Introduction
On 7 December 1941, the Second World War escalated dramatically when the Japanese launched a surprise attack against the American naval base at Pearl Harbour Hawaii and declared war against the United States of America and the British Empire. The South Africa government acted swiftly and on Tuesday, 9 December 1941, a proclamation was issued, stating that, as from 8 December, South Africa was at war with Japan.(1)

Dr D F Malan and the Nationalists justified Japanese expansion and regarded Soviet communism as the real threat to the Union.(2) However, while the Nationalists did not, on the whole, regard Japan as a threat,(3) government supporters took a much more realistic view of the situation. Prime Minister General J C Smuts said that should Japan dare to attack the Union, he would arm all able-bodied blacks and coloureds.(4)

A substantial amount of research has been done and much has been written about South Africa's role during the Second World War, especially regarding the role of the Union Defence Forces (UDF) in Abyssinia,(5) North Africa(6) and Italy,(7) as well as the situation on the home front(8). However, the country's role in the struggle against Japan has so far received only cursory mention. For nearly four years, the Union of South Africa was officially at war with Imperial Japan. It is the purpose of this study to shed some light on this war, in an effort to ascertain the nature and extent of South Africa's contribution to the Allied war effort, the implications for South Africa, both militarily and on the home front, of Japan's entry into the war, as well as any possible influence which the war against Japan may have had on local defence and economic, political and social matters.

The article should be seen as an introduction and a preliminary analysis of a few basic issues regarding South Africa's role in the war against Japan and the author hopes that it will lead to further research regarding this facet of South Africa's military past. The situation on the South African home front in December 1941 and the strength of the UDF at the time will be discussed first, followed by a review of what happened on the home front from 1941 to 1945, emphasizing, throughout, the influence exercised by the war against Japan. Before finally drawing some conclusions, South Africa's role in the military struggle will be set out and evaluated including reviews of the role played by several naval vessels in the Far East.
In a minesweeping operation, naval personnel bring in the "kite", an instrument which determines the depth at which the sweep wire will travel. (Photo: By courtesy, SA National Museum of Military History)

The South African home front, December 1941

Within two years, Smuts had consolidated his political position and had laid a sound economic foundation for the work that was to be done during the rest of the war years. Smuts' security measures, such as the National Emergency Regulations, played a very important role in maintaining relative peace and stability on the home front. By acting quickly and decisively, Smuts showed that there was a strong government in the saddle, a government which damped any sparks that might have led to a conflagration and had stabilised the internal security situation. By the end of 1941, there were even indications that the parliamentary and democratic forces in the opposition, as represented by Dr D F Malan's Herenigde Nasionale Party (HNP), were gaining the upper hand over the more militant ideological hotheads in, for example, the Ossewa-Brandwag (OB). The Second World War brought the race question in South Africa to a head, and Smuts' United Party (UP) government apparently did not have a consistent 'non white' (10) policy. If blacks wanted to make their grievances known on a dramatic scale, the war afforded them that opportunity, but nothing of the sort occurred; instead, black, coloured and Asian South Africans were, on the whole, committed to the Allied cause, and many were directly or indirectly involved in South Africa's war effort.

By the end of 1941, the South African economy had not yet been affected much by the war, but the foundation had been laid for a war economy and for massive war production during the remaining war years. This was mainly due to the dedication of Dr H J van der Bijl, who, on 24 November 1939, was appointed Director-General of War Supplies.

By December 1941, the war had not really had any effect worth mentioning on social conditions in the country. The initial military success of the Japanese had a potential psychological effect on at least a portion of South Africa's population, for the 'non-white' Japanese had inflicted serious losses on whites in the East, including those colonial powers who were driven from some of their colonies. As far as the local political scene was concerned, a possibility existed that the anti-war factions could step up their agitation against South Africa's continued participation in the war.

The Union Defence Forces (UDF), December 1941

Japan's entry into the war posed a very real threat to South Africa and emphasized the vulnerability of her coasts and harbours. The country's coastal defences had been planned to meet simple hit-and-run raids by enemy surface vessels and submarines, limited attacks by shipborne aircraft, and raids by small parties of enemy soldiers or marines. With Japanese forces overrunning one area after the other in the East, however, there was the possibility of a full-scale invasion. The Union's only safeguard against a Japanese invasion was the ability of the country's more powerful allies to maintain themselves in the Indian Ocean, especially after the spectacular successes achieved by the Japanese during the first few weeks of war. Although the UDF underwent a metamorphosis in the course of the first two years of the war, South Africa itself remained very vulnerable and its local defences not in the least adequate to withstand a determined enemy onslaught. By December 1941, a variety of coast artillery guns, ranging from quick-firing 6-pdr guns to heavy 9.2-inch guns, were installed at Walvis Bay, Saldanha Bay, on Robben Island, at Cape Town, Simon's Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, and Durban, but these were not enough.
The Union's anti-aircraft capacity also left much to be desired. When war broke out in 1939, there were only eight 3-inch anti-aircraft guns and six searchlights in South Africa and, when these guns and searchlights were despatched to East Africa, the Union was completely devoid of ground anti-aircraft defences. By the middle of 1941, there were still no modern anti-aircraft guns in the country - only machine-guns - and it was only in the course of 1942 that new equipment became available.(18)

