

# Springbok

Journal of the South African Legion  
Tydskrif van die Suid-Afrikaanse Legioen



ISSN: 221-9854

FEBRUARY 2021



*The three founders of the British Empire Services League in February 1921 – Field Marshal Haig (left), Field Marshal Smuts (centre) and General Lukin (right)*

<b>INDEX</b>	<b>Page</b>
FROM THE EDITORS DESK	3
NATIONAL OFFICE BEARERS	4
NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE	4
NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS	4
BRANCH NEWS	7
• Bloemfontein	7
• Cape Canopy	8
• Cape Town	9
• Rosedale	9
• Durban	12
• Kimberley	15
• Kroonstad	15
• Lower South Coast	15
• North Coast	15
• Pietermaritzburg	18
• Port Elizabeth	18
• United Kingdom and Europe	18
COMMEMORATIONS	19
• Virtual Three Ships Service United Kingdom	19
• Lest We Forget – Noordwijk, Netherlands	20
OTHER STORIES	20
• Remembering the sinking of the SS Mendi	20
• South African Navy hold Blessing Ceremony	25
• General Knowledge Quiz	27
OBITUARIES	28

## FROM THE EDITORS DESK



organisations in 48 countries.

We have come to the end of the month in which the South African Legion celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was during February 1921 that the British Empire Service League (BESL) was established in Cape Town. Major role players in this event were Field Marshall Earl Haig, General the Rt. Hon. J C Smuts and General Sir H T Lukin. The South African Branch of the BESL was known as the BESL (South Africa). In 1958 the name of the BESL was changed to the British Commonwealth Ex-services League (BCEL) and in 2002 it became the Commonwealth Ex-services League (CEL). The appellation "Royal" was granted by royal assent in 2003 and it became the Royal Commonwealth Ex-services League (RCEL). The RCEL has 56 member

Let us look back at what happened before the establishment of the BESL. In the magazine "The Leaguer" it is claimed that a meeting took place in Durban on 7 November 1917 where rules were drafted and a subcommittee formed to establish a veteran's organisation. At a public meeting on 7 December 1917 at which the first office bearers of the **"LEAGUE OF THE RETURNED SOLDIERS AND SOLDIERS"** was elected with headquarters in Durban. Apart from Durban, there were 18 branches, all in Natal.

In the maiden edition of "Comrades", it is reported that the process started in Bloemfontein on 27 November 1917 with a meeting attended by some 60 veterans. The meeting aimed to discuss the welfare of the returned soldiers, safeguarding the interests of war widows, military disabled and the dependants of the men still serving. And so the **"RETURNED SOLDIERS ASSOCIATION"** was established with Headquarters in Bloemfontein. Apart from Bloemfontein, there were five other branches.

In the United Kingdom veterans organised themselves. Some along with labour unions and others along political lines. Some of these barred officers from becoming members. The latter resulted in the formation of the **"OFFICER'S ASSOCIATION"** for those that held the King's Commission. A branch of this organisation was established in South Africa in October 1920. Following a letter published in British press calling for a new form of kind of veteran organisation where veterans would work together for the good of the country and outside politics the **"COMRADES OF THE GREAT WAR"** was established. By 1919 there were more than 1 000 branches of the new organisation in Britain.

Following a recruiting conference in Cape Town during which the lack of unity was discussed delegates from 17 cities and towns met in Bloemfontein over the period 13 – 14 March 1918 under the chairmanship of the Venerable Archdeacon W. H. Weekes. At the meeting, it was decided to unite under the banner of **"COMRADES OF THE GREAT WAR"** with the motto "we stand together" with branches in all the provinces, Border, Cape Province, Free State, Midlands, Natal, Rhodesia, Transvaal.

*With due acknowledgement to "NOT FOR OURSELVES" - THE FIRST EIGHTY YEARS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN LEGION by Arthur Blake published in 2004.*

## **NATIONAL OFFICE BEARERS**

The National Office Bearers (NOB) met through the Zoom platform on Tuesday 19 January 2021. During the meeting, it was agreed to call a Special Congress using the Zoom platform to:

*“Approval for the National Office Bearers to identify and make the necessary changes to the SA Legion Constitution and By-Laws, as approved at the SA Legion’s 86th Congress held on 12 – 14 October 2018.*

*All changes, amendments and endorsements will be approved or rejected by the National Executive Committee, which functions as Congress when it is not in session.*

*Approval must be in writing, via e-mail or voted at a meeting.*

- i. Voting – records to be kept at SAL NHQ*
- ii. The result – will be forwarded to all Branches.”*

The date for the Special Congress has been set for Thursday 18 March 2021 at 2021. National Secretary has already informed all and the Agenda distributed.

## **NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

The National Executive Committee (NEC) met utilizing the Zoom platform on Tuesday 16 February 2021. At the meeting, it was confirmed that the 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, ie the Centenary Congress, will take place from 15 to 17 October 2021 in Cape Town. More details will be communicated soon.

## **NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS**

### **NHQ ADMINISTRATION**

**NE Minutes** (compile a full list in book and current ones up to date). With the help of Enrique, all current NOB & NEC Minutes are filed. Still searching for previous minutes and agendas bmt.

**Medal Project:** Still waiting for SAL Durban to return medals. NHQ busy tracing some recipients.

**Stock** – Still have stock of white shirt embroidered SAL pocket badges @35.00 each and 3-layer printed face masks @R55.00 each, without courier cost.

