



16 October 2014

Rededication of *SS Mendi* Memorial to mark SA's heritage of courage

Department of Military Veterans, UCT to host ceremony to remember 616 South Africans who perished in WW1 tragedy

11h00 on Sunday, 19 October 2014 in UCT Lower Campus, Cecil Road, Rosebank

Speakers: Dr Max Price, Vice-Chancellor of UCT, and Deputy Minister of Defence and Military Veterans, Mr Kebby Maphatsoe

For media accreditation, please email pat.lucas@uct.ac.za or phone 021 650 5428

Reports of how hundreds of South African men met their death bravely as the *SS Mendi* sank in 1917 are now part of South Africa's cultural heritage. These men will be remembered at the rededication and memorial service to be hosted by the Department of Military Veterans and the University of Cape Town at 11h00 on Sunday, 19 October 2014 in UCT Lower Campus, Cecil Road Extension, in Rosebank, Cape Town.

According to reports of survivors, members of the Fifth Battalion of South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC) danced barefoot on the tilting deck of the *SS Mendi* before she plunged beneath the ocean. This legend was dramatised by playwright Lara Foot in *Did We Dance: Ukutshona ko Mendi (The Sinking of the Mendi)*, based on the novel *Black Valour* by Norman Clothier.

Members of the Fifth Battalion spent their last night in South Africa billeted where UCT's Lower Campus now stands (previously the old Rosebank Show Grounds). They sailed from Cape Town to assist the British in World War One. On the morning of 21 February 1917, just south of the Isle of Wight, on the way to Le Havre, France, the 4,000 ton steamship *SS Mendi* was rammed and almost cut in half by an 11,000 ton liner, the *SS Darro*. The *SS Mendi* sank in 20 minutes.

This rededication coincides with the centenary year of the beginning of World War One. This ceremony is the precursor to a memorial service to take place in 2017, marking the centenary of the sinking of the *SS Mendi*. Only white and coloured troops were awarded the standard Victory and Service Medals at the conclusion of the war. The Department of

Military Veterans is seeking surviving relatives of the men who died on the *SS Mendi*, to include them in the service that will mark the 100th anniversary of the tragedy.

Acts of bravery

A total of 647 people died that morning, of whom 616 were South Africans. Among those who passed away were three Pondoland chiefs: Henry Bokleni, Dokoda Richard Ndamase and Mxonywa Bangani; and the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, who accompanied the troops as chaplain. According to reports, Reverend Dyobha calmed the troops and inspired them to dance, saying: "What is happening now is what you came to do ... you are going to die, but that is what you came to do ... I, a Xhosa, say you are my brothers ... Swazis, Pondos, Basotho ... so let us die like brothers."

Other reports spoke of Joseph Tshite, a schoolmaster from near Pretoria, who encouraged the drowning men in the waters around him with hymns and prayers until he, too, died; and of two black troops who supported a white sergeant and swam with him until they found a place for him on a piece of flotsam.

Memorial designed by Madi Phala

The Memorial to the *SS Mendi* was installed in 2006 at the southeast corner Cecil Road Extension, where the ceremony will take place. This year the Department of Military Veterans sponsored an upgrade of the memorial, including a roll of honour and interpretive material. This rededication is required in order to proceed with normal annual services in honour of the men that passed away on the vessel.

The *Sunday Times* newspaper commissioned the original memorial design by artist Madi Phala, who was born in Springs in 1955. In 2007 he was murdered during a robbery in Langa, at the age of 52. Phala's works can be found in a number of private collections, including DeBeers in London and Renault South Africa. On his passing, a friend of Phala, fellow artist Roderick Sauls, laid a bed of sea stones around Phala's artwork to protect it and pay tribute to him. In honour of Phala's memory, sea stones will be available on Sunday to be laid around the memorial alongside flowers and wreaths.

The memorial depicts the skeleton of a sinking ship. Lined up in front of the prow are depicted the different hats and helmets of those who died, etched with their troop numbers. These elements— the steel hull and bronzed caps and helmets – were welded onto a metal frame which lies 30cm beneath the ground and is set into a concrete slab. The artist wanted the memorial to be flat on the ground, to become part of the environment.

Black South Africans in WWI

About 21,000 black South Africans, all of whom were volunteers, served in France with the SANLC between 1916 and 1918. They dug quarries, laid and repaired roads and railway lines, and cut tons of timber. Most of the men were employed in Le Havre, Rouen and Dieppe, where they unloaded supply ships and loaded trains with supplies for the battlefield. Of these men, 333 died in France during the war.

An information sheet follows this release with background information on the *SS Mendi*.