The South African Air Force (SAAF) grew dramatically during the first two years of the war and, by December 1941, had a personnel strength of 31 204, including 4 321 of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. Of the total personnel, however, most were trainees and only 2 074 officers and men were operationally employed in South Africa. The number of SAAF aircraft increased from 104 in September 1939 to 1 709 in September 1941. Nevertheless, in December 1941, the SAF had no fighter squadrons in South Africa. The threat of a Japanese invasion on the east coast was, for some time, considered a serious possibility and consequently the maritime patrol squadrons were reinforced by two fighter squadrons (No 6 and No 10) flying Curtiss-Mohawk IVs.(19)

As far as maritime defence was concerned, the South African Naval Service (SANS) grew from three officers and three ratings - obviously with no warships! - in September 1939(20) to a force with a personnel of 216 officers and 1 427 other ratings in September 1941. On 7 December 1941, the Seaward Defence Force (SDF) - as the SANS was known since 15 January 1940 - had fifteen small anti-submarine vessels and 39 minesweepers(21).

By December 1941, the UDF, which, until then, only had to look northwards, had successfully taken part in the Abyssinian campaign and was then involved in the struggle against Rommel's Afrika Korps in North Africa. Henceforth, however, it would also have to take into consideration a threat coming from the East.

Japan's entry into the war meant that the conflict had truly become a world conflagration. The Indian Ocean and adjoining areas were then directly threatened by enemy actions. The possibility of enemy submarine attacks on Allied ships in the oceans around South Africa increased dramatically, as did the threat against the country's harbours and coasts. In the light of the weakness of the Union's coastal and anti-aircraft defences, industrial areas along the coasts were particularly vulnerable.

Far away from the main operational areas, South Africa had been spared the brunt of the Axis offensives, but, by December 1941, she could not rely on much support, should the Japanese decide to launch an all-out offensive in the Indian Ocean. In more than one way, the Union was ill-prepared for a war against Japan, and nearly three and a half years would pass before the country would be in a position to actively support its allies militarily in the East. In the meantime, South Africa had to prepare itself for a possible Japanese incursion into the Indian Ocean.

The South African home front, 1941-1945

The Second World War once again emphasized the importance of the Cape sea-route and South Africa's harbours were of vital importance, particularly for storage and for repair work.

The Japanese capture of the British bases in the Far East, especially those at Hong Kong (25 December 1941) and Singapore (15 February 1942), had an immediate effect on South Africa. New bases were required, and the Union was the obvious choice. The country already had a well-developed harbour infrastructure and, for quite some time, the dry dock in Durban had been of immense strategic importance, being the largest of its kind between Singapore and Gibraltar. However, as this graving dock on its own was insufficient for the number of ships requiring attention, the Sturrock dry dock was built in Cape Town, capable of handling (like its counterpart in Durban) battleships and aircraft carriers. Also authorised was the dry dock for cruisers at East London.(22)

As far as harbour facilities were concerned, perhaps the most important and far-reaching result of the war against Japan was the decision to build a complete new naval base at Salisbury Island in Durban. The vast construction works, which cost £2 million, included the building of a causeway to link the island to the mainland; raising the level of the island by some 3 metres; the building of wharves, workshops, barracks, a hospital, training and other facilities; and the acquisition of a floating dock and a floating crane. The new base was, however, only completed after the war against Japan had ended.(23)

The war led to a dramatic increase in the sea traffic around the Cape and in the number of ships that visited the local ports. For example, the number of ocean-going ships (excluding warships) that called at Cape Town rose from 1 784 (1938-39) to 2 559 (1941-42) and 2 593 (1942-43) and, at Durban, from 1 534 to 1 835 and 1 930 respectively. The number of naval vessels that visited Cape Town rose from ten (1938-39) to 251 (1941-42) and 306 (1942-43), while, in Durban, the numbers rose from sixteen (in 1938) to 192 (in 1941) and 313 (in 1942).(24) The extent of the increase in sea-going traffic around the Cape may also be gauged from the rise in the value of South African produce supplied for the visiting ships, from £142 209 in 1939 to £5 381 015 in 1945.(25)

About 400 convoys, carrying some six million men, visited South African ports in the course of the war and a total of about 50 000 ships passed through these ports en route to and from the Mediterranean and Far Eastern war zones. Of these ships, about 13 000 underwent repairs in South Africa's harbours. Thus it is quite remarkable that, throughout the war, there was not a single serious accident at any South African port.(26)

The workshops of the South African Railways and Harbours (SAR&H) were requested to add the production of military material to their normal activities and they produced a variety of articles, including 100 barges of 250 tons each for India and 41 motor-boats for river-towing in Burma. Of all the private and government-controlled organizations, the SAR&H probably made the most important industrial contribution towards South Africa's war effort.(27)

As South Africa's geographic position safeguarded her against enemy attacks, industrial development was able to proceed unhindered. By 1942, the country's war economy was running smoothly. Industrial employment increased by more than 50% during the war.(28) and the number of blacks employed in industrial occupations also grew, as did the number of blacks in the so-called 'white' towns and cities.
Apart from arms manufacturing,(30) South Africa's industries supplied the UDF and other Allied forces with a large variety of personal and other equipment, some of which was exported to the East and used by personnel fighting against the Japanese. By the end of the war, South Africa had produced more than twelve million pairs of boots and shoes, five and a half million blankets and 2 435 million cigarettes to meet military requirements. About 80 different types of motor vehicles were also produced, resulting in a total of some 32 000 vehicles, including about 14 000 three and five-ton trucks.(31)

Japan's entry into the war had a profound impact on the demand for South African-produced war material as Australia, New Zealand and India then had to concentrate on their own defence requirements and could no longer supply the Allies in the West to the same extent as they had before. This placed increasing pressure on South Africa's industries (32).