**Membership cards:** Branches in good standing’s cards were couriered with Aramex beginning of Dec 2020 and those who requested delivery after Festive Season were dispatched in January 2021. These membership cards are valid for 3 years.



*White shirt embroidered pocket badges and three layer face masks.*



**The following branches' capitation fees are still outstanding:** Grahamstown, Lower South Coast, Soweto, Central Wits (R890.00) – still waiting for branch's bank statements to see who paid capitation fees into their account. Some members paid ±R500 to NHQ's account, which was used to cover other members' capitation fees as instructed by Gauteng Region Chairperson. Rooiplaas – since 2018, Atteridgeville (since 2017) Paid a small amount in 2018. Botshabelo (since 2017) – Only paid for 7 to attend Congress 2018.

**Bank fee charges to NHQ for cash deposits.** Due to the high fees of the above deposits, branches need to be charged to recover these funds.

**E-mail & Telephone System.** Sandringham and certain areas of Johannesburg had problems. NHQ was "off-line" for more than a week, working on NHQ's staff's personal wi-fi data and cell phones.

**Finances.** An amount will be withdrawn from the SA Legion Money Market Call Account to be used for certain Congress cost, e.g. flight costs of NOB to Congress 2021.

**Membership List, Almanac, AGM Minutes, Asset Register, Monthly Branch Updates:** Almanac, Membership list & Capitation fees was due on 30 Apr 2020 and will be due again on 30 Apr 2021. There are still branches that have not submitted all documents or paid capitation fees for 2020.

**Membership List.** Lists need to be updated monthly, in the correct format and submitted to NHQ with the monthly Branch Update. Branches do not update their nominal rolls, e.g. 48 people of a list and only paid capitation fees for 21. When NHQ queries them, they "forgot" to take it off or long stories.

**Almanac.** The following branches did not submit their 2020 Almanac: Atteridgeville, Botshabelo, Benoni, Kagiso, King Williamstown, Kroonstad, Pietermaritzburg, Lower South Coast, Port Alfred, Rooiplaas, Soweto, Strand and UK & Europe

**AGM Minutes.** Due to Covid-19, most branches have not had their 2020 AGM. Thank you to branches who forwarded theirs.

**Asset Register.** The following branches submitted their asset record: Bloemfontein, Cape Town and Central Wits. All branches are to submit a record with any SA Legion items such as wreaths, flags, banners, IT equipment, etc. A zero return should be forwarded should branches not have any assets.

**Monthly Branch Updates.** Not all branches submit monthly updates. Branches do not indicate information correctly. NHQ is mostly ignored when querying them.

## **NWF ADMINISTRATION**

Grants are paid monthly.

**Life Verification:** The life Verification process is done regularly.

**Casual Relief:** No casual Relief assistance was given since May 2019 and we did not have to access the funds through the NWF.

## **RCEL ADMINISTRATION**

All grants are paid every month. Records are kept of payments.

**SCOWP Quarter 3 Report**, due date 7 Jan 2021, was submitted by the NS on 19 December 2020 at 17:09. Quarter 4 will be submitted on request, ± 1st week of April 2021.

**SCOWP Grant Application 2021**, due 1 Feb 2021 was submitted by NS on 30 Jan 2021 at 19:12.

**Capt Lance Gill**, after almost 12 years of outstanding service to Commonwealth Veterans and Widows, will be saying farewell to RCEL on 19 Feb 2021. The SAL NHQ had a close working relationship with him, and he will be dearly missed.

## **CMVO**

Feedback to be submitted by Lgr. Ray Cumming.

## **DMV DATABASE CHECK & DMV DATABASE PROCEDURES**

DMV is not accepting any new application currently as they are working with a skeleton staff. They will inform the NS when new applications may be dropped off.

## **SPECIAL CONGRESS FEBRUARY 2021**

Notice and Agenda were forwarded to all Branches. NP will forward the communication to all Branches.

## **SAL WEBPAGE**

Busy negotiating all needs.

## **BRANCH NEWS**

### **BLOEMFONTEIN**

Bloemfontein Branch functions efficiently as it is run responsibly with proper financial management by the general committee and office administration by the branch secretary. All relevant matters pertaining to the Branch are reported on during the regular monthly meetings, this includes monthly financial statements by the bookkeeper. It enables the committee to make the necessary decisions and take the necessary steps to keep the Branch running smoothly. Our monthly committee meeting was held on 25 January 2021 with two committee members making their apologies.

As the general committee is very small we can have meetings where the members physically attend. The Chairman Lgr. JJ van der Merwe stated that because of poor health the Vice-Chairman Lgr. W Janse van Rensburg will be acting chair until elections for the new chairman is held at our next Annual General Meeting. We ensure that our veterans and/or widows are well looked after.

**Membership.** No new members have joined the branch. We are fortunate that none of our members contracted and or passed away because of Covid 19. We currently have 46 Members.

**Ex Volunteers Housing Organization.** The finances of this well-run entity are sound. Maintenance is done as and when required. The garden/terrain is tended to daily.

**Commemoration services.** The preparations for the commemoration services are on course. The Delville Wood service is planned for 11 July 2021 and the Remembrance Day service is planned for 14 November 2021.

## **CAPE CANOPY**

**Members' Well Being.** With the ongoing State of Disaster in place and lockdown level adjustments with stricter rules and regulations we were not being able to meet for various obvious reasons, but we will be having our first members' meeting on the 18th February 2021.

