

# Halifax Herald

November 2018

## **The feminine touch**

The Robben Island Swans

**World War I**  
Facts and trivia

## **We will remember them**

The 100th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice



From the  
**editor's**  
desk

I'm writing this on 5 November, Guy Fawkes day, and I'm not sure if it's my imagination, but it's damn cold.

This Sunday sees the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice. Admiral Halifax Shellhole will be attending the Remembrance Day ceremony at Rosedale this year. Mainly because this is where we meet for our shellhole meetings.

Listen, I'm not kidding when I say that some of you in the shellhole need to start contributing an article or two for our newsletter. Otherwise there will not be a newsletter. Come on, you must have at least one story to tell - either about being a Moth or from your service days.

Can you believe that next month will be Christmas? I also cannot believe that it's been 100 years since the end of World War I. As a youngster I got to meet quite a few people that actually fought in the Great War. Naturally they are all long gone.

Until next month. YUTTH.

*Matt*

### What's in this month's issue?

Once again, thanks to Servaas for another interesting article.

On page 3 this month there is a story from Servaas about the Swans that served on Robben Island during World War II.

I bet that when they were there they never imagined that a future president of South Africa would be imprisoned there, nor that the island would one day become a World Heritage Sight.

On page 8 there are some facts and trivia from World War I. I hope you find them interesting.

Those are the only two articles in the month's issue. Next month (December) we will have a bumper issue for you.

On page 13 is an important notice. Please make sure you read it.

Finally, on the back page, is a cartoon from World War I.

### FRONT COVER

Over the top. British troops advance on German trenches during World War I. Few of these attacks ever achieved any success and they were the cause of thousands of casualties.

# The **Femine** touch

*The World War II Swans of Robben Island.*

By **Servaas van Breda**.

In a previous article the birth of the SWANS were discussed. This article is dedicated to those who served on Robben Island.

By the end of 1944 there were about 150 Harbour Defence Operators, chosen after a Disciplinary Course, for their educational standard and then placed in groups of 30 on a four week technical course. Many were later employed and quartered in isolated places, and several senior ratings carried out their duties which, in other countries, would have been performed by officers. They gave excellent service.

Ideally a SWAN attended a Disciplinary Course immediately after attestation but it was not possible in the case of the training of the clerical, founder SWANS, who did so once a Training Reserve had been built up.

Very few concessions were made to SWANS on the grounds of them being female, but it was felt was felt by them to be an enormous privilege to be one.

Their Disciplinary Course was held at HMSAS Unitie, which was under command of the Legendary Cdr. W.J. Copenhagen.

The course covered: learning naval terms and language; paying of compliments (saluting) on encountering upper-deck personal of all three forces; mov-

ing about in disciplined marching order and generally getting to know what the SANF was all about.

Naval customs, times, bells and watches, types of ships and parts of a ship, ranks and ratings, upkeep of kit and dress, ect., were also included. For most SWANS this first course (two weeks beginning on 18th October) was felt to be too short.

In spite of the blistered feet (new shoes and much drilling), blistered hands (boat pulling), 'and the modicum of sarcasm from the parade ground instructors' which were not always understood. They were quartered in the WAAS barracks, Wynberg and travelled to town by train each day and thence by military transport to Unitie to be 'genned up'.

Included in the Disciplinary Course was the Higher Education Test, the purpose of which was seem inly to show each individual's ability to think. The SANF Sub-Depot on Robben Island was the training establishment for all A/SFD personnel: officers, ratings and SWANS, even though it was also an operational station.

The first SWANS arrived on the island in November 1943 to commence training as watch keepers on the anti-submarine fixed defences-the loop system and Asdics. Most of the Asdic-operators manning the station at the time were Royal

Naval personnel, including the Officer Commanding, Lt Cdr G.J. Perkins, RNR.

The ratings had a great time playing practical jokes on the young girls.

On first arrival at Murray's Bay they were met by Chief Petty Officer Peggy Forbes; resplendent with brass buttoned cuff and badge lapels. She was a slim girl with short wavy hair, affirm bracing manner and unwavering eye - a 'crusher' in very best tradition'.

The ship's company of the Sub Depot was divided into watches under an Officer-of-the-Watch and a Petty Officer, a Swan who had taken the advance course to qualify as a HDO2. There was never a Swan Officer on the Island, but Swan CPO Forbes served there from December 1943-July 1945 as the Senior Swan Rating on Robben Island station.