South Africa's position, away from the main operational areas of the war, was both a blessing and a problem. The entry of Italy into the war on 10 June 1940 brought the conflict nearer home, but, even by the middle of 1942, despite Japan's involvement since December 1941 and the increase of submarine activity along the South African coasts and adjacent oceans, there was still an almost general lack of appreciation by the average citizen of the fact that the country was involved in a war that, in more than one way, required total effort. (33)

Nevertheless, hardly any aspect of South African life remained unaffected by the war in some way. On 9 June 1942, Durban experienced its first real black-out, a step that became permanent on 16 June 1942(35). The rationing of petrol further restricted the movement of people, while commodities like motor vehicles, building material, rubber, wood, paper and agricultural implements were declared to be controlled goods. A shortage developed in foodstuffs, such as meat, maize, wheat and sugar; wholesale and retail price indexes rose; and price control was introduced.(36) The heavy demands made by visiting convoys aggravated shortages in certain foodstuffs and, by the beginning of 1943, there was greater austerity in the country. People were beginning to feel the pinch of shortages and the accompanying rising costs and the man in the street began to realise that the war had its price. Civilians began to feel the strain and even government supporters began to grumble.(37) However, as the result of the 1943 election pointed out, Smuts and his UP enjoyed stronger support than ever.

While the Allies and Japanese battled it out in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in the Far East and, in the Mediterranean theatre, the Allies had invaded Sicily, South Africa was gripped in a campaign for the general (albeit almost exclusively white) election, which was held on 7 July 1943. The election was fought almost entirely on the war issue, but the race question was also fiercely debated. The HNP remained vehemently opposed to the Union's continued participation in the war against the Axis powers and, in particular, against Germany, but the war against Japan was not specifically debated. While Smuts and his UP's victory appeared to be spectacular, the result was an artificial one and did not reflect the government's true standing.(38)

Within a short space of time following his appointment as Prime Minister in 1939, Smuts had consolidated his position and, by the time war against Japan broke out, it did not really affect the South African home front that much. While the Smuts government's decision to declare war against Germany had evoked strong reaction from many Afrikaners, the same did not occur when the Union went to war with the 'non-white' Japan.

South Africa and the military struggle against Japan, 1941-1945

The threat of a Japanese invasion declined after the battle of Midway (4-6 June 1942), but still hung over South Africa until the United States started to roll back the Japanese by the end of 1942. Throughout the war against Japan, South Africa's contribution was mostly of an indirect nature, with the emphasis on coastal defence and safeguarding the Cape sea-route.

Although more than three years would lapse before units of the UDF were actually sent to the Far East in the war against Japan, South African naval personnel, seconded to the Royal Navy almost immediately after Pearl Harbour, saw action against the Japanese. Having dealt the American navy in the Pacific a severe blow at Pearl Harbour, the Japanese invaded, inter alia, the Philippines, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, the Gilberts and Wake,(39) and set out to destroy Allied naval units operating in the Pacific Ocean. Amongst the first vessels to fall prey to the Japanese were the British battleship HMS Prince of Wales and the battle-cruiser HMS Repulse. Both vessels had stopped at Cape Town and Durban on their way to the East, forming part of a British naval task force, also including four destroyers, which had been sent out to intercept the attacking Japanese task force. Both capital ships were sunk on 10 December 1941, off the east coast of Malaya, by shore-based naval aircraft. Of 1 612 crew members of the Prince of Wales, 325 perished, as well as 513 (including a South African) of the Repulse's complement of 1309 (40).

From 27 February to 1 March 1942, the battle of the Java Sea occurred when an Allied force of five cruisers and eleven destroyers (including ships from four nations) challenged a Japanese force, which was escorting a convoy carrying troops for the invasion of Java. Two Dutch cruisers and one Dutch and two British destroyers were sunk in the ensuing running battle, and one British and one US cruiser were damaged. The Japanese suffered only minor damage and went ahead with the invasion.(41) During the clash, one South African was killed on 1 March 1942, when the 'E' Class destroyer HMS Encounter was sunk by Japanese surface craft.