Last year was a challenge for many Paratroopers as well, but we managed to push through and came out on top of everything despite a few setbacks in some men's personal lives as well some disappointments, for example, the cancellation of the annual 44 Parachute Regiment's "Waterjump" last year and not being able to gain access to our headquarters at 3 Parachute Battalion, C-coy inside Fort iKapa military base because of COVID safety reasons amongst other things.

For some members and their families, the year has not started well as some have lost family members and friends to CV19. One of our senior members Andy Johnston, an ex-member Dennis Croukamp, a members' wife and many other men and family members in the Paratrooper community passed away in the last 2 months. At the end of this month, we will hold a joint memorial service for them to pay our last respects.

The rest of the Cape Canopy members are very healthy, in good spirit and calm despite circumstances. The Parabat Brotherhood remains strong and we had a record membership count of 97 members by the end of last year. We still have to get all of the members' application forms though. Otherwise, we do not have any other complains, we are positive and grateful to be here.

**Support.** We will continue to help members when the need arises by giving them food vouchers or parcels. I don't think we have seen the end of this pandemic, I believe soon there will be members that will need our help and support.

**SA Legion Membership & Constitution.** We (EXCO and a few senior founding members of the CC) have met with the National President Brian Klopper concerning our Constitution and our autonomy that goes back a long time (over 36 years). We have agreed that the CC's will function independently (because Paratroopers do things differently), but considering the SAL Constitution. It was agreed that we would retain our Cape Canopy Constitution because it is not at variance with the SAL equivalent, but can simply mount to a set of by-laws. We have received our SAL membership cards, but still have to fill them in and distribute them to our members.

**Events.** There were no meetings or events during Level 3, but we will have a partial meeting this Thursday 18th February 2021 at a different venue than usual. We are aiming to have our AGM on the 11th March 2021 where a new EXCO will be voted for and a new MANCO announced for the next term of 2 years. The next step regarding the CC's future will also be deciding on.

We are hoping that we could hold a Parabat reunion in Bloemfontein on the 1st April 2021 when we will celebrate 1 Parachute Battalion's 60th Anniversary combined with a mass parachute Waterjump that we are not sure of if it will ever happen (a lot of doubt and confusion regarding this matter). Some things are unpredictable and out of our control.

All other functions/events are postponed depending on Covid level restrictions. The new management committee will arrange and make decisions accordingly.

## **CAPE TOWN**

**Membership.** Membership stands at 315 however some members have not paid their membership fees and we are in the process of contacting them to determine if they wish to retain their membership or not.

**Parades.** The branch was represented at the City's Remembrance Day Service and our usual service was held at Rosedale. Both took place indoors due to inclement weather.

**Events and Socials.** Covid and the various restrictions imposed have played havoc with our calendar. We were able to hold a new members evening with the National President in attendance on 30 October and a low key Poppy Day collection was held with some R28000 being collected. We were fortunate to be able to hold the Rosedale Christmas Dinner which was held over two evenings to allow for social distancing. The 2020 AGM has been scheduled and postponed a couple of times and it is now hoped to hold it on Thursday 18 February. Provision has been made to allow members not to attend but to still vote on the various motions before the meeting.

**Facilities Upgrade.** Our application for a liquor licence has been conditionally approved and work has started on the renovation of the Rosedale Club. It is hoped to finish this work by the end of February. Further, it has been decided to install a standby generator and work on this will start on 15 February.

**Conclusion.** We have experienced a further five cases of the Covid virus during the "second wave" – two residents and three members of staff. Fortunately, all have recovered and are back to good health.

## **Rosedale**

With social distancing in place, legionnaires were still able to enjoy a sumptuous Christmas on 4 December 2020, banquet, prepared by the Rosedale kitchen staff under the guidance of Philippa Woolley and served up by members of the Moths Pro Patria Shellhole.

Rosedale's oldest resident, Kathy Ellis, celebrated her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday on December 19, 2020, but with Covid restrictions in place, her resident friends only got to share in her celebration recently – and this



*Photos of the induction of 21 new members to the Cape Town Branch at the end of October 2020.*





*The National President, Lgr Brian Klopper addressing the new members of the Cape Town Branch after the induction ceremony.*



they did with ice-cream and black cherries. From college, Kathy joined the Military Hospital laboratory in Kimberley where she met and married the pathologist. She also signed up with the WAA and remains a loyal member to this day.

The Service Centre chair, Tim Reilly and members of the committee thanked the Rosedale staff for their exceptional service “above the call of duty” during the difficult past year and showed their appreciation by handing each one a braai pack to be shared and enjoyed in the comfort of their homes.

The 18 July Mandela Day activity came to a grinding halt last year, which led to a new idea: supporting Ladles of Love, the largest NGO/NPO feeding scheme in the Western Cape. This kicked off to a great start on Thursday 11 February when 36 loaves of bread were spread/sandwiched/delivered for handing out to the many soup kitchens that are locally supported. Getting stuck in are Peter Horsburgh, Beryl Lategan, Jenny Jewell and new resident Madga Bolton, who also enjoyed a sherry and fruit juice while grafting away. After all, as someone was heard to say, “A Boeing’s flying over somewhere in the world!”

## **DURBAN**

The Durban Branch receives and distributes 50 loaves of bread every Wednesday to residents of B.E.S.L. Court and continues feeding meals to 180 people (mostly Legionnaires) in B.E.S.L. Court, Memory Cottage and the Bartle Road MOTH Cottages twice weekly. For this, sincere thanks are due to the Branch Secretary, Lgr Johann Kruger and his band of willing helpers, all residents at B.E.S.L. Court.

