.

The arms embargo aborted a programme to replace the Type-12 frigates, and even completed vessels remained in their French builders' yards. Israeli-designed strikecraft became the navy's preferred surface vessels, although they were hardly ideal for South African sea conditions.

While rivet-counters might complain about a few minor typos and bits of navy-speak that make some sections less intelligible to the casual reader, this represents a good read that is grounded in extensive research. Admiral Bennett waded through myriads of files containing official reports and personal correspondence, and interviewed numerous senior officers and ratings alike. Dozens of illustrations of the ships and some photographs encapsulating life aboard enhance the value of this work that is laced with interesting anecdotes.

As a comprehensive record of the ships and their times, *Three Frigates* will appeal to many - old salts who sailed in them will associate readily with its contents; naval buffs will enjoy sifting through the ships' details, and, since Bennett has documented his sources meticulously, serious researchers will want a copy on their shelves.

Perhaps someone will write *Four Frigates* and *4x4s* that will make a compelling sequel!