With the Japanese almost completely in control of the skies, they started mopping up the little remaining Allied resistance and April 1942 became a very bleak month for the Allies. On 5 April, Japanese dive-bombers caught and sank the British heavy cruisers HMS Cornwall and HMS Dorsetshire off the west coast of Ceylon. Amongst the Cornwall's casualties were 25 South Africans, and sixteen of their compatriots died when the Dorsetshire went down. Of the two ships' total complements of 1 546, 424 were killed.(42)
Far away from enemy air force bases, South Africa's air space was ideally suited for training purposes. On 11 April 1940, Smuts switched to Sunderland aircraft. (57) and, later, the SAAF took over the Royal Air Force (RAF) Catalina squadron that was stationed at Durban. In 1945 this squadron (No 35) but of those only 179 were of the operational type and serviceable. Ventura aircraft were used to seek out and attack enemy submarines important role in watching over the trade routes along the country's shores. By February 1942, there were 2 002 aircraft in the Union, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban. (56) From the beginning of the war, South African air - and later also naval - forces played an into a respectable force, with a total of 104 3,7-inch and 104 40 mm guns and 60 searchlights at Saldanha Bay, Table Bay, Simon's Bay, four Bofors guns. (55). By September 1942, the increasing availability of equipment had turned the country's anti-aircraft port defences the country's ports. (54) By 23 April 1942, the following anti-aircraft guns existed at the ports: two 3,7-inch guns, four old 3-inch guns and the threat of a Japanese penetration into the Indian Ocean rendered the defence of the Union against invasion a matter of urgency. Accordingly, in June 1942, the UDF in South Africa was reorganised into an Inland Area (comprising the Northern, Central and Witwatersrand Commands, with headquarters at Johannesburg) and a Coastal Area (comprising the Fortress Commands of the Cape, Outeniqua, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban, with headquarters at Cape Town). Defences at the country's ports were strengthened and sea and air patrols along the coasts were intensified. Those Active Citizen Force (ACF) units that remained in the country were organised into a Mobile Field Force with headquarters at Ermelo. (46) Defence Headquarters called for special vigilance against possible attacks from the sea, as well as for the stepping up of internal security. (47) When relations with Japan became strained in July 1941, and especially after the fall of Singapore in February 1942, the threat to the Union's coastline was greatly increased and all coastal batteries were manned with a greater degree of alertness. Towards the end of 1941, the first coloured (Cape Corps) troops made their appearance in the Coast Artillery. They proved to be apt pupils and, by June 1942, formed the largest portion of the detail manning the various batteries. (48) South Africa's coast artillery defences were gradually improved and a few South African coast gunners also served outside the Union, such as at Kismayu and Mogadishu in the former Italian Somaliland, which, it was feared, might be threatened by the Japanese. (49) As the threat of invasion decreased during 1944, so too did the strength of coastal artillery units and, by November 1944, all batteries were placed in care and maintenance. (50) Despite South Africa having invested heavily in coast defence during the war, the coastal defence units never fired a shot in anger. Nevertheless, it was a necessary precaution and may well have been a good deterrent. (51)

Over and above coastal guns, South Africa's harbours were also protected by other means. The Japanese had attacked Sydney harbour (Australia) and Diego Suarez (Madagascar) with midget submarines and, with a Japanese submarine force operating in the Indian Ocean, Durban harbour, with its long entrance channel, was considered to be exceptionally vulnerable. Loops of electric cable were installed at the harbour entrance, and later also at Cape Town, and depth-charge throwers were introduced at Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth, Simon's Town and Cape Town. Saldanha Bay was earmarked as a convoy assembly port and, to protect the assembly area in the land-locked bay, a controlled minefield was layed there in 1943. (53)

As the situation in the East deteriorated at the beginning of 1942, South Africa braced itself for possible attacks from the sea and air. Towards the end of February 1942, the British War Cabinet's Subcommittee on Defence Arrangements for the Indian Ocean envisaged the possibility of brief bombardments of the Union's ports by Japanese battleships, operations by torpedo and minelaying craft, infantry landings, as well as attacks by up to 200 carrier-borne aircraft. Consequently, more anti-aircraft guns were ordered for the defence of the country's ports. (54) By 23 April 1942, the following anti-aircraft guns existed at the ports: two 3,7-inch guns, four old 3-inch guns and four Bofors guns. (55) By September 1942, the increasing availability of equipment had turned the country's anti-aircraft port defences into a respectable force, with a total of 104 3,7-inch and 104 40 mm guns and 60 searchlights at Saldanha Bay, Table Bay, Simon's Bay, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban. (56) From the beginning of the war, South African air - and later also naval - forces played an important role in watching over the trade routes along the country's shores. By February 1942, there were 2 002 aircraft in the Union, but of those only 179 were of the operational type and serviceable. Ventura aircraft were used to seek out and attack enemy submarines and, later, the SAAF took over the Royal Air Force (RAF) Catalina squadron that was stationed at Durban. In 1945 this squadron (No 35) switched to Sunderland aircraft. (57)

On 9 April 1942, Japanese dive-bombers attacked and sank the aircraft carrier HMS Hermes off the east coast of Ceylon. Amongst those who died, were another sixteen South Africans. On that same day, the 'Flower' Class corvette, the HMS Hollyhock, was sunk by Japanese aircraft east of Ceylon, and amongst the fatalities were five South Africans. Some time lapsed before the next South African died in action against the Japanese. This occurred on 12 February 1944 when the British troopship SS Khedive Ismail was sunk by submarine I-27. About 2 000 of those on board died, including one South African. This appears to have been the last seconded South African to die in action against the Japanese, although at least another two South Africans died while on duty in the Far East: one at HMS Highflyer, a base in Trincomalee, and the other at HMS Lanka, a Royal Navy shore establishment at Colombo. (43) In total, some 4 000 South Africans served in the Royal Navy at one time or another during the war. (44) Of these, 191 are believed to have died while on active service, (45) at least 67 (or 35% of them) in the war against Japan.
announced that the British government had accepted his offer of facilities for training airmen, a scheme with far-reaching consequences for both the RAF and the SAAF. The Joint Air Training Scheme (JATS) virtually commenced its existence on 1 June 1940 and was one of the country’s great success stories during the war, continuing after the war in Europe had ended and providing a steady stream of pilots for the struggle against Japan. By 31 December 1945, the JATS had passed out 33 347 aircrew members at 57 flying schools and depots: 20 800 for the RAF (including about 15 000 pilots and navigators), 12 221 for the SAAF and 326 for other Allied air forces. (58)

