

2009 KING HALL NAVAL HISTORY CONFERENCE COMMONWEALTH NAVIES: 100 YEARS OF COOPERATION

THE ANGLO-SOUTH AFRICAN SIMON'S TOWN AGREEMENT

The 1955 exchange of letters between the governments of the United Kingdom and South Africa, collectively known as the Simon's Town Agreement, is an excellent example of Commonwealth naval cooperation. Signed in the aftermath of World War II, at a time of increasing Soviet expansionism and influence, with Britain still facing significant post-war financial hardships and South Africa, one of the original Dominions, taking an increasingly nationalistic path, the agreement on naval cooperation was mutually beneficial to both parties. It established a special relationship between the Royal Navy and South African Navy and, notwithstanding the intense political controversy in Britain, and indeed within the Commonwealth for much of its existence, the Agreement remained in place for twenty years and served as a very useful force multiplier for safeguarding the strategically important Cape Sea Route.

As part of Great Britain's global presence, Simon's Town was progressively developed as an important naval base and dockyard during the nearly 150 years that it was occupied by the Royal Navy. After the second British occupation of the Cape in 1806, during the Napoleonic Wars, which finally ended Dutch rule, the Royal Navy established a sheltered base for their ships in Simon's Bay, in order to control one of the world's most vital trade routes and the only practical sea route to India and the Far East prior to the opening of the Suez Canal.¹

As the importance of the Cape Sea Route increased, the small base at Simon's Town was slowly developed, eventually reaching the stage in the late 1800s where significant expansion of the harbour and base was required.² To this end, the Cape Colonial Government passed the Simon's Town Naval Defence Act in 1898 which authorised the development of the port as a much-needed major naval base for the Royal Navy on the important Cape Sea Route.³ The extensive new dockyard which included a graving dock and sheltered tidal basin was finally completed in 1910, the year that the four Southern African colonies joined to form the Union of South Africa. The new Union, however, remained entirely dependent on the Royal Navy for the protection of her trade and shores, and Simon's Town became the principal base for the vessels of the Cape of Good Hope and West Coast of Africa Station.⁴

¹ C.H. Bennett and A.G. Söderlund, *South Africa's Navy, SA Navy, Simon's Town*, 2008, p.39 and Denis Judd, *Empire: The British Imperial Experience, from 1765 to the Present*, Harper Collins, London, 1996, p.105.

² Bennett, *op.cit.*, p.39.

³ Allan du Toit, *South Africa's Fighting Ships Past and Present*, Ashanti Publishing, Rivonia, 1992, p.xx.

⁴ *ibid*, p.xx

After World War I, agreement was reached between the United Kingdom and Union Governments that War Department lands and buildings in South Africa should be transferred to the Union Government subject to specific reservations preserving for the use of the Admiralty lands and buildings at Simon's Town required for naval purposes. The transfer was given legal sanction in the Union by the Defence Endowment Property and Account Act, 1922, which provided for the conclusion subsequently of an agreement dealing with the lands and property retained for the use of the Admiralty. This agreement was concluded in 1930. It laid down in detail the lands and properties involved and confirmed that although the freehold title to the lands rested with the Union Government, the Admiralty was recognised as the perpetual user for naval purposes.⁵

Additionally, arrangements, under the so-called Smuts-Churchill agreement, were made between the then Colonial Secretary (Mr Churchill) and the Union Prime Minister (General Smuts) in 1921 to transfer to the Union Government responsibility for the land defences of the Cape Peninsula, including the land defences of Simon's Town. In reaching this agreement the United Kingdom Government formally requested and received from the Union Government an assurance that 'the Union Government would keep the naval station in such a state of defence that it would at all times be able to discharge its functions as a naval link in the sea communications of the British Empire'.⁶

After coming to power in the 1948 general election, the Nationalist Government in South Africa, under Dr Malan, pressed with growing urgency for the Royal Naval Base at Simon's Town to be transferred to South African control. This was an old bone of contention between the United Kingdom and the South Africans. The motives behind the South African Government's initiative, in pressing for control of the base to be transferred to them, were essentially political and arose from the traditional attitude of the Nationalist Party. The Simon's Town arrangements were frequently criticised by the Nationalist Party when in opposition in the 1920s and 1930s, on the grounds that United Kingdom use of the base in war and South Africa's responsibility for its land defences would make it impossible for South Africa to remain neutral and that the South African Government and Parliament were thus deprived of the sovereign right to decide freely the supreme question of peace or war for their own country.⁷

Discussion of this problem centred not only on the agreement providing for the Royal Navy's perpetual use of the dockyard but also on the Union's undertaking, in the Smuts-Churchill correspondence of 1921, to defend the dockyard.⁸

⁵ DO 121/232, Royal Navy Base at Simonstown; Historical Summary 1898-1951, Commonwealth Relations Office, Jan 1952.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ PREM 11/1765, Royal Navy Base at Simonstown, Defence Committee, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, D(51)4, 18 Dec 1951.

