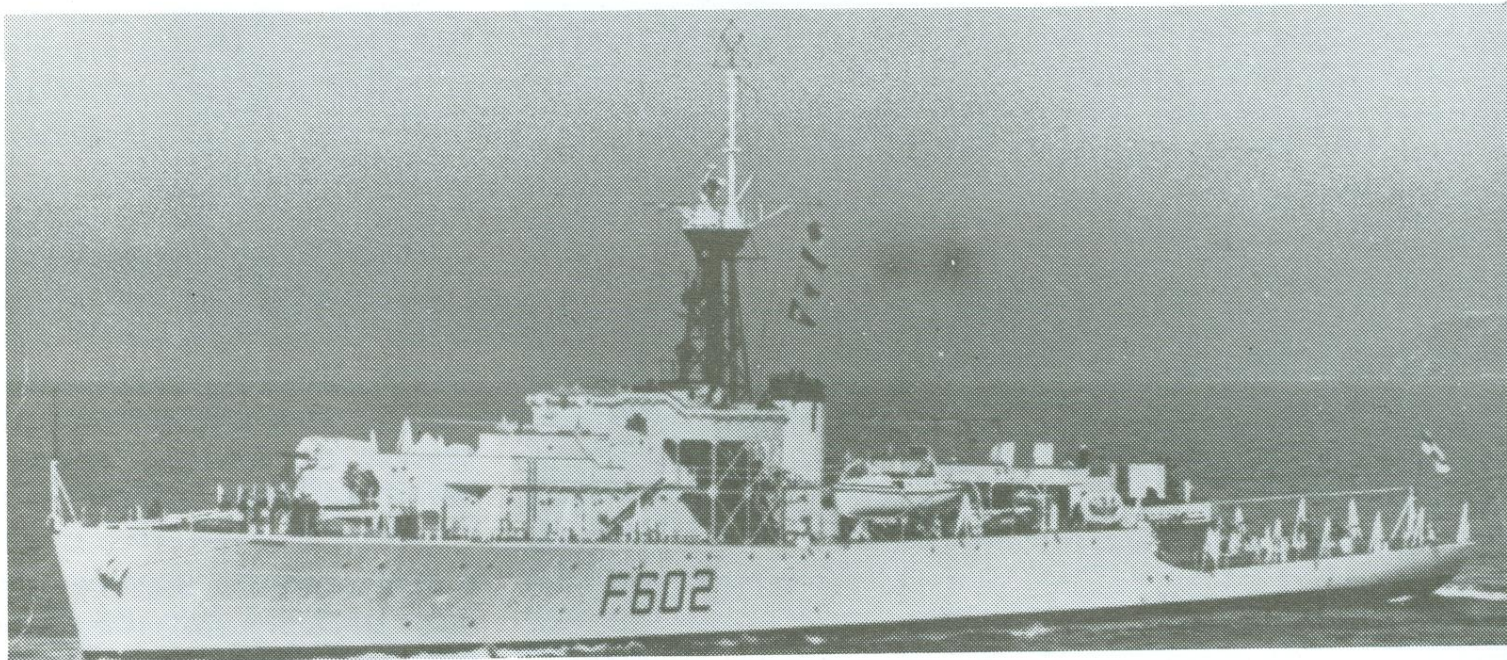


# HMSAS *Transvaal* visits Tristan da Cunha

by Richard J. Jenkins\*



HMSAS *Transvaal*

**AT THE outbreak of World War II, the Royal Navy occupied the Island of Tristan da Cunha, mainly to create a weather station. The South African Union Defence Force erected wooden houses to form the station, together with a radio station, powered by 2 Lister JP4 diesel sets. The furnishings for the houses were shipped from Simon's Town Dockyard and comprised cabin furniture and carpets stripped out of the *Carnarvon Castle* when she was converted into an armed merchant cruiser.**

The force was commanded by Surgeon Lt Cdr Woolley with Naval Padre Barney Lawrence second in command.

At the end of hostilities when the force was disbanded, Padre Barney Lawrence was posted to Wingfield Air Station. He was approached by Norman Howell who at that time was Shipping Editor of the *Cape Argus*. Barney and Norman became firm friends and originated the plans to introduce some industry and employment on Tristan da Cunha for the ± 350 islanders who lived in primitive conditions on the island.