When Japan entered the war, the SDF was fully occupied in patrolling South African waters against possible enemy submarine attacks and sweeping mines where necessary. The threat of a Japanese invasion meant that these patrols were to be stepped up. On 1 August 1942, the SDF and Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (South African Division), or RNVR(SA), were amalgamated under a new designation, the South African Naval Forces (SANF). All South African officers and men serving in the Royal Navy automatically became SANF seconded personnel. (59)

By the end of 1943, when the war at sea and the threat of a Japanese invasion began to abate as the Allies gradually rolled back the Japanese forces, there were about 4 000 officers and ratings in the SANF and, on 7 December 1943, the SANF had eighteen small antisubmarine vessels and 40 minesweepers. (60) By the end of hostilities in 1945, more than 10 000 officers and men had served in South Africa’s naval forces, and 89 vessels had, at one stage or other, been in commission. (61)

It must be noted that, on the eve of the war, there had been, for all intents and purposes, no armaments industry in South Africa. Within a remarkable short space of time, a formidable armaments industry had been built up and, by the end of the war, the following arms and ammunition had been produced in the country: 5 770 armoured cars, about 300 3,7-inch ordinary and pack howitzers, at least 300 6-pdr and 100 2-pdr anti-tank guns, 11 323 3-inch mortars, 4 970 502 hand-grenades, 768 314 966 rounds of .303 rifle ammunition, 2 568 652 mortar bombs, more than four million shell bodies, and 3 660 216 aerial bombs, including 3 057 717 practice bombs. Although the country’s armaments industry was never specifically geared towards the struggle against Japan, certain locally manufactured items found their way to the East. For example, most of the 3,7-inch howitzers were exported to India, some of the 6-pdr anti-tank guns were exported to Burma, and many 3-inch mortars, armoured cars and hand-grenades went to India. (62)

Sixteen Fairmile ‘B’ motor launches were built at Cape Town and Knysna in 1942 and early 1943, all for the Royal Navy and, although these boats were not built for South Africa, they were crewed mainly by South Africans who were originally recruited by the RNVR(SA). These Fairmiles first served in the Persian Gulf and later in the Burmese Arakan front campaign against the Japanese. Thereafter, they were handed over to the Indian Navy. (63)

South-African-manned motor launches in Burmese waters.
(Photo: By courtesy, SA Naval Museum)

The Madagascar campaign, May-November 1942

During the Madagascar campaign, the Allies clashed with the Vichy French defenders on the island, but, in reality, the campaign was directed against the Japanese.

With the fall of France on 22 June 1940, Madagascar came under the control of pro-Vichy elements. Although of little commercial value, the harbour of Diego Suarez (Antsiran), at the northern tip of the island, was of great importance for controlling the Indian Ocean and there was a considerable risk that the Japanese could occupy the island. In an effort to prevent this, South Africa’s Prime Minister Smuts - since 24 May 1941 a field marshal in the British Army - used all his influence to try to persuade the Allied commanders that it was in the interest of the Allies to invade the island. (64). There was, after all, evidence that Japanese submarines were being replenished at Diego Suarez. Furthermore, it later became known that an agreement had been signed between Germany and Japan, whereby Madagascar would fall under Japanese control (65). The Japanese therefore planned to use the island as a base for operations stretching from the Arabian Sea to the Cape. (66)

The ensuing Allied invasion plan was designated ‘Operation Ironclad’ and, as part of the general strategy of the war against Japan, the UDF participated in the invasion. The Union also provided base facilities for the task force, and units of the SAAF did photographic reconnaissance over the island in March and April 1942. The land invasion force consisted of three British brigades, one South African brigade (supported by locally manufactured Marmon-Herrington armoured cars), and one brigade from East Africa. The SAAF contingent had six Glen Martin Maryland bombers and eleven Bristol Beaufort bombers. The soldiers were transported in eight large troopships and the accompanying British naval task force consisted of one battleship (HMS Ramillies), two aircraft carriers (HMS Illustrious and HMS Indomitable), two cruisers, eleven destroyers, six corvettes, six minesweepers, and ten auxiliary vessels. With the exception of the Indomitable, which joined them in the Mozambique Channel, the task force set sail from Durban between 25 and 28 April 1942. While in Durban, the task force had received immense support from the UDF and from South Africa in general. (67)

The total Allied force consisted of the brigades, the aircraft embarked on the aircraft carriers, plus six RAF and seventeen SAAF aircraft,
together with 46 warships and auxiliaries, whereas the French Vichy forces could muster about 2,000 white and 6,000 black troops, six tanks, at least 35 aircraft and four warships. The Allied amphibious assault on Diego Suarez - the first British amphibious landing of the war - commenced on 5 May 1942 and, after some heavy fighting, the French were driven off. The first South African troops of the 7th South African Infantry Brigade under Brig G T Seneschall only landed at Diego Suarez on 25 June, together with artillery and armoured cars. They moved into camp at Sakaramy, where they prepared defensive positions. In the meantime, on the night of 30/31 May, Japanese midget submarines from the 8th Submarine Flotilla torpedoed and damaged the battleship HMS Rambles, as well as a tanker (the British Royalty) in the Diego Suarez harbour. The Rambles went to Durban for repairs.