⁸ DO 121/232, *op.cit.*

The question of Simon's Town had been brought up in the course of the debate in September 1939 in the Union Parliament on the issue of war with Germany. The then Union Prime Minister, General Hertzog, argued that the Union could both remain neutral and also carry out its undertakings in regard to Simon's Town. In the event, he was defeated on the main issue, Smuts became Prime Minister and the Union joined the United Kingdom in the war against Germany.⁹

Dr Malan and his Nationalist Party followers regarded Hertzog's attitude as mere wishful thinking. They could not see how the Union Government could carry out its undertakings both to permit the use of Simon's Town and to defend it and still remain neutral. They saw Simon's Town as the 'acid test' of neutrality.¹⁰

The broad argument taken by Smuts was that Union neutrality in the event of a war in which the United Kingdom was engaged was inconceivable, not only because of the Commonwealth relationship, but also because the Smuts-Churchill agreement involved the Union in an undertaking which, if they were to carry it out properly, would inevitably involve them in armed resistance to an enemy of the United Kingdom.¹¹

With the development of a less isolationist policy, leading up to a declaration by the newly elected Nationalist Government of their readiness to take part in a war against Communist aggression, the neutrality issue had become less urgent and less important post-war. But the transfer of the naval base to South African control would clearly, in view of the past controversy, be a significant political achievement for the Nationalist Government, and Mr Erasmus, the new Minister of Defence, realised that success in this would greatly enhance his personal reputation within the party and with his Cabinet colleagues.¹²

The question was first raised in informal discussions with United Kingdom Ministers during a visit which Mr Erasmus paid to Britain in July 1949. At that time the Admiralty were under great pressure to secure post-war economies and there was some tendency to look at the possibility of transfer in the light of the economies which would thereby follow. The matter was, however, handled very cautiously with Mr Erasmus and nothing definitive was discussed. Later the matter was examined more fully between United Kingdom Departments and Ministers concerned, and it became very clear that, partly because of the changed world defence situation and partly because of the force of other considerations, financial considerations could not be regarded as a decisive factor in any decision to transfer Simon's Town naval base to South African control.¹³ It was assessed that full and free use of the base would be essential for the United Kingdom in time of war and that

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

the wireless transmission stations at the Cape formed a key point in the world-wide maritime wireless organisation.¹⁴

In September 1950, Mr Erasmus again raised the subject, without notice. He was informed that the United Kingdom Government would be prepared to have discussions on the subject if the Union Government wished to raise it, but the Union Government should first provide detailed proposals in writing. This they did in February 1951 and there were further discussions, at the insistence of Mr Erasmus, with United Kingdom Ministers in June 1951 on the side-lines of the Commonwealth Defence Ministers meeting in London.¹⁵

Although he appeared to accept British requirements for transfer, correspondence from Mr Erasmus, after his return to South Africa, raised a number of difficulties. The most important of these was the unwillingness of the Union Government to provide an unqualified assurance that the base at Simon's Town would in all circumstances be available to the United Kingdom in war. The South African's were only prepared to promise that it would be available to the United Kingdom in any war in which they were fighting at Britain's side. In any event, the Attlee Labour government lost the general election shortly afterwards and the whole question of the future of Simon's Town stalled.¹⁶

In a Defence Committee Memorandum in December 1951, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations in the Churchill Conservative Government, Lord Ismay, recommended continuing discussions with the South African Government and argued that there was 'great force in the South African argument that, as a matter of status, the Simonstown arrangements (were) no longer appropriate'. He drew the comparison that other Commonwealth countries such as Australia and Canada had long since taken over full control of the naval bases in their countries, and that there was 'no question that a Commonwealth country nowadays has the right to decide for itself whether to remain neutral or not'. He also made the point that the South African Government had more than once declared that South Africa could not remain neutral in any war against Soviet Russia, and that the Union Government had undertaken in time of war against any form of Communist aggression, to despatch ground and air forces to the Middle East.¹⁷

Ismay proposed that in any further discussions with the South African Government, the United Kingdom should put in the forefront the practical question of how to secure conditions which would ensure the continued efficiency of the base under South African control, and that Britain should emphasise the need for building up an efficient South African Navy and Union Government acceptance of 'full naval responsibilities in accordance with the normal pattern of Commonwealth development'.¹⁸

¹⁴ PREM 11/1765, op.cit.

