

Daily Dispatch

NEWS

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Team braves rough waters to place plaque in honour of the SS Mendi

By TYLER RIDDIN

A TEAM of six men have braved the rough waters of the English Channel to pay respect to the 616 South African soldiers who lost their lives on the SS Mendi, the World War 1 troopship. The ship which was on its way to provide support at the Battle of the Somme, was struck early on the morning of February 21, 1917, by an Allied ship, Darro. This collision left a hole in the SS Mendi which caused it to sink.

Of the [646 who died there were] 616 [South Africans] who died in the tragedy, 607 were black and 139 were from the Eastern Cape. History curator at the Amathole Museum in King William's Town Stephanie Victor said that royalty from Mpondoland, such as Chief Henry Bokleni, were among these men.

Chairman of the England-based branch of the SA Legion of Military Veterans Claudio Chiste said: "A plaque was meant to be placed by the South African and Royal Navy on the 100th anniversary but the waters were far too rough. So on August 8, we [the South African Legion] went to the site which is about 10 nautical miles from the Isle of Wight. "The weather was terrible and the water was choppy. Overall, the 40m dive took about 30 minutes. We laid the plaque on one of the highest points of the wreck," said Chiste. The plaque is made of granite and weighs 20kg.

"Because it is so flat and thin it will not get picked up by currents. It is 45cm x 45cm which makes it easy for people who want to dive at the site, to see and read it," he said.

Chiste told the Dispatch that for the past five years the South African Legion has held a parade in Hollybrook, Southampton where most of the soldiers were buried.

"There are many reasons we do these things. One is because we want to give these men the honour they originally deserved, and another is to educate people. We see South Africans tearing down statues because they think the world wars were the white man's war. This is not true though. Non-white South Africans made up about 40% of South Africa's soldiers in World War 1 and roughly the same in World War 2.



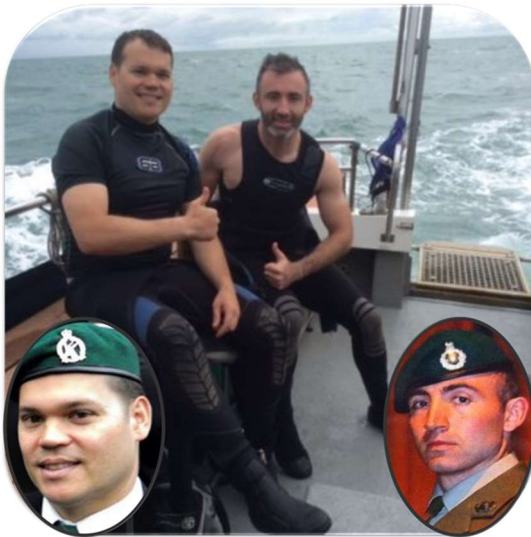
The going down of the SS Mendi

Credit: Book cover of Fred Khumalo's Dancing the Death Drill (Image: Penguin Random House)

SA and British Veterans ‘Buddy Up’ for Mendi Dedication

The raised awareness of the sinking of the Mendi in the ‘new’ South Africa, has roused a mixture of emotions, particularly amongst Black South Africans. There is a sensitivity to this episode of history, which up until fairly recently, was not given the attention it deserved, that of ‘forgotten valour’.

As part of the 100th anniversary commemorative events, despite the adverse sea conditions, a memorial dive was successfully completed. Rather fittingly, military veterans from both countries involved ‘buddied’ up as dive partners.



MAIN PICTURE: From left to right. Claudio Chiste, then England Chairman of South African Legion of Military Veterans and Royal Marine Commando Veteran & UK Clearance Diver (reserves) Mne Derek McMullen. INSET: From left to right. In their respective Legion and Royal Marine uniform.

The mysterious arrival of the SS Mendi Bell

On the 28th August 2018 the UK Prime Minister Theresa May presented President Cyril Ramaphosa with the SS Mendi Bell. This had been anonymously returned and handed back in the year prior.

It is believed that the diver who ‘salvaged’ it in the 1970s, may have been suffering a sense of guilt or perhaps fear of being caught out, following the raised awareness of the Mendi during the centenary.