In September 1942, the South Africans participated in a large-scale operation aimed at capturing the southern half of Madagascar, while a company of Pretoria Highlanders occupied the small island of Nossi Be after a preliminary bombardment by the minelayer HMS Manxman.

No serious opposition was encountered anywhere, but climatic and topographical conditions were arduous and many soldiers suffered from malaria. On 31 October, a South African armoured car regiment spearheaded the final attack on Fianarantsoa, which led to the French surrender on 5 November 1942.

During the campaign, the Allies lost at least 107 killed and 280 wounded, as well as many who died from diseases. The French lost some 150 killed and 500 wounded, while most of the remaining troops were captured. The South African Army's only fatal casualties were four men who died from tropical diseases, while fourteen others were wounded.

SAAF aircraft flew a total of 401 sorties during the Madagascar campaign. One pilot was lost in action, one killed in an accident and one died from disease. Seven aircraft were lost, only one as a result of enemy action.

On 13 May 1942, shortly after the commencement of the Allied invasion, the German Naval High Command suggested that the Japanese launch a counter-attack. This was, however, not contemplated and after the Japanese defeat during the battle of Midway (4-6 June 1942) this possibility was eliminated.

The Japanese submarine campaign, 1942

The German Naval High Command was anxious that the Japanese should send submarines to operate off the east coast of Africa and, at the beginning of April 1942, the Japanese promised to do so. Towards the middle of that year, they launched a submarine offensive in the western Indian Ocean. The raiding force - under the command of Rear Admiral Ishizaki - consisted of five submarines of the 8th Submarine Flotilla: I-16, I-18 and I-20 each with a midget submarine attached to it; and I-10 and I-30 each equipped with an aeroplane. The submarines were supported by two armed supply ships (Aikoka Maru and Hakoka Maru) that could have been classified as auxiliary cruisers. These Japanese vessels operated between Durban and the northern end of the Mozambique Channel.

From 5 June to 8 July 1942 the submarines sank 21 Allied merchant ships, while another merchantman was sunk by one of the Japanese supply ships. The total tonnage of the 21 ships which were sunk within 1,000 sea miles (1,852 km) of the Union's shores was 94,508 tons, 10.7% of the Allied tonnage that went down within 1,000 sea-miles of the coast of the Union. Most of the ships were sunk in the Mozambique Channel and the nearest sinking to the South African coast occurred on 6 July when the Mundra was sunk very near the coast, just south of St Lucia Bay. Despite many sorties, aircraft of the SAAF and the RAF made no contact with the Japanese vessels.

The Japanese task force tried to intervene during the Allied invasion of Madagascar when, as has already been mentioned, midget submarines torpedoed the battleship HMS Rambles and a British tanker on the night of 30/31 May 1942. During this operation, two of the midget submarines were destroyed.

It is interesting to note that there is good reason to believe that, in the early hours of 20 May 1942 and again on 5 June and 4 July and perhaps even on other occasions, aircraft carried by the Japanese submarines reconnoitred the Natal coast and flew over Durban! In no way prepared for this, the city and its harbour were illuminated and provided perfect targets. On 20 May, an unidentified aircraft was challenged by the Fire Commander of Durban Fortress Air Defences. It supplied the wrong code and disappeared out over the sea.

When the Japanese submarine force first made its appearance off the southern African coast in May 1942, the submarine war in the region had already been raging since 28 October 1941, when a German U-boat had sunk the Hazelside. After the withdrawal of the Japanese vessels, submarine warfare continued in the seas around South Africa, the last ship being sunk on 23 February 1945. No fewer than 156 Allied ships were sunk within 1,000 nautical miles (1,852 km) of the Union's coast.

Of these vessels, the Japanese task force accounted for 21,82 or 13.5%. However, in terms of the number of ships sunk within the 1,000 mile limit, 1942 was the worst year for Allied shipping along the South African coasts. In that year, 81 merchant ships (with a gross tonnage of 455,756) were lost and, in June, when the Japanese submarines were most active, fifteen ships (70,914 tons) were sunk, the third highest figure of shipping losses for any month during the war.
The Allied forces were only able to sink three enemy submarines within 1,000 sea miles of the South African coast and all three were German boats. Nevertheless, as the defensive measures of the SAAF and its allies improved, the Axis powers were forced to transfer the weight of their attack further east, even far beyond Madagascar. With this island under Allied control, the Japanese submarines, with a few exceptions, never again ventured near Africa's coasts, in any case not in great numbers, although they continued to operate further east in the Indian Ocean.

All in all, at least 36 enemy submarines operated within 1,000 sea miles of South Africa's coast during the war. Of these, at least five were Japanese. German and Italian submarines sank 116 vessels in the area, at an average rate of less than four per submarine. On the other hand, the five Japanese boats sank twenty ships, an average of exactly four per boat.

On the whole, the Japanese task force was very successful, but had Ishizaki risked a surface attack by night on the ships at anchor outside Durban harbour, he probably would have claimed many more victims. However, it must be borne in mind that the Japanese had no real interest in attacking merchant ships far from Japan. With scanty internal resources, Japan could not afford a protracted naval war and, therefore, concentrated on building surface naval vessels that could quickly annihilate the enemy's surface fleet. As Turner correctly points out, in terms of their strategy, the Japanese submarine offensive in the Mozambique Channel in June and July 1942 was really an isolated episode undertaken to meet the importunity of Germany, a not very well-loved ally.