Since the last NEC meeting, Durban has also successfully arranged and held their annual Poppy Day collection on November 7<sup>th</sup> and Service of Remembrance at the Durban Cenotaph on November 8<sup>th</sup>. Their Poppy Day collection yielded R87 000 which, under the Covid-19 circumstances, was much better than expected. Well done – and a very big ‘thank you’ – to all concerned!

Poppies were placed on the headstones of war veterans’ graves at cemeteries in Durban on Saturday and Sunday, 31 October & 1 November, thereby observing the tradition of Veterans’ Day (usually the first Sunday in November) – with sincere thanks to all members who assisted and a group of boys from Glenwood High School.

The Branch AGM took place on Saturday, November 28<sup>th</sup>.

A low-key Commemoration Service will take place at the Mendi Memorial in the Durban Harbour on Sunday, February 21<sup>st</sup>.

Apparently, due to Covid, the Midmar Mile this year is to be held over two weekends – 6/7 and 13/14 March. They’ll be there again, promoting the SA Legion as usual.

*Alterations to the Club House at Rosedale.*



*Left and below. Photos from the Christmas Dinner at Rosedale, December 2020.*





*Rosedale Staff with their  
"braai packs."*

*Members of Rosedale  
preparing sandwiches to  
be distributed at various  
soup kitchens.*



*Rosedale's oldest resident, Kathy  
Ellis, celebrated her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday on  
December 19, 2020.*

## **KIMBERLEY**

While the local office re-opened on 11 January 2021 administration is still done remotely. The membership cards have been received and are being prepared for distribution.

## **KROONSTAD**

**Activities:** Kroonstad Branch resumed normal activities in January 2021 and our first branch meeting was held in January 2021

**Parade:** The yearly Commemoration parade on the 8 November 2020 had been cancelled due to the fact of the Covid 19 regulations and still high risks area's for people over 60 and also school children attending the parade, as well as the soldiers from SoE who constantly reports Covid 19 infected members.

**Projects:** The branch will during 2021 try to hold another raffle to be able to conduct a fund-raising project.

**Recruiting:** The Kroonstad Branch will still during the FY 2021 try to recruit more members, but the Covid 19 level 3 still makes it difficult to achieve this goal, current members pay their yearly membership fees via the internet.

**General.** This branch did have in January 2021 a positive Covid 19 incident., Ann – Marie Odendaal in Reveille court nr 7 was tested positive, but her isolation period of 10 days did expire, and she is now fully back at work.

## **LOWER SOUTH COAST**

The Lower South Coast Branch held a very poorly attended AGM on Saturday, 31 October. A new Chairman and Vice-Chairman were elected, namely Lgr John Styles and Lgr Danny Hartslief respectively. Despite several reminders, no recent report has been received, but I believe that their bank account problems appear to have been sorted out at last.

## **NORTH COAST**

With the lifting of Covid restrictions in July/August 2020, the North Coast Branch wasted no time in conducting their AGM in September 2020 - later than it should have been, due to Covid. It was the first "official" meeting since their last in February and was held at the Masonic Lodge in Rossburgh. Being the AGM, the serving Committee stood down and a new committee was elected with two new appointments in the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, being Jan van der Wall and Clifford Ingle respectively. The Treasurer remained as Steve Leahy and Lana Skipworth-Michell was retained as the Branch Secretary.

One of the projects the new Branch Committee undertook was a new Banner/Flag for the Branch,

***NORTH COAST BRANCH CHRISTMAS LUNCH 2020***





which Skippy Michell and Cliff Ingle were responsible for. It was hoped that it would be ready for the Christmas lunch in December but unfortunately, it was only completed a day or so thereafter - the result being a fine-looking banner which will be hoisted with pride at the first available occasion. Normally, this would have been at the annual Regional Conference, due to be hosted by the North Coast Branch in February but, alas, the further restrictions due to the Covid second wave put paid to that.

Their Christmas lunch was held on 6 December at the Parkhill Bowling Club and, aside from a few members under isolation due to exposure to the virus, it was a good turnout and an enjoyable day was had.

One new member was recruited in September, being Lgr Philip Venter who had served in the Infantry (6SAI) and also the SA Navy. They currently have four potential members awaiting the lifting of restrictions so they can be processed and inducted. Three members of North Coast participated in a social bowls day at Parkhill on the public holiday, 16 December 2021 to raise awareness of this new Branch.

#### **PIETERMARITZBURG**

The Pietermaritzburg Branch did not hold a Poppy Day collection last year. Members of the Legion and MOTH laid poppies on veterans' headstones at the War graves at Mountain Rise, Fort Napier and Commercial Road cemeteries in November.

#### **PORT ELIZABETH**

As a result of the Covid virus and the closure of PAG to us, the EXCO decided to move our meetings to the Maritime Club on the corner of and the first such meeting was of course the AGM. The Club went out of its way to welcome the Legion to its premises and so all future meetings will be held at the Club, as a result of this our regalia has been moved to the Club from PAG.

**2020 Poppy Collection.** With Covid disrupting our Poppy plans and the municipality simply not giving authority to hold the street collection, we were surprised to receive R2876.90 from Woodridge School, several churches and Stella Londt Home! All these were unsolicited and resulted from their initiative. We were both very surprised and very grateful to these organisations for their contributions. Thank you all most sincerely. Hopefully, the municipality will allow street collections this year and Covid will play along too.

#### **UNITED KINGDOM AND EUROPE**

Membership. Presently at 126, with our Centenary membership Campaign well and truly kicked off.

Our rolling Lockdown has prevented not only the holding of any external events but also cogent planning for future events.