She was largely responsible for regulating, welfare and discipline and accordance to citation for the British Empire medal which she was later awarded: 'She.....carried out her duties with tact, energy and great success'.

Her duties were possibly better described as a mixture of house keeper, nurse and police woman.

Regulations regarding dress and hairstyle and nail varnish were very strict, naval discipline was, in fact hard. It says a lot for those young ladies that they joined up voluntarily, to forego the comforts of home life for service under conditions they were quite unused to and which made few concessions to their gender.

Quarters had been prepared for them in mid-October in the ASWAAS bunga-

lows from whence they were transported each day by 'troopie' (presumably the ubiquitous three ton truck of which the defence force had thousands) to lectures at the Sub Depot.

Lt Andrew McGregor was the HDO's 'schoolie', a teacher by profession, he was later COSDR and finally ASFIDO(SA).

When the first Swans reached the Island and were attached to NSDRI they had to learn 'Elementary Electrics', a completely foreign subject to most if not all. Those who had done science and mathematics at school were at a distinct advantage when wrestling with such concepts as the displacement from one atom to another: or the meaning of such terms as potential, EMF, ohms and microfarads.

This accounted for the very careful selection of candidates for the job and the almost inflexible insistence that they matriculated. So they gaily floundered about in Faraday's Experiment and Ohm's Law, worked their way through the Leclanche Cell and inert cell, to the accumulators and condensers.

They leaned of the cables on the seabed and connected by tail-cables to the Box, Balancing, Pattern No 2327, and Box Adjusting, Pattern No 2324; the Integrator A/C 91, and all the other instruments in the Instrument Room.

These they were told, registered whenever a considerable magnetized body crossed the cables. The impulses were registered through a delicately poisoned pen dotting a path over a slowly revolving paper roll. Deviations to either side of



**ROBBEN ISLAND:** During the Second World War the island was fortified and BL 9.2-inch guns and 6-inch guns were installed as part of the defences for Cape Town.

the central dotted line indicated a crossing by a ship or a submarine. Deviation was what the watch-keepers watched for.

The loop system, wrote one Swan, was simple to understand since it was based on principle of a galvanometer, provided, of course, that one did not become bogged down in the finer points of photoelectric cells, heterodyne valves and the like!

In their HDO3 Course it was necessary to learn ship recognition. The became familiar with ships: battleships, aircraft carriers, destroyers ect., and leaned about the rake of masts, the funnels, the radar fittings; liners, tankers, cargo ships, tugs and all the everyday merchant ships and the one they saw frequently of all, was the blunt outline of the Liberty ship.

This ship was perhaps the most remarkable result of a strategic naval planning. It was mass-produced in sections

at different factories, brought to the shipyards of Henry J. Kaiser and welded together.

They were often seen steaming up and down the degaussing range. Watch keeping involved manning the Asdic sets and the loop instruments and the operators changed every half hour.

Asdic operators could become 'ping happy' and when the noise of the ships engines were heard operators hoped the vessel would not pass directly over the transducer as the noise could be quite deafening.

Cabins were always spic-and-span as was the Mess Hall including tables, benches and floors. These were regularly scrubbed by the girls, windows were cleaned and even 'painting ship' was undertaken at times by the watch on duty but not actually on Watch.

But one of the buildings in which the



**SWANS:** This photograph is of a group of SA Navy Swans that visited HMS Vanguard in 1947, two years after World War II ended.

Swans were accommodated was called 'Worse to Putrid'. It really was that, unattractive place. 'Worse to Putrid' had been named by some previous occupant, probably Army Personnel, and there was a sign over the door to perpetuate the name. It was a non-descript old building, difficult to keep clean, as more than one Swan recorded, it was full of strange noises at night. The wind moaned through the sash windows, and floor would creak, 'and deep chill would descend on the building at night'.

As the war progressed the activities of the Swans expanded. Among other things they took over minefield duties, not only in Cape Town but at Saldanha and other coastal ports.

The sea was much on the minds of the Swans, not only watching over it day after day, recording sounds of Astic signatures from the loops, but also travelling over it to and from Cape Town docks and the Island.

Most journeys on Liberty Watch (shore leave of about 36 hours once a week) were made in the Isie. It was sometimes a 'wet' trip and some girls stepping off the Isie at Cape Town had embarrassing experiences as a result. The earlier issues of their white uniforms were made of heavy material and difficult to iron, but the later issues, although easier to iron became instantly 'see through' when wet.