¹⁵ DO 121/232, op.cit.

¹⁶ PREM 11/1765, op.cit.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

The question of the Royal Navy Base at Simon's Town was subsequently considered by the Defence Committee in March 1952 and it was agreed that no action should be taken to re-open the negotiations with the South African Government. The Committee Chair and Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was not persuaded that it was necessary to reopen the question of Simon's Town and that the United Kingdom had the legal right of perpetual user on which it could justifiably stand firm. Churchill argued that it was strategically necessary for the Royal Navy to have facilities in Simon's Town in any major war, and perhaps more particularly in a war in which South Africa was neutral. In his view, Simon's Town was an essential link in Imperial communications and there was no obvious alternative to it. He was in favour of taking no fresh initiatives and if it was raised by the South African Government, he would resist, on the basis of the United Kingdom's legal rights, any proposal for transfer without an unqualified assurance that facilities would be available to Britain in both peace and war.¹⁹

With Churchill's opposition to its transfer, and the South Africans preoccupied with internal politics, the whole issue of Simon's Town largely remained dormant until early 1954 when Erasmus let it be known that he wanted to resume negotiations on Simon's Town and it was agreed that he should be invited to London for Defence talks.²⁰ To the surprise of the British, he arrived in London prepared – with the full authority of the Union Cabinet – to give Britain and its allies the unqualified assurance about their right to use the Base in war as well as peace.²¹

Churchill, however, remained unconvinced, and continued to oppose any transfer. He was 'reluctant to contemplate any transaction which would be presented as yet another surrender of rights and responsibilities'. Indeed, Admiralty doubts about the South African Government's unqualified assurance simply reinforced Churchill's opposition to the transfer of the Simon's Town naval base.²² He did, however, agree in October 1954 to an Admiralty mission to South Africa to jointly formulate a detailed plan of transfer.

The joint South African/Admiralty working party, which with only one significant disagreement, 'produced a plan capable of achieving the objectives set in its terms of reference and practical in the sense that it should work without a disastrous decline in efficiency', submitted their report to the Secretary of the Admiralty in November 1954. The only major disagreement in the report, which was subsequently resolved, related to the position and responsibilities in peace of the Royal Navy Commander-in-Chief, in particular his direct access to Union Ministers, the South Africans preferring that the

¹⁹ PREM 11/1765, Folio 276.

²⁰ G.R. Berridge and J.E. Spence, *South Africa and the Simonstown Agreements*, in J.W. Young (ed), *The Foreign Policy of Churchill's Peacetime Administration 1951-1955*, Leicester University Press, 1988, p.188.

²¹ *ibid*, p.189.

²² Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw, *The Lion and Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War*, Cambridge University Press, pp.243-244.

formal channel should be Government-to-Government. The joint working party agreed a comprehensive plan between them for:

- the combined use of Simon's Town by the Royal Navy and South African Navy in peace and in war (even if South Africa were neutral in some non-Communist war, a most remote contingency), on the understanding that the base would also be available in war to the allies of the United Kingdom;
- the gradual assumption of responsibility by the South African Navy for the operation and administration of the base for combined use;
- the assumption by South Africa of responsibility in war for the operational and administrative control of a local sub-area of a South Atlantic Strategic Zone; and
- that a Royal Navy officer would continue as Commander-in-Chief South Atlantic in peace, with headquarters and communications at the Cape, and that his designation in war would be Commander of the South Atlantic Strategic Zone.²³

The conclusions of the joint working party were subsequently considered by the Defence Committee in December 1954, and while remaining uncommitted to a final decision, Churchill approved a proposal for a further round of discussions with Erasmus at Ministerial level, on the practical issues involved in reaching an agreement.

Erasmus subsequently visited the United Kingdom in June 1955 for discussions with Ministers of the United Kingdom Government, by which time Eden had finally taken over as prime minister and his Conservative Government had secured a new mandate at the polls. These discussions led to the British Cabinet choosing to conclude an agreement on Simon's Town and naval collaboration with South Africa and resulted in the exchanges of letters on defence matters between Erasmus and Selwyn Lloyd, the British Minister of Defence, on 30 June 1955 which became known collectively as the 'Simon's Town Agreement'. These exchanges, which were registered with the United Nations, embodied agreements and understandings on the following subjects:

- Memorandum on the need for international discussions with regard to regional defence.
- Agreement on the defence of the Sea Routes round Southern Africa.
- Agreement relating to the transfer of the Simon's Town Naval base and arrangements for its future use.²⁴

The memorandum on Regional Defence stated that the sea routes 'must be secured against aggression from without' and the defence of South Africa

²³ ADM 116/6027, Letter 32/54 from the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations to the Prime Minister on Simon's Town and Naval Cooperation with the Union of South Africa, Dec 1954.

