

WWI South African Military Memories – SS Mendi

“Excuse me Madam”, the captain addressed the lady who was aboard his ship with the visiting company, “but why did you and the Black veterans toss money and bread overboard with the sea and what is the significance of the seawater you collected in the empty cool drink bottle that was lowered overboard to fall and then hauled up.

These questions were asked when, way back in 1991, a party of South Africans went on a visit, off the coast of the Isle of Wight, to lay wreaths on the water grave above the sunken troopship, the SS Mendi. The ship sank 11 miles from St Catherine’s Point and lay 135 feet below the surface.

“Well, Sir,” came the answer, “these gestures are South African traditions. The bread is strewn because in the Bible (Ecclesiastes 11:1) it states: “Cast thy bread upon the waters” and 616 lives were lost at this spot when the SS Mendi sank during WW1 on 21 February 1917. The ‘money’ we tossed consisted of 616 South African 1c coins. One for each life lost. Our 1c coin depicts 2 sparrows on the one side reminding us all of the Biblical verse from St. Matthew’s Gospel 10:29-31:’ Are not two sparrow sold for 1c and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.” On the reverse of the coin is our State Badge. The seawater we collected is also very special. Our Black people believe in forefather worship so Prince Penuel Zulu (one of the Black veterans and a Zulu Royal) will now actually carry this bottle of seawater all the way back to South Africa so that descendants of those who drowned here, can drink of this water.”

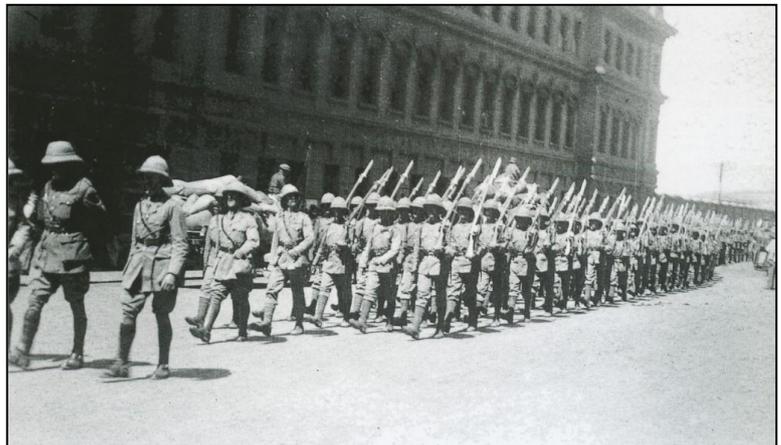
Nodding his head, as if he better understood, while watching the beautiful red poppy wreaths (in remembrance of those who drown) that had been cast overboard float slowly away on the surface of a particularly calm sea. He returned to his crew and explained these traditions to the British sailors.



The site of the Mendi tragedy revisited by South Africans in 1991

The ship's engines had been silenced for the duration of the short service conducted by the Rev. Dirk Oosthuizen. The service was followed by the sounding of the Last Post, the observance of the Two Minute Silent Pause of Remembrance (1 minute for those who had drowned and 1 minute for the survivors), and then by the bugler sounding the Reveille and the time taken to toss the 1c coins, bread and to collect the seawater. The engines were re-started and the ship moved forward. All aboard were lost in their own thoughts but ... the British sailors who had grasped the significance of what had taken place, followed the example of the Black veterans. They tossed of their coins and sandwiches overboard as a token of condolence and respect.

Strange as the co-incidence may seem, off the coast of South Africa, at Agulhas, during the same time (February 1917) the troopship Tyndareus struck a German mine and sank. The soldiers of the 25th Battalion of the Middelsex Regiment quickly and quietly lined up on deck while the lifeboats were lowered and with help of other shipping in the area, all lives were saved. Ten days later these same rescued Allied soldiers and sailors were accorded the honour of being invited to form the guard of honour at the opening of the South African Parliament in Cape Town. The politicians involved were the same men who had stood in silence with their heads bowed as a mark of respect to their fellow countrymen of the South African Native Labour Contingent who had gone down with the SS Mendi off the coast of Southern England.



Men of the Middelsex Regiment marching from the railway station, Cape Town, down Adderley Street, to form the guard of honour at the opening of the South African Parliament in February 1917.



The survivors of the SS Mendi tragedy attended the final public observance of the two minute silent pause of remembrance in Adderley Street, Cape Town on 2 August 1919. The Treaty of Versailles was only signed on 28 June 1919.

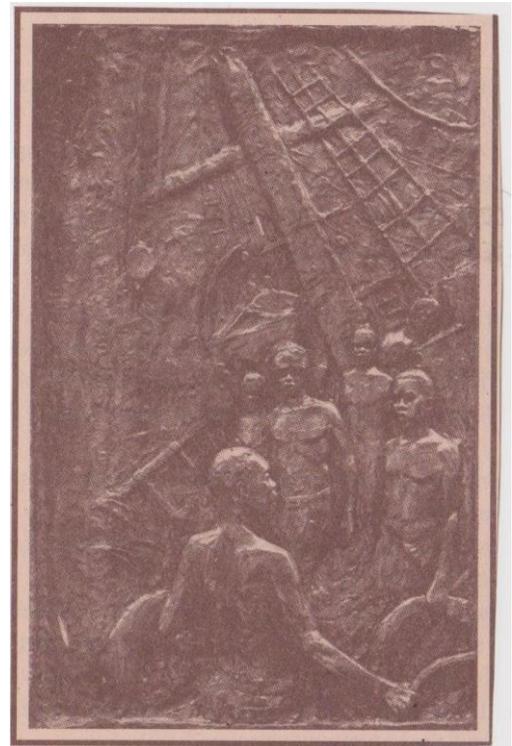


This Sotho blanket was, and still is, worn by veterans or relatives of men who had fought in WWI and WWII and sported the springbok head which had been the badge they wore.

It is interesting and touching to note that the High Commissioner of the Republic of South Africa in 1994 – 1997 was His Excellency Mr. Mendi Msimang who was most probably a descendant of a veteran of WWI.

“God Bless Africa”

A portion of the huge WWI plaque dedicated as a tribute to the memory of the men of the SS Mendi, to be seen at the Delville Wood Memorial in France as well as at the Military Museum in Johannesburg.



J. C. Abrahams (Tannie Mossie)