On arrival at the East Pier it was a long walk to town, and more so if the

Robertson Dry-dock was open and the long detour around the dry-dock had to be made.

Sometimes one was able to catch a bus and on one occasion a group of Swans walked behind a horse drawn dray, putting their cases on the back to give their arms a rest. The driver was unaware of this and once out of the dock gate and into Dock Road he whipped up the horses to the alarm of the girls who had to run after him shouting for him to stop.

Even sitting in a vehicle with boxes of frozen fish was better than the long walk to town.

When the Coast Batteries were placed into the care and maintenance and the last of the ASWAAS girls had left the Island, the Swans had it all to themselves and believed the Island 'belonged to them'. 'Polley's Perch' was abandoned and they took over the artillery BOP, using only the top floor where very fortunately for them the binoculars still formed part of the equipment.

They were able to keep watch from a far more comfortable and weather friendly 'perch'. At 16:00 a signal on the afternoon of Tuesday, 26th July, arrived at the Naval Sub-Depot ordering the closure of the Sub-Depot.



**SECURE:** From 1961 Robben Island became a prison for political prisoners and convicted criminals.

The Lower Deck was cleared and Lt 'Mac' McGregor read the signal to all ranks. He went to switch off the engines, while at the same time the flag was lowered and raised again.

The silence, it has been recorded, was awful. The Swans had been so used to the steady drone of the engines that 'it seemed as if someone had died! Lucy's Log records.

In writing his final report on the history of achievements of the Swans, Lt 'Mac' McGregor stated: Before the Swans came to the Island I had RN and SANF ratings under me on the A/S instruments; but I can honestly say that the Swans beat them absolutely. The standard of watch keeping that you girls reached was much higher than that of the men, as was your behaviour off duty. Maintenance of the instruments was not as good as the male ratings, but a few had in any event, been kept on strength for this purpose.

# Remembering World War I

*11 November this year marks the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice, bringing World War I to an end.*

It was called ‘The Great War’ and ‘The War to end all Wars’. Later it became known simply as World War I.

From 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918 more than 70 million military personnel were mobilised in one of the largest wars in history.

It was a war fought on a global scale and would result in the deaths of over nine million combatants and seven million civilians.

It was one of the deadliest conflicts in history, and paved the way for major political changes, including revolutions in many of the nations involved.

It would also contribute to the start of the Second World War only twenty-one years later.

Here are some facts, figures and trivia from World War I.

- More than 70 million men from 30 countries fought in WWI. Nearly 10 million died. The Allies (The Entente Powers) lost about six million soldiers. The Central Powers lost about four million.
- Nearly two-thirds of military deaths in World War I were in battle. In previous conflicts, most deaths were due to disease.
- Germans were the first to use

flamethrowers in WWI. Their flamethrowers could fire jets of flame as far as 40 metres.

- Artillery barrage and mines created immense noise. In 1917, explosives blowing up beneath the German lines on Messines Ridge at Ypres in Belgium could be heard in London, 220 km away.
- The Pool of Peace is a 12 metre deep lake near Messines, Belgium. It fills a crater made in 1917 when the British detonated a mine containing 45 tons of explosives under the German lines.
- Big Bertha was a 48-ton howitzer used by the Germans in World War I. It was named after the wife of its designer Gustav Krupp. It could fire a 930 kg shell a distance of 15 km. However, it took a crew of 200 men six hours or more to assemble. Germany had 13 of these huge guns or “wonder weapons.”
- Tanks were initially called “landships.” However, in an attempt to disguise them as water storage tanks rather than as weapons, the British decided to code name them “tanks.”
- “Little Willie” was the first prototype tank in World War I. Built in 1915, it carried a crew of three and

could travel as fast as 4.8 km/h.

- During World War I British tanks were initially categorized into “males” and “females.” Male tanks had cannons, while females had heavy machine guns.
- The war left thousands of soldiers disfigured and disabled. Reconstructive surgery was used to repair facial damage, but masks were also used to cover the most horrific disfigurement. Some soldiers stayed in nursing homes their entire lives.
- World War I helped hasten medical advances. Physicians learned better wound management and the setting of bones. Harold Gillies, an English doctor, pioneered skin graft surgery. The huge scale of those who needed medical care in World War I helped teach physicians and nurses the advantages of specialization and professional management.
- Russia mobilised 12 million troops during World War I, making it the largest army in the war. More than three-quarters were killed, wounded, or went missing in action.
- For the span of World War I, from 1914-1918, 274 German U-boats sank 6,596 ships. The five most successful U-boats were U-35 (sank 224 ships), U-39 (154 ships), U-38 (137 ships), U-34 (121 ships), and U-33 (84 ships). Most of these were sunk near the coast, particularly in the English Channel.
- German trenches were in stark contrast to British trenches. German trenches were built to last and included bunk beds, furniture, cupboards, water tanks with taps, electric lights, and even doorbells.
- France, not Germany, was the first country to use gas against enemy troops in World War I. In August 1914, they fired the first tear gas grenades (xylyl bromide) against





**HOME SWEET HOME:** A British soldier stands guard in a section of trench. These trenches served as home for most troops.