This has resulted in successful well-attended virtual events. Our Membership Secretary has his feet under the desk and is steaming ahead with a bold Membership campaign, underpinned by Virtual Meetings that are social in format. Our Brotherhood Team is about to kick off a new initiative to offer our Mental health and Wellbeing training. We now have formal qualifications, and by virtue of partnerships with other charities, we also not only offer training but can avail ourselves of the partner's resources.

Our referrals come from not only these partners but also NHS, Police, Parole Services and other Government Departments.

I have just been notified that this year's Remembrance (Cenotaph) Parade will more than likely also scaled down from 10,000 veterans to only 2000, and all organisations will be limited to eight representatives.

## **COMMEMORATIONS**

### **VIRTUAL THREE SHIPS PARADE**

The England Branch of the SA Legion held a virtual Three Ships Parade on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup>.

The Three Ships parade is to remember the South Africans who have perished and been lost at sea by highlighting Three Ships:

*SS Mendi* to commemorate the WW1 period, *HMSAS Southern Floe* for WW2, and *SAS President Kruger* for post WW2.

*SS Mendi* was a British passenger steamship that was built and launched in 1905 and in 1916 during the First World War the UK Admiralty chartered her as a troopship. On 21 February 1917 a large cargo steamship, *Daro*, collided with her in the English Channel south of the Isle of Wight, killing 646 people, most of whom were black South African troops. The sinking was a major loss of life for the South African military, and was one of the 20th century's worst maritime disasters.

*HMSAS Southern Floe* was a converted whaler into an anti-submarine role and commissioned into the South African Navy for service, they were part of the Seaward Defence anti-submarine flotilla. In 1941, the *HMSAS Southern Floe* arrived at Tobruk on 31 January 1941 to take over patrol duties from their sister ships. On patrol, the duties were complicated by sandstorms, low visibility, heavy cross-seas. To these conditions were added the menace of the mine fields on one side and an ill-defined and unlighted coast on the other. On the morning of 11 February, *Southern Sea* arrived at the patrol rendezvous, two miles east of Tobruk, but found no sign of *Southern Floe*.

*SAS President Kruger* was the first of three President-class Type 12 frigates built in the UK for the South African Navy (SAN) during the 1960s. The ship spent most of her career training and made visits to foreign ports in Africa, Western Europe and the United States. In the late 1960s, she was modernized and equipped to operate a helicopter. In the mid-1970s, *President Kruger* played a minor role in the Angolan Civil War as a part of South African operations. The ship was placed in reserve in 1977 but

was recommissioned in 1980. She sank in 1982 with the loss of 16 lives after colliding with her replenishment oiler, *SAS Tafelberg*, in the South Atlantic.

### **LEST WE FORGET – NOORDWIJK, NETHERLANDS**

Ever since 2015, the General Cemetery in Noordwijk, Zuid-Holland, Netherlands, where six casualties of the *SS Mendi* which sank on 21 February 1917 lie buried, has seen an annual gathering of the Mayor and Aldermen of Noordwijk, the South African Ambassador, Consul, and embassy staff, diplomats and military attachés of several countries, as well as many members of the South African community in the Netherlands.

The service and wreath-laying remember not only the men of the *SS Mendi* but also usually marks a national day of remembrance for all South African war casualties and is coupled to South African Armed Forces Day. The Dutch Armed Forces send a band, a bugler, and a piper, and it's especially heartening to see the way a small gathering of Legionnaires has grown into this important annual event.

Today, as it has done on 21 February for the last several years, the sun came out in Noordwijk, however, to protect the living from the scourge of COVID-19, there could be no bands, no banners, no flags, and no bugler. But the men who danced the 'drill of death' as the *SS Mendi's* deck slipped beneath the frigid English Channel would not go unremembered.

Observing strict compliance with Dutch distancing regulations, I observed two minutes' silence at 11:00, also remembering the fallen of the *HMSAS Southern Floe* (11 Feb 1941), the *SAS President Kruger* (18 Feb 1982), that are collectively remembered by the SA Legion UK & Europe as 'The Three Ships', and laid a poppy wreath in an unfamiliarly deserted, but sun-drenched cemetery to maintain the continuity.

The SA Embassy has informed us that the planned occasion next year to mark 105 years since the sinking will be a special one, so be sure to mark February 21 in your diary.

### **OTHER STORIES**

#### **REMEMBERING THE SINKING OF THE SS MENDI TROOPSHIP - 21 FEBRUARY 1917**

##### **SS MENDI MEMORIAL, SAULSVILLE**

Every year on the Sunday closest to 21 February, the South African Legion (Atteridgeville and Pretoria branches), City of Tshwane Community and Social Development Services Department, Ditsong Museums of South Africa, South African National Defence Force, Gauteng Department of Education, Department of Military Veterans and members of the local community host the annual *SS Mendi* commemoration memorial service and wreath-laying ceremony at the *SS Mendi* Memorial at the Ga-Mothakga Resort in Saulsville.

As the country fights yet another war to curb the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic, the commemoration event will not be held this year. Instead, this publication is intended to remind the community of the *SS Mendi* ordeal that took place during World War I (1914 – 1918).

*Lgr Andrew Bergman laying a wreath  
at the graves of SS Mendi casualties  
in Noordwijk, Netherlands.*



The story of the SS Mendi is part of a bigger story of the recruitment of black South African men to serve in the South African Native Labour Contingent, often called the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC), for non-combatant labour services. Around 21 000 men volunteered to serve in the SANLC in France. Black South Africans had served during the South-West African (Namibia) campaign during World War I (1914–1915) and later in the East African campaign.