²⁴ FO 371/177101, The Simonstown Agreement.

against external aggression lay in the Middle East as well as in Africa itself.²⁵ Britain undertook to contribute forces for the defence of these areas including Southern Africa, as did South Africa, who would build up a land and air task force for use outside the country against external aggression.²⁶

The Agreement, which was to remain in force until such time as the two Governments decided otherwise by mutual agreement, was particularly favourable to Britain. It recognized 'the importance of sea communications to the well-being of their respective countries in peace and to their common security in the event of aggression'. Although it met the South African Government's strong desire to have the last British military base on South African soil transferred to South African control after a 150 year British presence, it importantly provided for the continued use of the base at Simon's Town by the Royal Navy in peace, and by the Royal Navy and its allies in any war in which the United Kingdom was involved, even in a war in which South Africa was not involved. It significantly increased commonality and interoperability between the two navies and in time of war placed South African maritime forces under the command of the British Commander-in-Chief South Atlantic, who continued to fly his flag at the Cape after the signing of the Agreement and who would be responsible for war planning for both countries.²⁷

The Agreement established a South Atlantic Strategic Zone approximating to the British South Atlantic Station, including the Mozambique Channel, in which both the Royal Navy and South African Navy would operate under the operational authority of the Commander-in-Chief who would be responsible for the command and control of maritime operations including the naval control of shipping in the South Atlantic and Southern Indian Oceans. Within this zone lay a South African Area which remained the direct responsibility of the South African Navy.²⁸

In addition, naval communications facilities were to be handed over to the South African Navy, after which the Union Government would continue to meet the requirements of the Royal Navy.²⁹

From a financial perspective, while Britain retained full access to Simon's Town, the agreement imposed considerable obligations on the South Africans and absolved Britain from the costly upkeep and modernisation of the base and other maritime facilities at the Cape, including access to strategic naval communications and fuel stocks. Finally, from an economic perspective, the Agreement greatly benefited British industry with significant South African orders following for warships, helicopters and maritime patrol and strike aircraft.

²⁵ Cmd 9520, White Paper, Exchange of Letters on Defence Matters between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Union of South Africa, June 1955.

²⁶ FCO 45/654, South Africa and Naval Strategy, The Importance of South Africa.

²⁷ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., p.174.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ FO 371/177101, op.cit.

Following the signing of the Agreement, the developing South African Navy vacated its base at Salisbury Island in Durban and moved to Simon's Town, and on 2 April 1957, the British Flag was lowered for the last time at HM Naval Dockyard Simon's Town.³⁰ The First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Selkirk, represented the Government of the United Kingdom at the ceremony marking the transfer. In a speech at the ceremony he said that 'We believe the agreement we have reached in these matters is thoroughly sound, will operate to our mutual advantage and promote closer understanding – if that is possible – between the South African Navy and Royal Navy'.³¹

The Simon's Town Agreement initiated an era of unprecedented expansion and modernisation of the South African Navy between 1955 and 1963. Based on the experience of two world wars, and in the light of an increasing Soviet threat, the expansion of the South African Navy was almost exclusively focussed on the acquisition of anti-submarine and mine countermeasures capabilities. It resulted in the rapid expansion and development of a small but highly professional, efficient and well equipped Commonwealth navy which was well able to train and effectively take its place alongside the Royal Navy and other Commonwealth and Allied navies during the Cold War.³²

Within the terms of the Agreement, South Africa purchased five Ford class seaward defence boats, ten Ton class coastal minesweepers, a Type 15 anti-submarine frigate and three new Modified Type 12 anti-submarine frigates from the United Kingdom. Because of rising costs, only four frigates were purchased instead of the six originally envisaged. In addition to these newly acquired ships, which virtually trebled the size of the Fleet, many of the older vessels in service were also progressively upgraded locally. Most notable was the conversion of the two war-built W class fleet destroyers which were upgraded to Type 16 configuration between 1962 and 1966 but with the addition of a flight deck and hangar which could accommodate two Westland Wasp anti-submarine helicopters. This conversion compensated for the reduction in frigate purchases from the United Kingdom and made them most useful ships.³³ The growth of the fleet also progressively led to the expansion of the Simon's Town naval dockyard.³⁴

At the same time the South African Air Force (SAAF) acquired Avro Shackleton long-range maritime patrol aircraft in 1957 to replace its ageing fleet of Sunderland flying boats, Westland Wasp anti-submarine helicopters in 1964 for operating from the converted W class destroyers, and Buccaneer maritime strike aircraft in 1965.³⁵

In the early 1960s, as the Nationalist Party's racial policies began to create more and more ill-will abroad, South Africa was subjected to a process of

³⁰ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., p.174.