- the Germans.
- In January 1915, Germany first used tear gas against Russian armies, but the gas turned to liquid in the cold air. In April 1915, the Germans were the first to use poisonous chlorine gas.
- During World War I, the Germans released about 68,000 tons of gas, and the British and French released 51,000 tons. In total, 1,200,000 soldiers on both sides were gassed, of which 91,198 died horrible deaths.
- Approximately 30 different poisonous gases were used during World War I. Soldiers were told to hold a urine-soaked cloth over their faces in an emergency. By 1918, gas masks with filter respirators usually provided effective protection. At the end of the war, many countries signed treaties outlawing chemical weapons.
- World War I introduced the widespread use of the machine gun, a weapon Hiram Maxim patented in the U.S. in 1884. The Maxim weighed just over 45 kg and was water cooled. It could fire about 450-600 rounds per minute. Most machine guns used in World War I were based on the Maxim design.
- The term “dogfight” originated during World War I. The pilot had to turn off the plane’s engine from time to time so it would not stall when the plane turned quickly in the air. When a pilot restarted his engine mid-air, it sounded like dogs barking.
- Millions of soldiers suffered

“shell shock,” or post traumatic stress disorder, due to the horrors of trench warfare. Shell-shocked men often had uncontrollable diarrhoea, couldn’t sleep, stopped speaking, whimpered for hours, and twitched uncontrollably. While some soldiers recovered, others suffered for the rest of their lives.

- On Christmas Eve in 1914, soldiers on both sides of the Western Front sang carols to each other. On Christmas Day troops along two-thirds of the Front declared a truce. In some places the truce lasted a week. A year later, sentries on both sides were ordered to shoot anyone who attempted a

repeat performance. The British High Command ordered artillery bombardments to start on Christmas Eve and carry on for three days.

- Margaretha Zelle (1876-1917), also known as Mata Hari, was a Dutch exotic dancer accused of being a double agent. Though she always denied being a spy, the French executed her in 1917.
- The most decorated American of World War I was Alvin Cullum York (1887-1964). York led an attack on a German gun nest, taking 32 machine guns, killing 28 German soldiers, and capturing 132 more. He returned home with a Medal of Honor, a promo-



**FLANDERS FIELDS:** A section of No-man’s land between the trenches.



**DOGFIGHT:** World War I saw the introduction of the aircraft as a new weapon.

tion to Sergeant, the French *Croix de Guerre*, and a gift of 400 acres of good farmland.

- Even though the U.S. government didn't grant Native Americans citizenship until 1924, nearly 13,000 of them served in World War I.
- More than 200,000 African Americans served in World War I, but only about 11 percent of them were in combat forces. The rest were put in labour units, loading cargo, building roads, and digging ditches. They served in segregated divisions (the 92nd and 93rd) and trained separately.
- The Harlem Hell Fighters were one of the few African American units that saw the front lines. For their extraordinary acts of heroism, the soldiers received the French *Croix de Guerre*, a medal awarded to soldiers from Allied countries for bravery in combat. However, in the U.S their deeds were largely ignored.
- The trench network of World War I stretched approximately 40,200 km from the English Channel to Switzerland. The area was known as the Western Front. British poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote, "When all is done and said, the war was mainly a matter of holes and ditches."
- World War I was also known as the Great War, the World War, the War of the Nations, and the War to End All Wars.
- World War I is the sixth deadliest conflict in world history.

# Pay attention!

**There is no Shellhole meeting on Saturday 10 November. It will be on Saturday 17 November.**



**The Shellhole will be attending the Remembrance Day Parade at Rosedale. Please be there by 10h00. Attendance is compulsory.**

**Nothing much changes, no matter what war.**



**“Join the army, they says to me. See the world, they says to me. All I’ve bloody seen is the same piece of no-man’s land for the past six months.”**