On 1 July 1916, the Allied armies in France launched the Somme offensive on the western front. With casualties rising, the British government requested South Africa to recruit 10 000 black troops to provide services in France. On 7 September 1916, South Africa acceded to the British request. Many men volunteered for service in the SANLC and the Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport Companies. They were not allowed to bear arms and their roles included working in hospitals and plantations, hewing wood for the trenches, working in the harbours loading cargo on ships, and cleaning mess tins in the trenches.

On 16 January 1917, the troopship SS Mendi departed from Cape Town with 802 black soldiers, five white officers and 17 non-commissioned officers of the Fifth Battalion SANLC. There were also 89 crew members and 56 other military passengers on board. The SS Mendi was named after the Mendi community of Sierra Leone since it had seen service on the West African sea route.

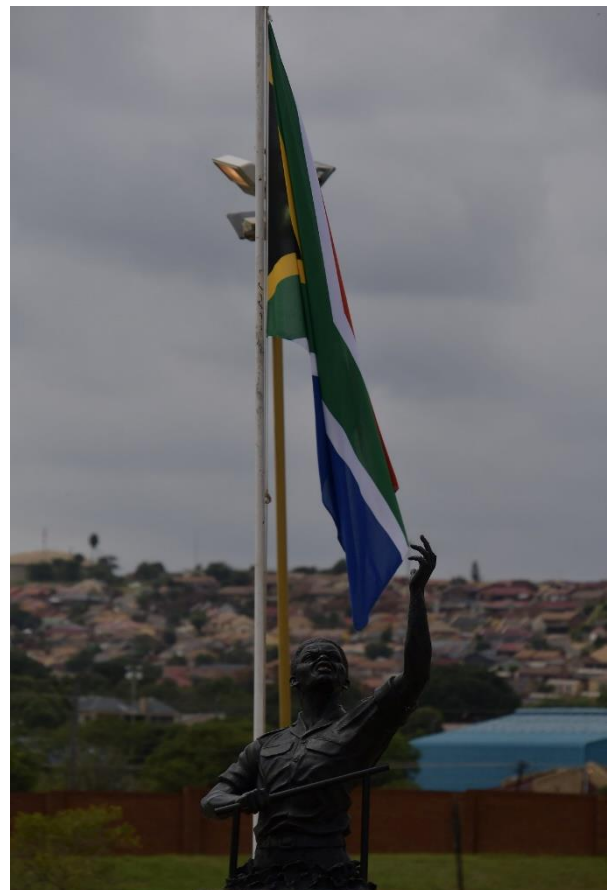
The SS Mendi's route to Plymouth in the United Kingdom included calls at Lagos in Nigeria and Freetown in Sierra Leone for replenishments. She arrived in Plymouth after a journey of 34 days from Cape Town.

In overcast conditions on the afternoon of 20 February 1917, the SS Mendi sailed from Plymouth, escorted by the destroyer HMS Brisk. On the evening of 20 February 1917, the SS Darro departed from the French port of Le Havre and headed into the English Channel. The weather was dull, overcast and misty, and the SS Darro sailed at full speed. She displayed some lights but did not sound her siren. The weather deteriorated with heavy fog and due to her slow speed, the HMS Brisk had difficulty in keeping station a cable length astern of the SS Mendi.

At 04:57 on 21 February 1917, about 11 miles south-southwest of St Catherine's Point on the Isle of Wight, the bow of the SS Darro crashed into the starboard side of the SS Mendi with tremendous force, tearing a large opening through which water poured into the SS Mendi. Men standing on the deck were hurled to the deck while those asleep were woken up. The two ships drifted apart, leaving the large hole on the side of the SS Mendi.

The many hours of training and exercises during the voyage from Cape Town paid off as the men, shaken by the collision, struggled out of their blankets, picked up their lifebelts and made their way in the dark and rising icy water to the deck of the ship. Sadly, some 140 of the men were trapped in their cabins and could not escape. Some 750 men made it to the deck and started lowering the lifeboats. All appeared to be calm and the men were disciplined as they went about their tasks.

As the SS Mendi took on water, she leaned heavily to starboard, making it very difficult to lower the lifeboats on the port side. Some of the lifeboats were successfully launched, but several of them capsized on hitting the water, while others capsized when the men tried to jump into them. As there



*The SS Mendi memorial in Atteridgeville.*

were not enough lifeboats, the men proceeded to make use of the life rafts, which could each support only 20 men at a time.

It is recorded that Rev Wauchope Dyobha calmed the panicking men and quietened them in their hour of death, capturing their attention by raising his arms aloft in the true tradition, as he cried out in a loud voice:

**“Be quiet and calm my countrymen, for what is taking place is exactly what you came to do. You are going to die ... But that is what you came to do ... Brothers, we are drilling the death drill. I, a Xhosa, say you are my brothers. Swazis, Pondos, Basutos, we die like brothers. We are the sons of Africa. Raise your war cries, brothers, for though they made us leave *assegaïs* in the *kraal*, our voices are left with our bodies.”**

It was further said that the men removed their boots and stomped the death dance on the deck of the SS Mendi.