To be accredited for this event as a member of the media, please email pat.lucas@uct.ac.za or phone Pat Lucas on 021 650 5428 or 076 292 8047.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Patricia Lucas

Manager: Media Liaison & Communications
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Tel: (021) 650 5428

E-mail: Pat.Lucas@uct.ac.za

About the SS Mendi

(Information sourced from the Southafrica.info *Sunday Times* Heritage page and "They died like warriors: tale of the SS Mendi" from the *Independent UK*)

Questions

How can family members of the troops on the *SS Mendi* make contact with the Department of Military Veterans?

What happened to the *SS Mendi*?

Who was aboard the *SS Mendi*?

Who died in the collision?

Story of Reverend Isaac Williams Wauchope Dyobha

Answers

Family members are requested to contact their nearest DMV Provincial Co-Ordinator. A directory is provided at the end of this document.

The *SS Mendi* was carrying South African Native Labour Corporals - to assist the British in World War 1 - from Cape Town to La Havre, France. On the morning of 21 February 1917, just south of the Isle of Wight, the 4,000 ton steamship was rammed and almost cut in half by an 11,000 ton liner, the *SS Darro*. The *SS Mendi* sank in 20 minutes. The captain of the *SS Darro*, HW Stump, took no steps to aid the drowning soldiers of the *SS Mendi* and was later disciplined for travelling at a speed through fog without sounding a warning horn. Lifeboats from the *SS Mendi's* escorting destroyer, *HMS Brisk*, rowed among survivors, trying to rescue them.

Fifth Battalion of South African Native Labour Contingent, officers and crew members.

647 people died that morning. 616 were South Africans, of whom 607 were black troops and nine, white officers. Among those who passed away were the Pondoland chiefs Henry Bokleni, Dokoda Richard Ndamase, Mxonywa Bangani and the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha.

According to legend, Reverend Dyobha, the chaplain of the troops, calmed them as the ship was sinking. He cried out, "Be quiet and calm, my countrymen. What is happening now is what you came to do ... you are going to die, but that is what you came to do ... I, a Xhosa, say you are my brothers ... Swazis, Pondos, Basotho ... so let us die like brothers. We are the sons of Africa Raise your war cries my brothers, for though they made us leave our assegais back in the kraals, our voices are left with our bodies."

Later, the voices of men dying from hypothermia in the sea could be heard through the fog, calling out: "Ho, 'so-and-so', child of my mother, are you dead that you do not hear my voice?"

Dyobha was described as the quintessential missionary-educated African of the late 19th and early 20th century. In September 1882 he played a key role in establishing *Imbumba Yamanyama*, one of the earliest political associations for Africans in South Africa. In literary history Dyobha is credited with launching protest literature in South Africa. In May 1882, writing as IW Citashe, he published his first poem. The poem exhorts Africans, after decades of resistance, to abandon their spears, which were no match for European weapons, and adopt other means, such as protest and persuasion.

His poem reads, in part:

Your rights are taken away!
Grab a pen,
Load, load it with ink ...
Shoot with the pen ...
Engage your mind.

Other legends of the *SS Mendi*

Another legend is that of the "death dance", as the men of the labour contingent performed one last, barefooted, dance on the tilting deck of the *SS Mendi* before she plunged beneath the ocean.

Then there was Joseph Tshite, a schoolmaster from near Pretoria, who encouraged the drowning men in the waters around him with hymns and prayers until he, too, succumbed.

A white sergeant is said to have been supported by two black compatriots, who swam with him and found place for him on a piece of flotsam.

Role of descendants of victims of the *SS Mendi*

Only white and coloured troops were awarded the standard Victory and Service Medals at the conclusion of the war.

In preparation for the WW1 centenary SANDF is considering striking a new medal for SANLC descendants using the *SS Mendi* centenary as an appropriate peg on which to hang the initiative.

Why was the memorial designed?

The memorial was originally created to commemorate the sinking of the *SS Mendi*. It formed part of the Sunday Times heritage project, which commemorates newsmakers over the past 100 years.

Why is the memorial at UCT?

The grounds on which the memorial is situated was previously the old Rosebank Show Grounds. It was here that the men aboard the *SS Mendi* were bivouacked the night before their voyage.

