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The Story of the *SAS Pietermaritzburg* (ex *HMS Pelorus*)

On 6 June 2004, kings, presidents and veterans met at Normandy to pay tribute to those who took part in the D-Day landings, 60 years ago. The valour shown that day has not dimmed with the passing of the years.

The Normandy landings would become one of the most decisive battles in the 20th century and ultimately pave the way for the end of World War II. Yet there is another reason why this anniversary is special – it is the first time that a German Chancellor participated in this event, albeit at a smaller ceremony held towards the end of the day.

The idea of the allied forces to carry out a joint invasion began to emerge as early as two years previously, in an effort to break Hitler's Atlantic Wall. It took months of top secret training and co-ordination, under the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Not only could no trial run be held, but there was no room for any errors. All contributing forces underwent extensive training in the weeks leading up to Operation Neptune, the name given to the naval part of the mission. Not only did information have to pass from one allied line of command to another, but from one continent to another, without being intercepted by the Germans. Troops were therefore only given extremely limited information. "The Germans knew the allies would have to invade 'Fortress Europe'. They were anticipating the invasion would be in the area of Calais and they were on alert at the beginning of June but the bad weather convinced Rommel that the allies could not invade on June 5th - 7th. The next combination of moon and tide would not be for another fortnight. This invasion was no secret, only the timing and the exact location was in fact so secret, that Field Marshall Erwin Rommel went home to Germany to be with his wife for her birthday."³ Differences of opinion among the German ranks meant they simply did not retaliate fast enough.

One vessel in particular which took part in the D-Day landings namely *HMS Pelorus*¹, would later have ties with South Africa. She was launched on 18 June 1943 and was commissioned as Senior Officer's ship of the 7th MS (Minesweeping) Flotilla. From April 1944 onwards, *HMS Pelorus* and other ships of the Algerine class (*Fancy, Larne, Lennox, Pickle, Pincher, Plucky, Rifleman* and *Recruit*) were involved in long hours of minesweeping in order to prepare the safest possible searoute for the invasion. The minesweepers always went in first, clearing the way and then making numerous trips back and forth across the Channel.

This article, however, is more about one particular vessel that was engaged in the Normandy landings, *HMS Pelorus*. While the Algerine class minesweepers were preparing to leave Portsmouth, every small boat or craft able to make the journey to Normandy, was assembling in the Solent and getting ready to weigh anchor on the afternoon of June 5th.

Originally planned for June 5th, D-Day was postponed until the 6th, due to bad weather. “5,000 ships and landing craft carried 5 Allied divisions to the French coast”.² Within 48 hours, 107,000 men landed on the Normandy beaches, not to mention all the vehicles and equipment as well. In the coming days, more would follow.

The 7th MS Flotilla and many other vessels were based in Portsmouth. Although *HMS Pelorus* claimed to have led the way towards the Normandy beaches this has since been disputed by others who took part in operations that day. In the words of Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay KCB, KBE, MVO, Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, “*Let no one underestimate the magnitude of this task.*”³

In 1947, the SA Navy bought two ships from the Royal Navy, one of them being the *HMS Pelorus*. “They (the Algerines) were fitted with radar from the outset and carried a full asdic outfit, rendering them effective as submarine escorts.”⁴

Originally, it was planned to rename *HMS Pelorus* ‘*HMSAS Maritzburg*’ “but the residents of the city of Pietermaritzburg made special representations to the Prime Minister and she was officially renamed *HMSAS Pietermaritzburg* (at Maydon Wharf, Durban) by Mr. A.E. Hirst, Mayor of Pietermaritzburg in January 1948.” In November of that year, she took part in exercises with the 3rd aircraft carrier squadron of the RN. “*Pietermaritzburg* recommissioned on 30 August 1962, after a refit and modernisation, as a Training Ship. The new OC was Lt.Cdr. A.S. (Sam) Davis.”⁶

Then serving his obligatory 9 months’ citizen force training in 1963, Ralph Thornley recalls some three months on board the ship which had by then become renamed *SAS Pietermaritzburg*:

“I joined the ship in June of that year as a 19-year-old seaman and was a quartermaster. With her extra superstructure, *SAS Pietermaritzburg* became the navy's training ship for midshipmen.

“Everyone from Captain to sailor pitched in to make *SAS Pietermaritzburg* - already a 20-year-old lady with many thousands of seamiles behind her - a smart and most presentable ship. As one of the quartermasters, my job was in the wheelhouse, amidst all the gleaming brass and other paraphernalia needed to steer the ship. I must say I really did take pride in the wheelhouse. During our daily excursions, a certain VIP mom brought her "little one" along to look at the wheelhouse with all its fascinating gadgets. He was eating an ice cream in a cone!

“It was not long before this ice cream found its way all over my beautiful, gleaming, brass engine room telegraph. Mother simply said: ‘Oh dear! Sorry’ and left. My thoughts, emotions and feelings to this day, remain unprintable.