The Captain of the SS Mendi then ordered everyone to abandon ship and to get as far away from the ship as possible. Many men, singing, praying or crying, jumped into the icy cold waters. However, many who had never seen the sea before were too afraid to jump and remained aboard the SS Mendi. Most of those that ended up in the water, even though they wore their life jackets, succumbed to hypothermia and those who remained on board perished when the SS Mendi sank. The SS Mendi sank with 618 black soldiers, two officers, seven non-commissioned officers and 33 crew members. The total number of survivors was 267 (we cannot be sure of these figures). Those who have no known grave are commemorated at the Hollybrook Memorial, Southampton, United Kingdom. 19 bodies were washed ashore and are buried in four cemeteries in the United Kingdom, and one each in France and the Netherlands.

The Commander of the SS Darro was suspended for 12 months.

Communities around the world commemorate the SS Mendi incident on 21 February every year. There are memorials erected in South Africa, the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands. In South Africa, SS Mendi memorials are located at New Brighton in Port Elizabeth, Mowbray in Cape Town, Avalon Cemetery in Soweto (unveiled by Queen [Elizabeth II](#) on 23 March 1995) and the Ga-Mothakga Resort in Atteridgeville.

The erection of the monument in Atteridgeville was encouraged by the South African Navy during the early 1990s. It is not certain when the original memorial was erected, but it appears to have been around 1995. Sadly, the original memorial was removed by an unknown person and a replacement was erected some years later. Currently, the monument requires minor repairs, some material to encircle it, and the installation of the information panel and names of the fallen heroes.

The SS Mendi tragedy has not been forgotten and the continuation, documentation and appreciation of the SS Mendi incident and the role played by the members of the SANLC are symbolised by the following:

- Two South African Navy ships were named in honour of SS Mendi and Rev Isaac Dyobha: The valour-class frigate SAS Mendi, and the warrior-class off-shore patrol vessel, SAS Isaac Dyobha.

- The [Order of Mendi for Bravery](#) is bestowed by the [President of South Africa](#) on citizens who have performed extraordinary acts of bravery.
- In March 2009, the British Ministry of Defence designated the site of the SS Mendi's wreck as a protected war grave. People must obtain permission to dive on the wreck and it is considered a criminal offence to remove or bring any piece of the wreck to the surface.
- In 2018, the SS Mendi bell was mysteriously discovered and brought to South Africa to be preserved and exhibited. This historic ornament is currently housed in the Chief of the Navy's office in Tshwane, and it is placed on display every year during the annual Armed Forces Day.

#### References

Clothier, N. *Black Valour*. University of Natal Press, Durban, 1987.

*Centenary Retrospective – Sinking of the SS Mendi 1917–2017*. Delville Wood Memorial Trust, 2017.

*Photos of the SS Mendi Memorial in Atteridgeville*. Council of Military Veterans Organisations of South Africa.

#### **Let us protect our heritage sites**

The City of Tshwane Heritage Resources Management Service Subsection of the Arts, Culture and Library Services Division of the Community and Social Development Services Department appeals to communities to protect their valuable heritage sites. The current high rate of vandalism is not only impacting the tourism sector but also erasing irreplaceable elements of our history for future generations.

#### **Request for donation of SS Mendi troopship material**

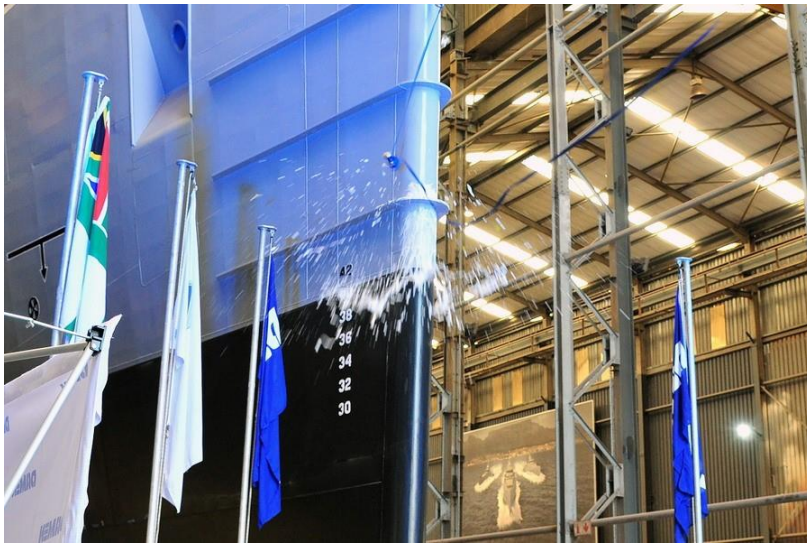
The City of Tshwane Heritage Resources Management Service Subsection of the Arts, Culture and Library Services Division of the Community and Social Development Services Department requests the community to donate books and any other written material on the SS Mendi. The material will be put on the shelves of the Atteridgeville Library, which is close to the SS Mendi Memorial, to be used by the community. Contributors can contact [heritage@tshwane.gov.za](mailto:heritage@tshwane.gov.za) or [jamesbo@tshwane.gov.za](mailto:jamesbo@tshwane.gov.za) for further arrangements.

*The above article was compiled by the City of Tshwane Heritage Section with assistance from the South African Naval Museum and the editor of Springbok. It was published on the Official Facebook Page of the City of Tshwane on Friday 19 February 2021.*

#### **SA NAVY HOLD BLESSING CEREMONY FOR FIRST NEW INSHORE PATROL VESSEL.**

Damen Shipyards Cape Town (DSCT) and the South African Navy (SAN) have held a blessing ceremony for the first of three new multi-mission inshore patrol vessels (MMIPVs) to be delivered under Project Biro.

