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***SS Mendi* Memorial reminds us of courage, volunteerism, national pride**

*Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price delivered this speech
at the rededication of the memorial to the SS Mendi on Sunday, 19 October 2014*

Welcome to the University of Cape Town, and to this special ceremony to rededicate the memorial to the *SS Mendi*. Today we remember the 616 South African men who died during the sinking of the ship on 21 February 1917. This ceremony acknowledges the upgrade of the memorial with a roll of honour and interpretive material, sponsored by UCT. This rededication will open the way for annual military services to be held in honour of these men, who are now officially (and finally) recognised as veterans.

The presence of a memorial to a military troopship on UCT's Lower Campus may seem unusual to some people. The men we are remembering today did not attend the university. Nor was the university located anywhere near here – it was located in town. In fact, this property belonged to the Rosebank Show Grounds in 1917, when the troops of the South African Native Labour Contingent were billeted here before they were shipped to France to aid the war effort. For those who died overseas, this was where they spent their last night in South Africa. (The property did not become part of the university until 1928.)

So the relationship between UCT and the *SS Mendi* could be seen as an accident of history. Yet we feel privileged that this accident of history has provided us with the opportunity to educate students, staff and the public about our history, our common heritage, to recognise the values of courage and volunteerism, national pride, and putting the needs of society above one's own needs, even sacrificing life for a greater cause.

The story of the *SS Mendi* puts into stark relief the different experiences of black and white volunteers during both world wars. Black South African volunteers saw service in both wars, but many of them were not allowed to carry arms. This is true of the men of the SA Native Labour Corps who sailed on the *SS Mendi*. As a result of their non-combatant status, they were listed as war veterans only recently.

They were recruited by the Department of Native Affairs from the Eastern Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Basutoland. They were attracted by the pay, incentives and the adventure: many told of being promised a bicycle on their return. They were also encouraged to volunteer by their own chiefs – some of whom also joined up. Interestingly, because the South African were not willing to have black soldiers as part of their troops, these men were enlisted in the British forces and were paid a higher rate than the South African white soldiers. This raised some eyebrows in the press at that time and highlights the ambiguity in the government's relationship to the black, disenfranchised recruits whom, for ideological reasons, they could not regard as motivated by noble motives such as loyalty, and whom they did not want to allow to acquire entitlements to citizenship through their having fought or served the nation.

As we know, the sinking of the *SS Mendi* happened in 1917 – so why a ceremony in 2014? It is, of course, because at the centennial of the start of World War One, it is appropriate to commemorate more generally those who lost their lives in that war. It also coincides with the recent completion of the reconstruction and upgrading of this memorial.

While UCT's involvement at the time with the *SS Mendi* men was non-existent, the university was very much affected by the war effort. Figures from the Official History of South Africa's World War One involvement show that 146,000 white men, 400 white female nurses, 45,000 African men and 15,000 Coloured men served. War death casualties from action, illness and accidents amounted to 12,500, (about 8%) mostly occurring in France during battle. A significant proportion of the casualty balance was incurred by troops of all races who succumbed to tropical diseases during the German East Africa campaign.

I would like to note as well the participation of armed Coloured volunteers in the Cape Corps. They were recruited from December 1915 as a battalion of infantry who fought under Imperial Command in both German East Africa and against the Turks in then Palestine. During World War Two, they also fought in the North African campaign. The Cape Corps Memorial inside the Cape Town City Hall highlights the honour they received for their service. Besides the infantry, thousands of other

Coloured troops also served as labourers and in units like the Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport.

UCT students and staff members also participated in the Great War, World War One. As many as 929 UCT students, ex-students and staff volunteered for active military service, both in SA and England. Of these, 130 were killed in action – nearly one in seven.

Today UCT students continue to serve their country in the armed forces and Military Health Services. In the last five years, 24 UCT students from various disciplines have completed their basic training and officer courses through the University Reserve Training Programme. Last year, five UCT Engineering students passed from phase one of the University Reserve Training Programme and into the Officers Course. This programme attracts students with special skills such as medicine, engineering, science and law. These students give up their evenings, weekends and holidays to be trained as Reservist Officers.

UCT is proud of these students. We are honoured to have the memorial to the *SS Mendi* on university property, where thousands of students see it as they walk past it each day; and to be co-host to this ceremony today, to remind us of those who made the choice to serve their country and who paid such a high cost.

And now I welcome to the podium the Director General of Defence and Military Veterans, Mr TE Motumi.

END

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