

# It Took 15 Years to Save MT-2800



Westlake 2006 – Manually unloading MT2800 at Westlake College - Photo by: Guy Ellis

## Guy Ellis

After decades of neglect and threat of destruction MT2800 has a proper home and a future. Last month the restoration and preservation of a 1941 24ft marine tender was at last assured.

MT 2800 was built by British Power Boat Company at their Hythe yard as a 24ft marine Tender Mk II and was assigned the Yard number 1961. She was completed and taken on charge by the RAF at 62 MU Dumbarton on 24 September 1941, allocated the RAF hull number 2800 and was immediately allocated for service in Durban in South Africa, arriving there in late 1941.

She served until the 1990s and then languished in various locations, her continued survival fought for by a few dedicated individuals who passed on the baton of care from one to the other.

Durban Harbour on the East coast of South Africa is renowned as a major port, but from the 1930s to the late 1950s it was an important hub for civilian and military flying boats. Imperial Airways Short C class, which opened the first commercial air route to Europe, and warlike Sunderland and Catalina flying boats that watched over the convoys of World War II and ships in peace time, used the harbour as a base.

The MT was assigned to Durban to support the flying boat service between South Africa and Great Britain and then to 262 Squadron RAF from November 1942.

Initially operating Consolidated Catalina aircraft, the squadron patrolled the increasingly busy Indian Ocean, watching for U boats and giving assistance to vessels in distress.

The many ship convoys that stopped in Durban for resupply interfered with flying and the RAF operations were moved to Langebaan on the west coast and St Lucia in the then Zululand in 1943. The Catalinas were gradually being replaced by the large Short Sunderland Mk 5, which drew over five foot of water and St Lucia proved to be too shallow. Looking for deeper water the Squadron moved to Umsingazi toward the end of 1944.

RAF records show that 1961/MT2800 was based at St Lucia in 1943 and it is probable that she moved to the new base in 1944. Contemporary photographs show a number of similar vessels tied up to the Squadron jetty.

By 1945 there were so many South Africans on strength that it was decided to transfer the squadron to the SAAF and it became 35 Squadron SAAF. Once again, operations returned to Congella in Durban. However the planes were not allowed to land in Durban at night for fear of colliding with the fishing boats active in the harbour and the Umsingazi base was retained as an alternative alighting facility.



Safely at the Armscor Apprentice Training Centre -Lt Cdr Steyn with Mr Mogamad Fisher of Armscor

With the war over, the famous SAAF shuttle service was put in place to bring the troops home. One route was flown by the flying boats from Cairo to Durban. During November and December 1945 it was recorded that 1022 troops had been brought home and 72526 lbs or 32966kgs of Christmas packages delivered to the waiting men in Egypt.

The last Sunderland left North Africa on 26 February 1946 with the commander of the South African 6th Armoured Division, Major General Evered Poole, on board.

Records show that MT2800 was based in Congella in February 1945 and it is possible that she was used to transport many of these returning soldiers from flying boat to shore.

Although the days of flying boats drew to close in the 1950s the SAAF retained some elements of its maritime unit that had saved over 600 lives during the war. MT2800 served at Langebaan lagoon attached to the No 1 Motor Boat Squadron and was then transferred to No 3 Motor Boat Flight along with 3 SAAF 63ft Miami class high speed launches and two dinghies on 5 December 1956.

Service continued with the Air Force until the Navy took over the marine unit in 1969. MT 2800 was eventually 'Struck Off Charge' by the South African Navy in 1990. In SAN service she

was painted grey with a green deck, yellow engine cover and displayed her number in yellow on the bow. For a short time she was used as a pleasure craft and was painted blue and christened *Cameron L*, the name she still carried into the new century.

Willie Burger, of the West Coast SAAFA, saved the boat from destruction when the tender was up for disposal in 1997. He highlighted its historical importance and made plans for its preservation. Funding was difficult and there were ideas that using her as a pleasure cruiser would pay for the upkeep, but these plans failed. She was stored undercover in a set of open sheds within a secure lockup outside the Langebaan Air Force Base, where she suffered very little damage, but was under continual threat of a scrapping order.

The Old Boat Trust was established by Guy Ellis in 2003 to preserve the boat. For two years various schemes and ideas were explored to find a location or organisation that could provide a secure future for MT2800. Westlake Technical College came to the rescue. The College had established a shipwrights' school and agreed to take the boat on as an educational project. One hot February day in 2006 the SAAF provided a large truck and staff to load the boat and drove it south to Westlake. Unloading a two and a half ton boat and its cradle took a great deal of ingenuity and muscle power, as there were no heavy lifting capabilities at the College. Through brute force, clever thinking and care MT2800 was put under cover.

At this stage she represented the last vestige of an RAF link to Westlake, which, during the war, had served as barracks to the RAF personnel who served on the SAAF air-sea rescue launches. It is a good possibility that some men who had been accommodated at Westlake had, at some stage, driven or been transported by MT2800.

Modern day boat building does not demand the skills needed to work on a clinker built wooden marine tender. There was no space in the curriculum for work on the boat and it remained untouched, luckily mostly undercover and reasonably secure.

By the end of 2009 it was clear that a new location had to be found. Richard Hellyer began to investigate the feasibility of returning the boat to the UK for the Portsmouth Naval Trust. There were no funds for the building of a new cradle or to cover the costs of shipment on a container vessel.

When it was clear that MT2800 would remain in South Africa, Charles Hellyer took on the task of finding a solution. These ranged from a private organisation to mounting the boat at the entrance to the collage as a gate guard. The former would not have ensured her existence as an artefact of military history and



Sunderland - A 35 SQN Sunderland lies moored at the base at Congella. The aircraft's name painted on her nose is 'Little Zulu Lulu'. Launch 999 is a sister ship to 2800 (Lebbeus Laybutt and FAD)

the latter was fraught with issues around protecting the boat from the elements and vandalism. Contact was made with the South African Navy in November 2011, and through the efforts of Lt Cdr Leon Steyn of the SA Navy Museum, she was moved to Simon's Town Naval Base on 6 September 2012. Here, she will be restored over three years as part of the Armscor apprentice scheme, and be placed on display when complete.

### Bibliography

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Langebaanweg – Herman Els, Matrass van Staden and Col Jacques Niemann



Zulu Jetty – boats at the Umsingazi base jetty (Robert Page and FAD)



Removal 2012 – MT2800 being removed from Westlake to the SAN Museum in Simon's Town (Leon Steyn)