These worthy originators approached Hubert Gaggins, Chairman of the main fishing company in Cape Town, with the plan to form a fishing company on Tristan da Cunha to fish for crawfish around the islands, and to erect a crawfish cannery. Barney Lawrence proceeded to the UK to seek approval from the Colonial Development Corporation and authority from the British government to proceed with this plan.

The South African fishing industry, led by Hubert Gaggins,

fully supported a Tristan da Cunha expedition which sailed in the ex-wooden minesweeper *Pequena* to the island in the late 1940s. As a result of the success of this expedition led

by Padre Lawrence, the Tristan da Cunha Development Corporation was founded.

Staff were recruited in Cape Town for the venture and Bertis Rowan, a marine biologist, was appointed as manager, ably supported by his wife, Bunty, also a marine biologist of some renown, and the daughter of Prof S.H. Scaife.

The author's wife was at that time nursing her first-born, a wee laddie of six weeks, and the first lieutenant graciously

The author was appointed as chief engineer, backed by his wife, who was also on the payroll as state registered nurse. The lady doctor was recruited from the UK, together with a lady school teacher from the Society of Propagation of the Gospel. The ranks were swelled by a fishing master, Basil Botha, his wife Gillian and family, Red Fenton the W/T technician from the Department of Transport, and his newly wed wife, Clarise.

Having assembled the working party, the next problem that faced the Company was to locate a vessel to transport them to the island with their effects. In keeping with tradition, in times of distress the Navy came to their assistance and HMSAS *Transvaal* was made available for this purpose.

On 20 January 1949 *Transvaal* sailed from Cape Town for Tristan da Cunha with 14 adults and four children as passengers. The decks resembled a forestry department with some 400 tree seedlings in tins, whilst in the ship's safe were bags of South African currency — the first money ever introduced to the island.

The *Transvaal* was commanded by Lt Cdr (later Cdre) J.J.C. Rice, a courteous gentleman who rendered outstanding assistance and extended kindness to the island passengers.



*The expedition finally reached its destination and work could begin in earnest*



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marine commander — seven members of the flotilla each received a medal or service certificate.

After divisions receptions were held in all three messes at SAS *Hugo Biermann*, the headquarters of the submarine flotilla.

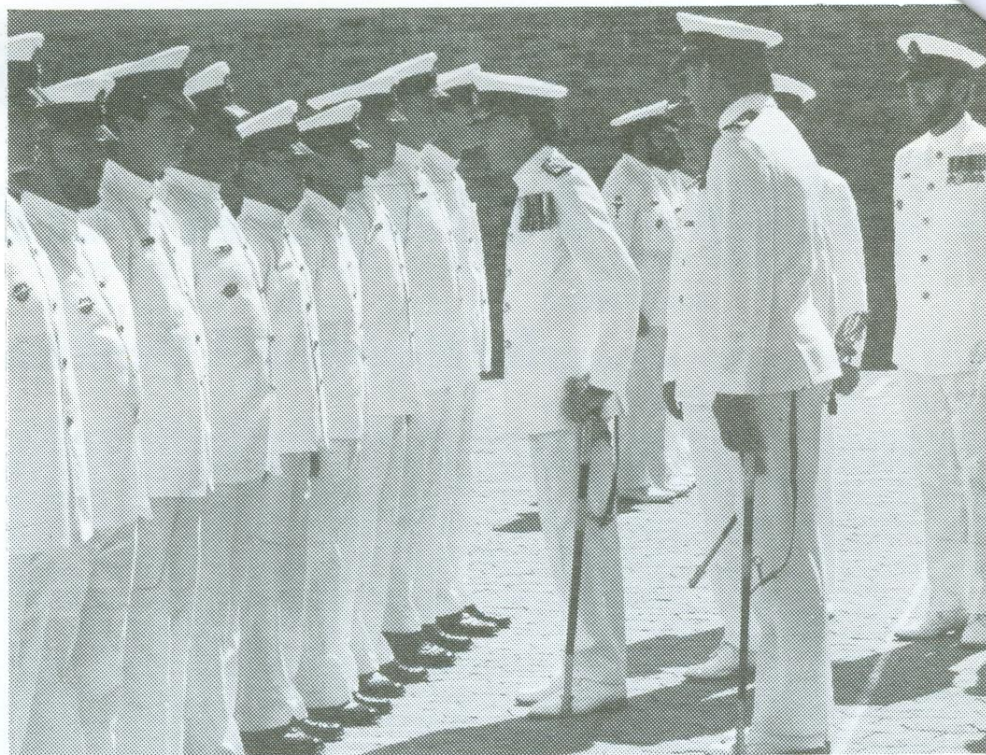
During the course of the reception in the wardroom, Messrs **Patech (Pty) Ltd** formally presented a magnificent painting of one of the SA Navy's Daphne-class submarines to the wardroom. Alongside the painting is displayed a most applicable quotation by T.S. Elliot from "The Rock", which reads:

Our gaze is submarine, our eyes gaze upward and see the light that fractures through unquiet water.

The painting by Cdr Tim Johnson (NWAS) was commissioned by Messrs **Patech (Pty) Ltd** especially for the submarine flotilla. While the

nature of the painting was left to the artist's discretion, the proviso was placed that the layout should be such that the painting could be used for the background of a commemorative cover to celebrate the submarine flotilla's 21st birthday in 1990. This will match the format used for the first day cover celebrating the submarine flotilla's 10th birthday on which a painting by Cdr R. Furness formed the background. The 10th birthday first day covers are now highly prized items and it is intended that the finish on the 21st birthday cover will be of an even better standard.

The painting depicts a submarine on the surface, in weather typical of that so often encountered by sailors around the South African coast. The sky is overcast, the sea is rough and anyone with experience of South African sea conditions can immediately identify with the circumstances: the sting of the salt spray driven against the face, the forces on the body of



*R adm Lambert Woodburne speaking to crew members of SAS Maria van Riebeeck during divisions at SAS Hugo Biermann*

the motion of a small vessel, the tiring strain of pitting oneself and vessel against the elements, never mind other vessels or a possible emergency. The artist has captured the lines and shape of the Daphne-class with extreme accuracy at an unusual angle which has resulted in many a submariner

standing silently engrossed in the painting.

It was a special occasion to look back on two decades during which this proud flotilla kept the honour of the SA Navy and the Republic of South Africa high at every occasion and under all circumstances.



Vlootrugby  
goed  
op  
dreef

*Die rugbyseisoen is in volle gang en Vlootspanne vaar oor die algemeen baie goed. Hierdie speler het egter sy rieme styfgeloop toe hy gelyktydig hoog en laag gevat is tydens 'n onlangse wedstryd tussen KOMNAVWEST en KOMNAVWEG by die Glencairnsportgronde.*



gave up his cabin to the nursing mother for the voyage. In this regard she was the luckiest lady on board as the other five ladies and three children were accommodated in the sick-bay. Shortly after sailing from Cape Town the vessel encountered heavy seas and rolled as only a frigate can roll. Thus, the sick-bay was turned into an undescrivable mess where nobody stood on their feet for some four days.

The author, an ex-merchant seaman, collected his son from his mother's arms in the morning and proceeded to the ER flat, drew a bucket of water from the ER hotwell, bathed the wee boy, and delivered him back to his mum, then washed the nappies and festooned them in the flat.

On the fifth day the weather moderated and the sick-bay was finally vacated. The lady doctor prescribed champagne and stout as a recovery remedy. Amid great rejoicing landfall was made with the island and the party disembarked into open canvas boats. During our three-year stay on



One of the houses on Tristan da Cunha showing the primitive conditions under which the islanders lived

the island the *Transvaal* paid the island a further visit coincident with the visit of Cunard's *Caronia* on the first African cruise.