**South African naval vessels in the Far East**

Although several SANF vessels stayed in the Mediterranean until shortly before the end of 1945, the cessation of hostilities in Europe on VE Day, 8 May 1945, meant that, to all intents and purposes, the war was over for South Africa. However, steps had been taken to ensure that units of the SANF and SAAF would participate in the war against Japan, should that country not surrender in the near future. The boom defence vessel, HMSAS *Barbrake*, was the first South African naval ship to be attached to the Royal Navy East Indies Station. In November 1944, the Union government agreed to lend the *Barbrake* and her crew to the British Admiralty for service on the East Indies Station. Under the command of Lt F M Kamke, the *Barbrake* sailed from Simon's Town for Trincomalee on 3 February 1945, and arrived at its destination on 23 March. This ship was employed mainly in laying and lifting moorings off the coast of Ceylon and in the Bay of Bengal and, in April 1945, she played a prominent part in laying a submerged pipeline at Chittagong, in that part of India that today is Bangladesh. With Trincomalee, Ceylon (the present-day Sri Lanka), as her base, the *Barbrake* also visited Madras (India), Colombo (Ceylon) and Akyalo (Burma, the present-day Myanmar).

On 20 July 1945, the *Barbrake* arrived at Rangoon in Burma. After removing parts of the Japanese boom defences there, as well as doing general work on buoys and moorings in the river channel, she sailed for South Africa at the beginning of December 1945. After an uneventful voyage, the *Barbrake* arrived back at Simon's Town on 12 January 1946.

With the struggle against Germany having ended in May 1945, the Allies concentrated all possible power against Japan. The SANF decided that all three of their 'Loch' Class frigates, which remained under the operational control of the Royal Navy, would be sent to the Far East. The HMSAS *Natal* and HMSAS *Good Hope* were tropicalized and certain other alterations were made to prepare them for service in the Far East. The sudden collapse of Japan, however, meant that only the *Natal* would serve in Eastern waters.

On 20 August 1945, after the nuclear bombs had been dropped on Japanese cities and after VJ Day, 15 August 1945, but before the signing of the formal surrender on 2 September, the HMSAS *Natal* left Durban. The ship arrived at Colombo in Ceylon on 1 September, having called at Diego Suarez along the way. Later that month, she escorted a convoy of 24 ships across the Bay of Bengal and through a cleared minefield in the Malacca Straits to Port Swettenham on the Malay Peninsula. She then escorted a small relief convoy to Singapore. Attached to the East Indies Escort Force, the *Natal* was given a number of assignments in and around Singapore and the Malacca Straits and participated in clearing-up operations in Burmese waters.

HMSAS *Natal* (Photo: By courtesy, SA Naval Museum)

Having taken part in the Allied occupation of Singapore and Malaya, the *Natal* was ordered to relieve the cruiser HMS *Nigeria* as guardship off the strategic island of Sabang, at the north-western tip of the island Sumatra. On 23 October 1945, the *Natal* sailed for home via Singapore, Colombo and Port Louis (Mauritius). The vessel arrived back in Durban on 30 November 1945 and received a resounding welcome.
Two Royal Navy vessels that served in the Far East in the war against Japan were entirely manned by SANF personnel. The purpose-built 'King Salvor' Class salvage ship, HMS Salvator remained the property of the British Admiralty, but was placed under SANF control, being taken over by the SANF at Naples on 31 August 1944. After doing stirling work in the Mediterranean, the Salvator sailed from Alexandria in Egypt for Durban on 24 March, where she arrived on 17 April. On 21 April, she left Durban and sailed via Port Louis and Colombo to Trincomalee, where she arrived on 12 May 1945 to join the British Eastern Fleet. The Salvator would have sailed to Freemantle in Australia but, en route on 24 May, she received instructions to proceed instead to Onslow in north-western Australia, where she refuelled and then sailed to Darwin. Escorted by two Australian fleet minesweepers, the Salvator and two tugs left Darwin on 19 June, with Admiral Floating Dock No 18 in tow. The small convoy sailed via Torres Strait to Milne Bay New Guinea, arriving there on 8 July 1945.

On 8 August 1945, the Salvator went to the assistance of a merchant ship that had encountered problems more than 200 km from Milne Bay, and safely brought her into port on 11 August. Three days later, the Salvator sailed for Manus Island, north of New Guinea, where she arrived on 19 August. On 30 August she left for Hong Kong, where she raised a Japanese tug and carried out a number of other salvage tasks, thereby rounding off the SANF's valuable contribution to wartime naval salvage. The SANF crew was gradually replaced by Royal Navy personnel, and the Salvator was handed back to the Royal Navy early in 1946, and the South African crewmen returned to the Union by naval transport.

Because of a shortage of manpower in the Royal Navy, the SANF agreed to man HMS Teviot and HMS Swale, 'River' Class anti-submarine frigates. After refitting, HMS Teviot was recommissioned with an all-SANF crew at Cape Town on 10 June 1945. Although manned and operated by the SANF, however, the vessel remained the property of the British Admiralty. On 19 June 1945, she sailed from Durban for Colombo, where she arrived via Diego Suarez on 2 July. There she joined the East Indies Escort Command in Colombo and, after being painted in Pacific Ocean camouflage colours, immediately began a four-week work-up period. She was then employed as a link and mark ship on the aircraft route between Colombo and Rangoon. However, her active role did not last long, because, while sailing up the Irrawaddy River on the way to Rangoon, she struck an unchartered submerged wreck of a Japanese gunboat, and suffered considerable underwater damage. The Teviot was patched up at Rangoon and repaired in a floating dry dock at Trincomalee and then returned to Durban, arriving on 21 December 1945. She was paid off on the same day.