	<p>These men spent their last night in South Africa billeted where UCT's Baxter, Graça Machel and Kopano residences and the soccer field now stand. For this reason the Memorial to the SS Mendi stands at the southeast corner of the soccer field in front of the Fitness Centre in Lower Campus.</p>
<p>Why is the memorial being rededicated?</p>	<p>2014 signifies the centenary of World War One. Upgrades to the original memorial site (installed in 2006, commissioned by the Sunday Times newspaper) , including a roll of honour and interpretive material, have been concluded and now a rededication is required in order to proceed with normal annual services in honour of the men that passed away.</p>
<p>Who designed the memorial?</p>	<p>Madi Phala was born in Springs in 1955. In his early days Phala worked as an art teacher at schools but from 1988 he became a full time artist, while still conducting workshops for young artists. In 2007 he was murdered during a robbery in Langa, at the age of 52. Phala's works can be found in a number of private collections including DeBeers in London and Renault South Africa.</p> <p>On his passing, a friend of Phala's, Roderick Sauls a fellow artist, laid a bed of sea stones around Phala's artwork to protect it and pay tribute to him.</p> <p>When talking about the <i>SS Mendi</i> memorial, Phala said "this is one of the greatest challenges I've had in my life to be given this chance with this piece. "I have this belief that I have put my signature on the Mother City's belly and we've made a baby now. This will be more memorable than anybody buying my private work and keeping it in their lounge, because now this will be exposed to everybody."</p>
<p>About the memorial</p>	<p>In the artist's words the sculpture evokes, "the history of the people – the black corps and the crew members."</p> <p>The different elements of the work of the work – the steel hull and bronzed caps and helmets – were welded onto a metal frame which lies 30cm beneath the ground and has been set into a concrete slab. Etched onto the bronze crowns of the hats and helmets are the numbers of the troops and crew members who died.</p> <p>The work depicts a sinking ship while lined up in front of the prow are the different hats and helmets of those who dies.</p> <p>Phala and key partner, blacksmith and artist</p>

Luke Atkinson, did not want the sculpture to be raised on a platform or plinth. They wanted it to be flat on the ground so that it became part of the environment and people could walk over it.

What is the significance of South Africa's involvement in World War 1?

About 21,000 black South Africans, all of whom were volunteers, served in France with the South African Native Labour Contingent between 1916 and 1918. They dug quarries, laid and repaired roads and railway lines, and cut tons of timber. Most of the men were employed in the French harbours of Le Havre, Rouen and Dieppe, where they unloaded supply ships and loaded trains with supplies for the battlefield. 333 of these men died in France during WW1.

Where is the *SS Mendi* now?

The wreckage of the *SS Mendi* lies across the English Channel ocean bed, approximately 11 miles south of the Isle of Wight.

DMV PROVINCIAL CO-ORDINATORS

RAN K	NAME	PROVINCE	CONTACT	EMAIL
CD	Vulani Ngobeni	HQ	0780992565	shaba@live.co.za
DD	Ralph Sebonka	HQ	0730012610 0725458301	rsebonka@vodamail.co.za
DD	Mxolisi Faku	HQ	0765107522	Mxo.faku@gmail.com
DD	David Rampedi	Gauteng Province	0726827142 0765101757	Davidrampedi7@gmail.com
DD	Titus Modiboa	North West Province	0825221805	tmodiboa@nwpq.gov.za
DD	Bishop Zondi	Kwa-Zulu Natal	0738409486 0765101858	Simphiwezondi2012@gmail.com
DD	Mvelile Gqibitole	Eastern Cape Province	0782126444	gqibitole@gmail.com
DD	Terence Mxi	Free State Province	0835317337	taruwimx@gmail.com
DD	Col(Ret) Sindi Mbobo	Western Cape Province	0833337623 0764004194	Peter.mbobo@dmv.gov.za
DD	Themishi Moropane	Mpumalanga Province	0717827365 0765101822	themishimoropane@gmail.com

DD	EL Mhlongo	Limpopo Province	08358609 89 07651017 35	lesibamhlongo@webmail.co.za
DD	Odirile Motseoakhumo	Northern Cape Province	07682218 89 07651018 57	Odirile.frank@gmail.com
ASD	Jabulani Mayaba	Gauteng Province	07844297 38 07651017 27	jhsmayaba@live.co.za
ASD	Kabelo Mahloane	North West Province	07315657 15	mahloanekb@yahoo.com
ASD	Saziso Nene	Kwa-Zulu Natal	07279980 19 07651018 02	sazisonene@gmail.com
ASD	Leo Skenjana	Eastern Cape Province	08343488 57	leoskejana@gmail.com
ASD	M.D. Majoang	Free State Province	07375600 77	Gift.majoang@gmail.com
ASD	M.P. Masala	Western Cape Province	08427685 07 07651018 63	mpmasala@live.com
ASD	Stanley Matlala	Mpumalanga Province	08448383 22 07651016 77	Stanleymatlala67@gmail.com
ASD	Mothoka Betha	Limpopo Province	08295642 07 07651017 46	Mb.mothoka@gmail.com
ASD	David Daniels	Northern Cape Province	07651017 41 08254872 35	Dav14daniels00@gmail.com gtshakela@gmail.com

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