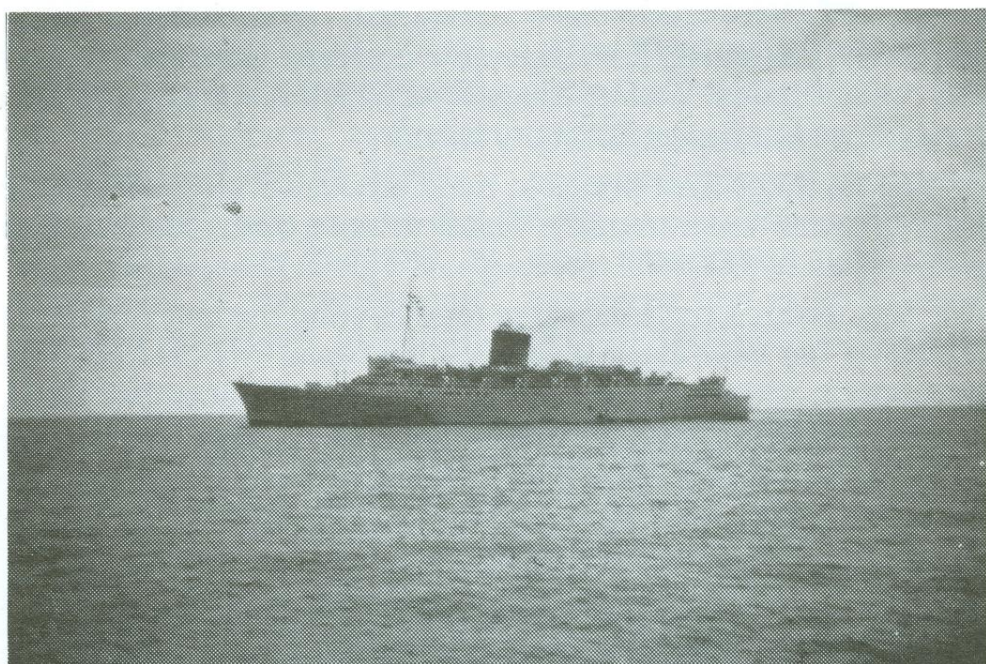
Whilst these events occurred over 40 years ago, it is pleasant to enjoy the nostalgia of recalling the seamanship, courtesy and assistance extended by the

SA Navy during this epic voyage.

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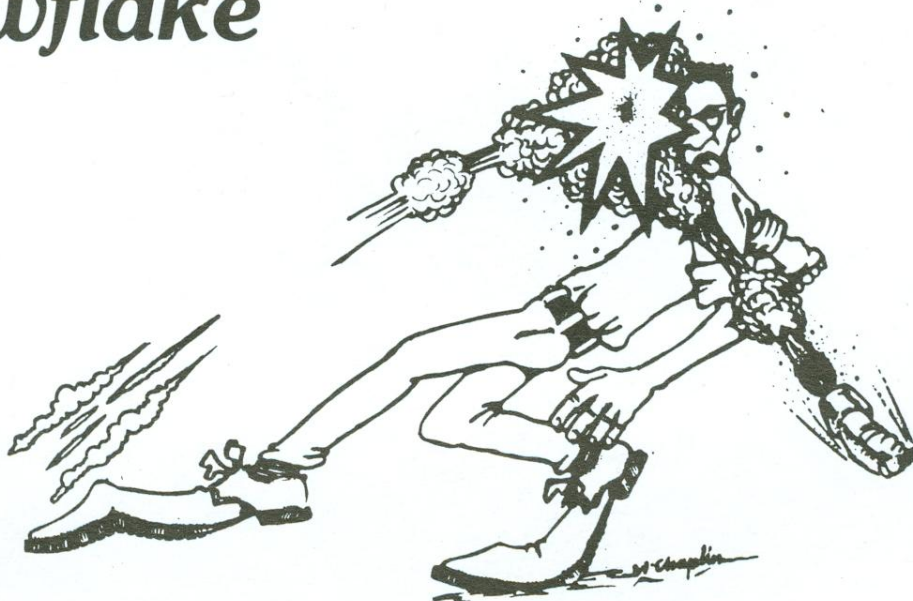
The island women knitting while watching the expedition land on the beach



Cunard's *Caronia* sighted off Tristan da Cunha on her first African cruise

## Hit by a snowflake

In 1944 I spent some time in the tiny naval hospital in Somerset, Bermuda. One morning I awoke to find the bed next to mine occupied by a young signalman, his head swathed in bandages. He was from one of the Canadian corvettes doing exercises in the area, I learned, and had been injured when a parachute flare known as a "snowflake" misfired. The flare had veered horizontally and struck the side of his head, removing most of his ear.



Later that afternoon I noticed he was awake, so I asked him how he was feeling. Slowly, painfully, he twisted his head towards me. "Pretty good, I guess, considering," he answered. "But I wonder what they'll think back home when they ask me how I got hurt like this, and I tell them I was hit by a snowflake in Bermuda!"

G.S. Smith

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