

JEREMY WATSON – me.

OK, I only did my year of national service in the South African Navy in 1970, but there are some aspects that you may find interesting.



The Gordons Bay naval base looking like a sleepy coastal resort in 1970.

I did my basic training at Gordon's Bay on False Bay. Our training “ship” was a converted wooden fishing boat and we rowed or sailed whalers. (Sort of makes “basic training” really basic). Guard duty at night could be intriguing with occasional marine fluorescence in the lapping water, disturbed cormorants or skimmed stones. I didn't make the grade for an officer course, but did meet some interesting guys such as a descendent of Messerschmitt and Prime Minister Vorster's son (who had got into the officer course).



Our initial sea experience was on this converted fishing boat. You can just make it out in the preceding picture.

The uniform for ratings during regular activities was rather basic and included shorts, blue shirt, tackies, beret and a Burberry coat.



This is me during an introductory marines course.

I then did a radar course on the Bluff in Durban before being posted to a ship. The radar training facilities were little changed since WWII and from below the Bluff drifted the smell of whales being butchered from the still active whaling station.



Looking smarter. The South African Navy uniform while in public is a black suit and a peaked cap. Officers differ mainly in their cap badges and insignia.

My ship was the SAS Simon van der Stel (named after the last Commander and first Governor of the Cape Colony, the Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope). This destroyer had a permanent small list to port, but somehow managed to go through the swells (rather than over them) such as off Cape Point. We would be ordered in advance to batten down the portholes. Green water could be seen outside sometimes. If really rough weather was anticipated we would need to batten down the deadlights over them as well. We, at least most of the ratings, slept in hammocks strung from the deckhead (ceiling). When told we could use “stretchers” these turned out to simply be bits of wood found on the quayside that could keep the ends of the hammock wider so we would not be encased in canvas cocoons. We would need to roll and tie up our

hammocks every morning – the theory being that they could act as lift belts as they were presumed to float.



I don't have many pictures of SAS Simon v d Stel and those that I do were taken with a very basic camera.

This one was taken across the helicopter pad towards Simons Town.

Compare this to the picture below when HMS Whelp.

Of note is the South African flag of the time.

I peeled many a potato down there. The milk would arrive in large urns which we would store in the disused mortar launcher on deck. I had an occasional very brief turn at steering the ship, but my real role was to be on radar duty or plotting the ship's course on backlit map. Some excitement when the radar picked up thousands of sardines splattered by an anti-submarine depth charge set off in an exercise. A “high-tech” illuminated compass rose automatically followed the ship's course across the chart, but we had to add the details – with chinagraph pencils on the polycarbonate overlay. [This was way before GPS so the automated tracking was purely based on speed, time of travel and degrees]. Decca Navigation System stations had been set up along the coast and were used to confirm location, accuracy being through triangulation.

I wasn't on the ship long due to asthma triggered by the fumes and spent my remaining months in Maritime Headquarters at Youngsfield, a remnant of a WWII airfield. These were the days of apartheid and paranoia about Russian or any communist influence and possible incursions. At the headquarters we used the high-tech system of plotting both friendly and Russian or other communist country shipping around the Cape with paper labels on pins in a map on the wall. The reports would come in regularly from spotter planes and there really were lots of suspicious cargo ships carrying military vehicles on board clearly visible in the photos sent back. The state of the art Maritime Headquarters was then only being started at Silvermine in the hills above the Cape Flats.

SAS Simon van der Stel had a previous life – as HMS Whelp. We I was on her she looked rather tired and out of date in spite of a recent addition of a helicopter deck.



The ship while still HMS Whelp. Wikia.

HMS *Whelp* was one of eight W-class destroyers built for the Royal Navy during the Second World War. Completed in 1944, the ship spent most of the war assigned to the Eastern and Pacific Fleets. She screened British aircraft carriers as their aircraft attacked targets in the Japanese-occupied Nicobar Islands and Dutch East Indies, Formosa and near Okinawa. *Whelp* was present at the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay in 1945 and later in Hong Kong. She was paid off in January 1946 and went into reserve.

Whelp was sold to the South African Navy (SAN) in 1952 and renamed Simon van der Stel. She was subsequently converted into a fast anti-submarine frigate in the early 1960s and served as a training ship from 1968 until 1972 when she went back into reserve. *Simon van der Stel* was recommissioned in 1975 for a refit, but that proved to be uneconomical and she was scrapped the following year. [Wiki]. I understand that she sits on the bottom of False bay along with her sister ship SAS Jan van Riebeeck – part of an artificial reef to attract sea life.

During her active service, her captain and first lieutenant were Commander G. A. F. Norfolk and Lieutenant Phillip Mountbatten (now Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh), respectively.

So there you have it. I served on the same ship as Prince Phillip!