Ralph Thornley took part in the exercise *Capex 63* and remembers it well:

“During July of 1963 we sailed in company with *SAS Transvaal*, *SAS Good Hope*, *SAS President Kruger*, *HMS Leopard*, *HMS Whitby*, *HM Submarine Alliance* and a French frigate *Amiral Charner*. On the afternoon of the 27th, there was an aerial attack by Vampires of the SAAF. We were designated as a cargo ship, *SS Pietermaritzburg*, carrying a valuable cargo of avocado pears! A "bomb" hit us on the fo'c'sle and to mark this and give it some realism, a smoke bomb was set off to show we were on fire. *HMS Leopard* was detached and came up on our starboard side to fight the fire. Unbeknown to her, our Captain had ordered full pressure on our fire mains. The two ships were in ‘mortal combat,’ firing water broadsides at each other.

“Tragedy struck the next morning when, on the 28th July 1963 at 0512, *Pietermaritzburg* collided with *HMS Leopard* about 15 miles south of Cape Point and an 18-year-old Ordinary Seaman from Aberdeen, Scotland was killed at the point of impact. *Pietermaritzburg* slammed into *HMS Leopard's* port bow about 8 feet forward of the magazine. As *Pietermaritzburg* pulled out, she left behind a twenty-foot hole from deck to keel taking most of the contents of the store on her fo'c'sle. There was a lot of beer on board but this had to be dumped because it had been contaminated with broken acid bottles.

“We were ordered to emergency stations. One officer appeared on deck wearing his cap, red cravat, tartan underpants, suede shoes and life jacket. He was ready to abandon ship! Fortunately both ships were able to steam back to Simon's Town. Someone remarked that these war exercises were getting very realistic. *HMS Leopard* was repaired in the Simon's Town dockyard. A huge steel patch was placed over the hole, making her seaworthy for her long voyage back to the UK. The day came for her to leave and as she backed out of the harbour, for some reason she did not take a tug and the wind caught her. She collided with the Bullnose (part of the entrance to Simon's Town Dockyard) right on the patch!! But it held and that was the last I saw of *HMS Leopard*.”

In November 1994, *SAS Pietermaritzburg* “was taken out and moored in position on the nineteenth of November 1994 and a Navy diving team checked that demolition charges were properly placed and that everything was ready for the sinking. One of the S.A.N. minehunters carrying VIPs and a Navy News Team, lay just offshore during the operation.

“After what seemed to be an age, watchers on the water's edge saw the divers leave the ship and not too long afterwards the funnel cover, which had kept the rain out of the boiler room for many years, shot up into the air A split second later, the explosions were heard and the ship quickly settled and disappeared under water.”⁷

Ralph Thornley was also present, watching from the shore as she was finally laid to rest.
No longer a seaman but as a permanent force naval chaplain:

“My time on board *Pietermaritzburg* was a very happy one and there was a long queue of men wanting to join her because she had such a good atmosphere on board. I really did not want to go when my time was up.”

The SA Naval Museum and the Simon’s Town Museum both provide much interesting historical information, all relating to the ships, wrecks and the lives of naval officers and their families. So it came about that the *SAS Pietermaritzburg* (ex *HMS Pelorus*) was sunk near Miller’s Point, where she eventually became a natural reef on the ocean floor. Brightly-coloured fish now swim along her empty passageways and it is perhaps a good thing that she can rest here, below the seas she once so proudly sailed.

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References

Special thanks to Capt. W.H.Rice, SAN (Retired) Project Officer of Project Dockyard 2010) Simon’s Town for providing invaluable information and excerpts from the press on *SAS Pietermaritzburg* as well as for checking on naval technicalities.

Thanks also to Capt. Rice, for putting me in touch with Rev. Ralph R. Thornley, who kindly provided his personal insight, sometimes humourous and sometimes sadder moments on life aboard *SAS Pietermaritzburg*. .

Special thanks also to staff of Caird Library, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London for providing the following references:

“The History of the Algerines” Volume 9, 7th Minesweeping Flotilla by Jack Williams.

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¹According to **The Oxford Companion to ships and the sea**: the Pelorus is “A circular ring fitted to the rim of a compass bowl and carrying two sighting vanes, used for taking azimuths (bearings) of celestial objects.

The word comes from the name of Hannibal's pilot, possibly Greek, who sided with the Carthaginians and assisted Hannibal to get his troops accross Europe and kept him in touch with Carthage by sea.”

²“The World at War“ by Wilfried Braakhuis, Associate Professor of History, University of Twente, the Netherlands (Elite Engineer Publishing (2003)

³ Mr. Bob Todd, Head of Historic Photos and Ship Plans, National Maritime Museum, London

⁴ “South Africa’s Fighting Ships: past and present” by Allan du Toit, Ashanti Johannesburg (1992)

⁶ “South Africa’s Fighting Ships: past and present” by Allan du Toit, Ashanti Johannesburg (1992)

⁷ Captain W.H. Rice, Project Officer, Simon’s Town Dockyard Project and SA Navy Museum, Simon’s Town.