³¹ ADM 1/29316, Speech delivered by the First Lord of the Admiralty on the occasion of the handing over of the Royal Naval Base at Simon's Town on 2 April 1957.

³² SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., p.174

³³ *ibid*, p.175.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

increasing isolation from the international community.³⁶ Despite South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth in 1961, and increasing international pressure, the British Government maintained defence links with the Republic. Britain continued to supply arms to South Africa in terms of the Simon's Town Agreement and the 1955 exchanges were re-affirmed in a further informal exchange of letters between the British and South African Defence Ministers, Mr Watkinson and Mr Fouché, in 1961-62.³⁷

However, following the election of a labour Government led by Harold Wilson in the United Kingdom in October 1964, Britain refused to supply further arms to South Africa. Whilst this ban included any new orders for maritime aircraft and naval vessels and equipment, the British Government was still prepared to honour existing contracts and to provide spares and ammunition within the terms of the Simon's Town Agreement. This concession was later extended to include licences for the sale of additional Wasp helicopters in 1966 to replace aircraft written off during normal operations.³⁸

At that stage, all South African naval vessels were of British design and construction. For reasons of compatibility and logistics, and because of the close traditional links with the Royal Navy, South Africa wished to place orders for submarines and replacements for the Loch class and Type 15 frigates in the United Kingdom. However, despite its obligations under the terms of the Simon's Town Agreement, the British Labour Government was not prepared to approve the construction of any additional vessels for the South African Navy in the United Kingdom.³⁹ As a result, South Africa, which would have preferred to acquire Oberon class submarines from the United Kingdom, turned to France for the provision of three Daphne class submarines.

In spite of the new British Government's determination not to enter into arms sales with South Africa, the strategic importance of the naval base at Simon's Town remained undiminished. As a result, the Simon's Town Agreement continued and links between the Royal Navy and South African Navy remained strong. Before 1964, day to day training was carried out between South African Navy vessels and Royal Navy vessels based at Simon's Town, and an annual medium sized exercise (CAPEX), which sometimes also included naval forces from the United States, Portugal and France, was conducted, the South African ships performing with great credit, reflecting the high standards of operational efficiency achieved as a result of the Simon's Town Agreement. However, in November 1964, the newly elected Labour Government decided that while normal manoeuvring and practising between ships in company should continue, major exercises should stop but that there would be special arrangements for anti-submarine training.⁴⁰

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ FO 371/177101, *op.cit.*

³⁸ SA's Fighting Ships, *op.cit.*, p.175.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.280.

⁴⁰ FCO 45/1613, The Importance of the Simon's Town Agreement.

The Simon's Town Agreement was modified in by mutual agreement in 1967 following the 1966 British Defence Review which resulted in the closure of the South Atlantic and South America Station as part of Britain's cut back in her overseas defence commitments. As a result, at sundown on 11 April 1967, the Commander-in-Chief South Atlantic and South America, Vice Admiral J.M.D. Gray, hauled down his flag, marking the end of the virtually continuous presence of a British Flag Officer at the Cape, except for a short period during the Napoleonic wars, since Admiral Sir Keith Elphinstone sailed into Simon's Bay with nine ships of the line in 1795.⁴¹

Following the closure of the South Atlantic and South America Command, and the revision of the Simon's Town Agreement, the Commander-in-Chief Home Fleet (and later the Commander-in-Chief Fleet) became responsible for the South Atlantic and a much smaller organisation under a Commodore, known as Senior British Naval Officer South Africa (SBNOSA), was established as his representative at HMS *Afrikander* at Youngsfield near Cape Town.⁴² At the same time, the last remaining Royal Navy frigate stationed at Simon's Town was withdrawn and the Chief of the South African Navy assumed the additional appointment of Commander Maritime Defence (COMMARDEF) and assumed greater responsibility for the South African area in times of war.⁴³

Most of the other provisions of the Agreement, however, remained unchanged, except that a caveat was made which required mutual agreement between the Governments of the United Kingdom and South Africa before the facilities could be used in a war not involving South Africa.⁴⁴