By the time atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima (6 August 1945) and Nagasaki (9 August 1945), a total of 16 630 officers and men of the SAAF had volunteered for service against Japan; 5 411 in the Army had done likewise; as well as 1 350 SANF personnel.

Of these - not counting naval personnel seconded to the Royal Navy - only those members who served in the naval vessels that went to the East, 'saw action' against Japan, a figure of not more than about 400 officers and men, including those who served on board the two Royal Navy vessels with all-SANF crews. As far as could be ascertained, no black, coloured or Indian South Africans were sent to the Far East.

A total of at least 334 324 South Africans (men and women) of all races served in uniform as full-time volunteers in the UDF during the Second World War, both at home and/or abroad. Only 0.12% of these were sent on active service to the Eastern theatre and none of them saw action against the Japanese. On the other hand, more than 2 000 South Africans seconded to the Royal Navy saw action in the Far East. However, those thousands who manned South Africa's coastal and harbour defences, flew maritime reconnaissance sorties, and served on board the minesweepers and anti-submarine patrol craft in local waters, also guarded against potential Japanese attacks. From December 1941 onwards, local defences were geared to withstand the Japanese threat as much as the German and Italian threat. A total of 12 046 South Africans lost their lives during the war, including at least 75 (or 0.6% of the total) in the war against Japan, albeit sometimes indirectly, as in the case of the Madagascar campaign.

Conclusion

When, on 2 September 1945, the Japanese envoys signed the Instrument of Surrender on board the battleship USS Missouri, South Africa was represented by Comdr A P Cartwright of the SANF, the senior South African officer on the staff of Admiral Chester Nimitz, the Allied commander-in-chief in the Pacific Ocean. Although South African naval vessels were sent to the Far East shortly before the cessation of hostilities, UDF units and personnel were never in direct armed confrontation with Japanese forces, while South Africans seconded to the Royal Navy did fight against the Japanese. No Japanese military personnel set foot on African soil, no South Africans were captured by the Japanese, and UDF personnel were consequently spared the horrors of Japanese prisoner of war camps.
In relation to the role played by the Union in the overall Allied war effort during the Second World War, the country’s direct contribution towards the struggle against Japan was not very extensive. However, during the dark days experienced by the Allies in the months following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, South African ports played an important role in keeping the Allies supplied in the East and this role continued until the cessation of hostilities. The Union’s participation in the war against Japan led to the improvement of local defences as the country braced itself for a possible Japanese invasion. The war against Japan did not affect local politics or social matters in South Africa to any great extent, but it did contribute to the economic growth experienced during the war years.

For most of the nearly four years that the Allies fought against the Japanese, South Africa’s direct military role was negligible. However, the country did play a vital role in keeping the Cape sea-route to the Far East open, conquering Madagascar, supplying ships on their way to the East with fuel and stores, repairing ships where necessary, and exporting certain war items to the Allied forces in the Pacific region. South Africa participated in driving the Axis powers out of Africa, and contributed towards the defeat of Italy (September 1943) and Germany (May 1945), so that gradually more and more other Allied forces could be freed for action against Japan, bringing that aspect of the Second World War to a close with the signing of Japan’s unconditional surrender on Sunday, 2 September 1945.

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1. *Die Burger*, 10 December 1941, p 1; *The Star*, 10 December 1941, p 2
3. See, for example, *Die Burger*, 9 December 1941, p 4 editorial.
5. See, for example, N Orpen. *East African and Abyssinian Campaigns* (Cape Town, 1968); C Birkby, *It’s a long way to Addis* (London, 1943).
7. See, for example, N Orpen, *Victory in Italy* (Cape Town, 1975); H J Martin and N D Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*.’ The operations of the South African forces over the Mediterranean and Europe, in Italy, the Balkans and the Aegean, and from Gibraltar and West Africa (Cape Town, 1977).
8. See, for example, H J Martin and N D Orpen, *South Africa at war: Military and industrial organisation and operations in connection with the conduct of the war, 1939-1943* (Cape Town, 1979); J Chrys-Williams, *A country at war 1939-1945: The mood of a nation* (Rivonia, 1992).
10. When terms like ‘non-white’ and ‘coloured’ are sometimes used out of necessity, no negative connotation is implied.
11. See, for example, Department of Historical Papers (University of the Witwatersrand Library, Johannesburg), South African Institute for Race Relations Collection, BS6.1: ‘A draft manifesto’; Killie Campbell Africana Library (Durban), G H Nicholls Papers, File No 48 (War Debates); Document KCM 3755, p 4.
12. As far as the role of ‘non-white’ South Africans during the war is concerned, see, for example, L W F Grundlingh, *The participation of South African blacks in the Second World War* (DLitt et Phil thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, 1986).
30. See *infra* for more details.
98. Martin and Orpen, *SA at war*, p 344.
100. Doming, 'A concise history of the SADF', p 16.

Footnote added in May 2007: there is a description of some minesweeping operations in the Tomalin diaries - see Home page.

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