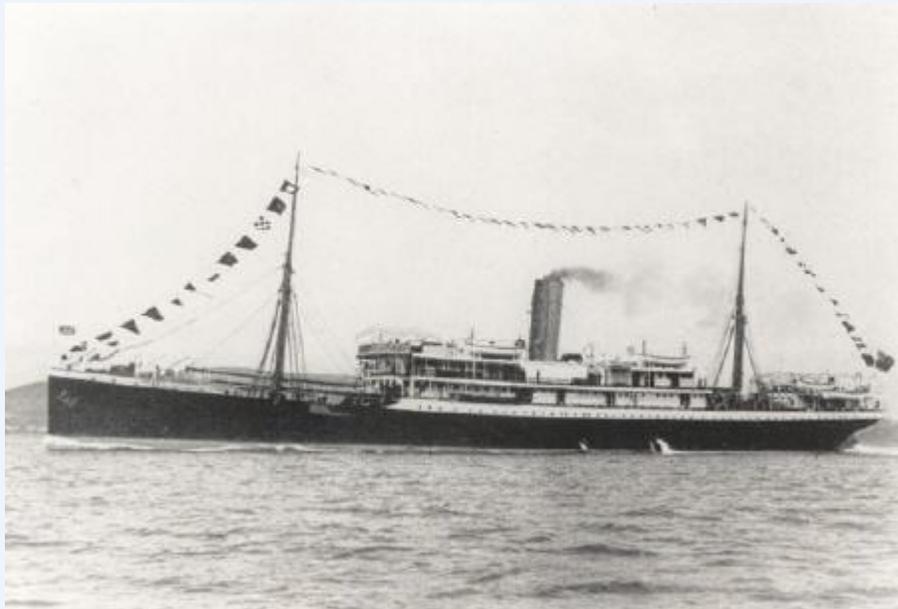


"Be quite and calm my countrymen, for what is taking place now is what you came here to do. We are all going to die, and that is what we came for. Brothers, we are drilling the death drill. I, a Zulu, say here and now that you are all my brothers... Xhosas, Swazis, Pondos, Basotho and all others, let us die like warriors. 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..."

(The Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha)

THE SS MENDI - A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Black people of South Africa have a proud and illustrious heritage, which identifies with the whole South African society. Blacks have equally played a very important role in the defense of this country dating back to the First World War.



The story of the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC), particularly the sinking of the *Mendi* troopship, is one of the most fascinating stories ever related in South Africa's military history.

On January 16, 1917 the *Mendi* troopship sailed from Cape Town en route to La Havre in France carrying the last contingent of the SANLC comprising 805 black private, 5 white officers and 17 non-commissioned officers as well as 33 crewmembers.

On the morning of 21 February 1917, another ship, the *SS Darro* (10 000 tons) travelling at full speed and emitting no warning signals, rammed the *SS Mendi* (4 230 tons), which sank in 20 minutes. No steps were taken by the *SS Darro* to lower boats or rescue the survivors. She stood off and floated nearby while lifeboats from the *SS Mendi*'s escorting destroyer, *HMS Brisk*, rowed among the survivors, trying to rescue them.

There are many stories of bravery about the men's bravery as the ship went down. One of them is that of the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, who cried words of encouragement to the dying men.



The men sang and stamped the death dance together as the *SS Mendi* sank, taking with her all still on board and many who leapt into the icy waters (607 black troops along with 9 of their fellow white countrymen and all 33 crewmembers). Of note is that, regardless of clan or tribe, these men faced death together as South Africans.

Other heart wrenching tales of valour are told of those trying to survive in the freezing water. It is said that the cries of the men dying of hypothermia echoed in the misty dawn: "Ho, 'so and so', child of my mother, are you dead that you do not hear my voice?" and "Ho, to me, men of 'so and so', that we may all die together?" Joseph Tshite, a schoolmaster from near Pretoria, encouraged those around him with hymns and prayers until he died. A white sergeant was supported by two black compatriots, who swam with him and found place for him on a raft.

Among the black Africans lost were some prominent men such as the Pondoland chiefs Henry Bokleni, Dokoda Richard Ndamase, Mxonywa Bangani, Mongameli and the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha.

On receiving the news (on 9 March 1917) of the disaster, all the members of the South African House of Assembly, under the then Prime Minister Louis Botha and a celebrated Boer War hero, rose in their seats as a token of respect to their fellow South Africans who had gone down with *SS Mendi*. Lore has it that the black tribes in South Africa were aware of the disaster before they were officially advised by the government.

The survivors were to continue with their military service in France. One of the highlights was when some of them met the King and Queen of England at Rouen in July 1917. One of them, Koos Matli (of the Bahaduba tribe) recalled: "One day we were all called together and we went to another ship. On the deck we met King George V and Queen Mary. The King addressed us personally and thanked us for the services we had rendered. He told us that we were going home within a few days, and when we reached home we must tell our Chiefs and fathers how he had thanked us."

Like so many other military disasters, the story of the *SS Mendi* is a story of supreme courage in the face of death and valour shown between brothers toward each other in dire circumstances. The courage displayed by these men has remained a legend in South African military history.

The commemoration of the *SS Mendi* is held on the third Sunday of February every year.

Sources: SA Legion - Atteridgeville Branch and Navy News)

***SS Mendi* links on the Internet**

- The South African Military History Society Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereeniging Military History Journal - [Vol 10 No 1 THE SINKING OF THE SS MENDI, 21 FEBRUARY 1917](#)
- PRETORIA NEWS ONLINE EDITION POWERED BY IOL Friday 13th August [SOUTH AFRICA Homage to Mendi disaster men March 15, 2004](#)
- [The Mendi Decoration for Bravery](#)
- [The Mendi Sinking](#)