With the withdrawal of the Royal Navy frigate on station in South Africa, the United Kingdom assured the South African's that they would be prepared to continue taking part in bilateral anti-submarine training on an annual basis subject to the availability of ships and submarines and to prevailing political circumstances.⁴⁵

Apart from joint training and exercises, the Royal Navy also cooperated with the South Africans in planning Naval Control of Shipping (NCS) measures. Although the NATO area did not extend south of the Tropic of Cancer, there was a NATO world-wide NCS organisation with the area around Southern Africa designated NATO Area Bravo for which the United Kingdom had planning responsibility in cooperation with South Africa, France and Portugal.⁴⁶

The strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route and the naval base at Simon's Town was reinforced not long afterwards following the closure of the Suez Canal in the aftermath of the Six Day War in the Middle East in June 1967. By way of example, the average number of sea-going vessels calling at

⁴¹ FCO 25/656, JS 10/10, Withdrawal of the British Commander-in-Chief from South Africa.

⁴² Announcement by the Under-Secretary of State for the Royal Navy, Mr Foley, 8 Feb 1967.

⁴³ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., pp.175-176.

⁴⁴ FCO 45/1613, op.cit.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

South African ports prior to the Six-Day War was 7,000 a year. In 1968 this had increased to around 15,000 and the average number of ocean-going vessels rounding the Cape in both directions was over 20,000 a year, including a total of around ten tankers a day on route from the Persian Gulf to Europe.⁴⁷ The Royal Navy made considerable use of South African ports following the closure of the Suez Canal to support the constant deployment of ships required to meet the United Kingdom's East of Suez commitments, and they continued to do so until the withdrawals from Singapore and the Gulf were completed in the early 1970s.⁴⁸ During this period there were on average about 30 Royal Navy visits to South Africa annually, with a number of the visits involving more than one ship or submarine.⁴⁹

As a result of the prolonged closure of the Suez Canal, the political complications in the Middle East and Africa, together with the recent changes in British Defence Policy and force levels East of Suez, a re-examination of the importance of the Cape Sea Route was undertaken in Whitehall. A paper on the importance of the Cape Sea Route was subsequently prepared by the then Director of Naval Plans, Captain Henry Leach, in September 1968.⁵⁰

In December 1969 the British Government informed the South Africans that, in accordance with their interpretation of the UN resolutions of 4 December 1963 and 18 June 1963, the United Kingdom was not prepared to supply South Africa with Wasp helicopters as requested by South Africa under the terms of the Simon's Town Agreement, either to replace those lost or to equip the Type 12 frigate conversions. This produced adverse comment in South Africa, notably from the South African Minister of Defence, Mr P.W. Botha. The South African Government subsequently asked the British Government to indicate its attitude towards its responsibilities under the Simon's Town Agreement. In its reply the British Government indicated that the Simon's Town Agreement was of value, and that it considered the United Kingdom's obligations under it had been and were being properly discharged.⁵¹ The irony was that the Labour Government had handed over a greater responsibility for the defence of the Cape Sea Route to South Africa but refused to sell her the maritime arms to make the defence effective.⁵²

Nonetheless, South African personnel continued to attend Royal Navy courses and small scale combined maritime exercises between the Royal Navy and the South African Navy in South African waters, the so-called SANEX series, continued throughout the 1960s and early 1970s as well as regular interaction with ships and submarines on their way to or from the Far East Station. These exercises and weapons training periods, which at the United Kingdom's request, were conducted away from normal sea lanes and without publicity, continued to place particular emphasis on anti-submarine

⁴⁷ FCO 45/280.

⁴⁸ FCO 45/679, Letter from Denis Healy to David Winnick, Esq, MP, 26 Feb 1970.

⁴⁹ FCO 45/1613, op.cit.

⁵⁰ FCO 45/280, DN Plans 269/2 (Revised), 12 Sep 1968.

⁵¹ FCO 45/654, D35/8388/Br/2, Relationships with South Africa including protection of the Cape Route.

⁵² FCO 45/654, South Africa and Naval Strategy, The Importance of South Africa, op.cit.

warfare. They were planned by the South African Navy working in close liaison with SBNOSA and his staff, and were designed to meet the particular training requirements of all participating units.⁵³

During the Autumn of 1969 references, however, began to appear in the British press about joint exercises carried out with the South African Navy, and at the beginning of 1970 the then British Minister of Defence, Mr Denis Healy, for the first time admitted in Parliament to their taking place and described their scope.⁵⁴ After the extent of Anglo-South African naval cooperation became public knowledge, press coverage of these activities progressively increased, ultimately to the detriment of the Agreement.

Following the election of a Conservative Government in the United Kingdom, led by Edward Heath, in June 1970, South African hopes were revived that orders for up to six new frigates could be awarded to British yards. At that stage the South African Navy was interested in acquiring at least three broad-beam Leander class frigates or Vosper frigate derivatives. South Africa also had an outstanding requirement to procure additional Wasp helicopters to operate from the converted Type 12 frigates, which the previous Labour Government had refused to provide.⁵⁵

In July 1970 the British Government stated its intention to rebuild Britain's 'vital defence interests' in South Africa and to resume limited arms sales to help the Republic defend the sea route around the Cape in accordance with the spirit of Britain's obligations under the Simon's Town Agreement.⁵⁶ In essence, the British Government was prepared to continue to supply South Africa with spares and other items which were being supplied by the previous Labour Government, considered that there was a legal obligation to complete the equipment of the frigates already sold with anti-submarine helicopters and undertook to be prepared to consider orders for equipment and arms necessary to maintain South Africa's maritime defences at their present level of efficiency provided that arms supplied would not be used for any other purposes other than the defence of the sea routes.⁵⁷

Whilst the Heath Government, which was under considerable pressure from within the Commonwealth not to sell arms to South Africa, was considering accepting naval orders from South Africa, the Labour opposition stated that any South African orders placed in the United Kingdom would be cancelled if they were subsequently returned to office.⁵⁸

While South Africa duly ordered an additional seven Wasp helicopters and various items of naval equipment from Britain, the Conservative Government made it clear that it was not politically opportune to accept orders for frigates at that time. The South African Navy was meanwhile also having second

⁵³ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., p.229.

⁵⁴ FCO 45/679.

⁵⁵ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., p.280.

⁵⁶ Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1998, p.319.

⁵⁷ CAB 129/154.

⁵⁸ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., p.280.

thoughts as it was not prepared to run the risk of ordering frigates which would not be completed before the next general election in Britain. This subsequently proved to be a wise decision, as the Labour Party, which was returned to power in March 1974, reimposed a total arms embargo and cancelled the Wasp order which resulted in the last aircraft not being delivered.⁵⁹ As a result of this decision, the South African Government formally asked the United Kingdom Government whether they wished to continue to operate the Simon's Town Agreement in its present form.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, in July 1973, units of the South African Navy, together with maritime aircraft from the SAAF, had exercised with a Royal Navy task group commanded by Rear Admiral R.P. Clayton, RN, which consisted of the helicopter cruiser HMS *Tiger*, the nuclear powered attack submarine HMS *Dreadnought*, three frigates as well as two fleet auxiliaries. This was the first of the new-style British group deployments East of Suez, which replaced the smaller task unit and single ship deployments of the past, and the first occasion on which a nuclear-powered submarine had visited Simon's Town,⁶¹ one of the few ports where visits by nuclear submarines forming part of the group deployments East of the Cape area could be made.⁶²

With the return of the *Tiger* group from the Far East in November 1973, combined exercises were again carried out with the SA Navy. In addition to SAAF Mirage, Buccaneer and Shackleton aircraft, Nimrod long-range maritime patrol aircraft from the Royal Air Force also deployed to the Cape and participated in the exercise.⁶³

Following the return of a Labour Government in the March 1974 British general election, 'operationally necessary ship visits' to politically sensitive countries, including South Africa, came under closer scrutiny as well as the vexed issue of arms sales to the Republic. Ministerial direction was sought on further group visits to South African ports and other connected matters such as training and exercises under the Simon's Town Agreement. It was argued that these visits were necessary to permit joint training with the South African Navy in order to demonstrate Britain's continued adherence to the Agreement.⁶⁴

With the Suez Canal remaining closed, approval was subsequently given for group visits to continue and at the end of August 1974, a nine-ship Royal Navy task group, the largest to have visited South Africa in several years, arrived in South African waters, and after a week-long operational visit to Cape Town and Simon's Town, exercised with units of the South African Navy and Air Force, who were by now well practiced in working with large task groups. Again under the command of Rear Admiral Clayton, Flag Officer Second Flotilla (FOF2), who on this occasion flew his flag in the County class

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ FCO 45/1613, Relations with South Africa – Simon's Town Agreements.

⁶¹ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., pp.229-230.

⁶² FCO 45/1613, op.cit.

⁶³ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., p.230.

⁶⁴ FCO 45/1613, op.cit.

guided-missile destroyer HMS *Fife*, the group consisted of five frigates, as well three auxiliaries.⁶⁵

On this occasion the South African frigate SAS *President Kruger* accompanied FOF2 on their northward passage to the United Kingdom before joining up with the next eastward-bound task group, FOF1, on their passage to the Cape. This task group, the most powerful British force ever to call at the Cape in peacetime, consisted of the helicopter-cruiser HMS *Blake*, flying the flag of Vice Admiral Henry Leach, Flag Officer First Flotilla, six frigates, the nuclear-powered attack submarine HMS *Warspite* and three Royal Fleet Auxiliaries. South African participants in the extensive four-day weapon training period, which commenced on sailing from Cape Town and Simon's Town on 21 October, included two frigates, a submarine, two coastal minesweepers, a fleet replenishment ship together with maritime aircraft from the SAAF.⁶⁶

This was, sadly, to be the last occasion on which South African ships exercised with units of the Royal Navy for almost twenty years, as extensive international press coverage of the visit and exercise caused a political furore in the United Kingdom. Harold Wilson's Labour Government, which had initially allowed combined maritime exercises with South Africa to continue under the Simon's Town Agreement, finally decided that the political disadvantages of doing so outweighed any military advantages. In reaching this decision on 31 October 1974, the British Cabinet argued that 'although the defence facilities available to us under the Simon's Town Agreement were useful in peacetime and could be of importance in war, their value was not such as to justify continuance of the Agreement in view of its political objections'.⁶⁷

As a result of this decision, and as part of the much wider British withdrawal from her far-flung overseas bases, the British Government announced its intention to enter into negotiations with the South African Government with a view to terminate the Simon's Town Agreement.⁶⁸

Following an exchange of letters between the two signatories, the Simon's Town Agreement was finally terminated on 16 June 1975. In informing the House of Assembly in Cape Town of the termination, the then South African Minister for Defence, Mr P.W. Botha, said: 'Now that these Agreements have been terminated, the two navies will deal with each other on the same basis as either of them would deal with any other navy with which they have no special relationship'.⁶⁹

The last remaining Royal Navy shore establishment on South African soil, HMS *Afrikander*, at Youngsfield, was consequently shut-down in February 1976 and the last SBNOSA, Commodore A.F.C. Wemyss RN, returned to the

⁶⁵ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., p.230.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ CAB 128/55/17, CC(74) 42nd, 31 Oct 1974.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ House of Assembly, Hansard No 19, 16 Jun 1975, par.8489.

United Kingdom. This finally closed the chapter on 180 years of British naval presence in South Africa and effectively ended the traditionally close 'special relationship' between the two navies.⁷⁰

Following the termination of the Simon's Town Agreement and the subsequent imposition of a mandatory arms embargo by the United Nations in November 1977, which led Paris to cancel the sale of new corvettes and submarines on order for the South African Navy, South Africa was forced to abandon its role as a pro-West 'Guardian of the Cape Sea Route'. From 1978 it concentrated entirely on the protection of South Africa's coastline and maritime interests.⁷¹

The subject of intense political controversy in Britain and within the Commonwealth for much of its existence, the Simon's Town Agreement remarkably continued for some twenty years, largely because of the continued belief by both signatories in the strategic importance of the naval base that sat astride the vital sea routes around the Cape. Whilst financial savings were a consideration when Great Britain negotiated the agreement, Britain's prime interest was in maintaining unfettered access to Simon's Town in peace and in war for both her and her allies, at little or no cost, together with the concurrent development of the South African Navy's capacity to assume an increasing role for the defence of the vital Cape Sea Route in close cooperation with the Royal Navy.

For South Africa's part, the transfer of the naval base at Simon's Town to South African control, almost at any cost, was largely politically driven and a long-standing issue of national pride and sovereignty. The growth and development of the South African Navy, which Britain pushed so hard for, was initially of secondary importance to the Union Government. The rapid transformation of the South African Navy into a small but highly competent blue-water force, together with the ongoing strategic importance of Simon's Town and the Cape Sea Route, particularly after the closure of the Suez Canal and the increased Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean, however, enabled the South African Government to use the Agreement as a means to maintain links with the anti-communist Western Alliance.

Although the Simon's Town Agreement was finally terminated in 1975, long after South Africa had left the Commonwealth and at a time when Britain was withdrawing from East of Suez and South Africa was becoming increasingly isolated internationally because of its Apartheid policies, the agreement served the national interests of both nations well, albeit for different reasons. Although most advantageous to Britain, the Agreement was mutually beneficial, not only for the United Kingdom and South Africa, but also for the broader Western-Alliance; and at the operational level, it remains an excellent practical example of Commonwealth naval cooperation and interoperability.

⁷⁰ SA's Fighting Ships, op.cit., p.230.

⁷¹ *ibid*, pp.177-78.