The ceremony was held at DSCT's facilities in Cape Town on 12 February. DSCT said the plan had been to hold a large launching ceremony, but due to the situation surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, the SA Navy decided to do something on a smaller scale.



During the event, the vessel was blessed and a bottle of champagne was broken over the bow as is the custom. The South African flag was raised on the vessel and she was cheered by her crew.

Sam Montsi, Director at DSCT said, "Despite the low-key nature of the event, this remains a momentous occasion – the blessing of the first of these three important

vessels that we are building in Africa for Africa. With this taking place as the global pandemic continues, every care has been taken to ensure the well-being of everyone here today. This counts also for the day-to-day work on the project, with strict safety measures in place. Because of these measures we can continue our work on the vessels and remain on time and on budget, something in which we can all take pride."

The MMIPVs will contribute to South Africa's maritime security in augmenting the country's capability to respond effectively, rapidly, and cost-efficiently to threats such as illegal trafficking and fishing, Damen Shipyards Cape Town said.

"Today marks another milestone in the history of the SA Navy. To think where this first MMIPV might end up in history is exciting," stated Chief of the SA Navy, Vice Admiral Mosiwa Hlongwane during the blessing ceremony. "This vessel will be crucial in search and rescue operations and a critical link in security operations. The reconfigurability of the ship makes it a force multiplier in any littoral environment for the SA Navy. What the future holds for this ship, is anyone's guess. What I do know, without a doubt, is that the brave men and women, who took an oath to uphold the constitution and protect the freedoms we hold so dear, are the true heroes and protagonists of this story."

The 62 x 11-metre naval vessel will be the first Damen Sea Axe vessel to operate in South Africa. The Sea Axe is a Damen patented design offering what the company says is exceptional seakeeping behaviour as the straight-edged, axe-shaped bow cuts through the water, minimising slamming for improved safety and comfort on board and significantly reduced fuel consumption and emissions.

The MMIPVs, built to the Stan Patrol 6211 design, have a maximum speed of 26.5 knots, a range of 4 000 nautical miles, and a crew of up to 62. The vessels will each carry one 7 metre long RHIB and one 9 metre long RHIB for boarding operations. Combat equipment will include a combat management system, radar, forward gun position and heavy machinegun positions. Reutech is supplying 20 mm

Super Sea Rogue turrets with Denel GI2 cannons, as well as RTS 3200 Optronics Radar Tracker (FORT) systems and communications systems.

DSCT laid the keel of the first vessel in February 2019 and the second in August 2020. Deliveries are expected between 2021 and 2023, with the first vessel being delivered to the Navy in mid-2021. They will be based at Naval Base Durban.

Armcor previously said it expects the contract to be completed around December 2025, after it became effective on 11 January 2018. It is worth R2.471 billion. Project Biro covers the delivery of three inshore patrol vessels, three boarding boats and three sea boats.

Project Biro was originally planned to acquire three inshore and three offshore patrol vessels (earlier plans called for a minimum six offshore patrol vessels) for an estimated cost of around R6 billion. However, the offshore patrol vessel component has stalled due to a lack of funding. Damen Shipyards Cape Town had been the preferred bidder for the larger vessels. *The article was written by Guy Martin for Defence Web on 18 February 2021.*

#### **GENERAL KNOWLEDGE –courtesy Military Dispatches Vol 44 February 2021.**

This month is all about general knowledge. We ask you 25 questions, you tell us the answer. Some of them you should all know, others are a bit more difficult and will be a true test of your general knowledge regarding military matters. *Answers will be published in the April 2021 edition.*

1. Who was the only member of the South African Air Force to become Chief of the SADF?
2. In what year did National Service end in the South African Defence Force?
3. What was a Leading Seaman in the South African Navy better known as?
4. Which South African army unit was based at Ndukuduku in Zululand?
5. The motto of the South African Corps of Signals is 'Certa Cito'. What does it mean?
6. Who was South Africa's leading air ace during World War I?
7. Situated in the Northern Transvaal, close to the town of Groblersdal, was a farm where the South African Police did their counter insurgency training. What was this training facility called?
8. On what date did Operation Reindeer, the attack on Cassinga, take place?
9. Who was the first person to be awarded the Honoris Crux?
10. How many South Africans were awarded the Victoria Cross during World War II?
11. Where was the first place ever bombed by the South African Air Force?

12. What was the nickname given to Britain's Home Guard during World War II?
13. By what name was the German Panzerkampfwagen V better known?
14. What does the AK stand for in AK-47?
15. Who was the top air ace of World War II?
16. What were the code-names for the five beaches on D-Day?
17. Which big band leader disappeared over the English Channel on 15 December 1944?
18. Where did the shortest war on record take place, and how long did it last?
19. Which Rhodesian unit was known as "The Saints"?
20. What famous American aviation group flew P-51 Mustangs with bright red tails?
21. Which former heavyweight boxing champion was a paratrooper during World War II?
22. Which country has the smallest army in the world?
23. During the Vietnam War, who was known as Hanoi Jane?
24. How long did the 100-year war last?
25. What was significant about the Battle of Kursk in 1943?

## **OBITUARIES**



### **LT COL JOHN YATES 1931 – 2021**

John Yates was born in the Eastern Cape and educated at Grey High School. His military career was somewhat unique, as he served in three arms of the Services, Navy, Air Force and Army! On matriculating he saw fit to join the South African Navy where he eventually aspired to the rank of Sub Lt. However he had a love of flying and when he saw an advert for fighter pilots in the South African Air Force he applied for a transfer from the SA Navy to the SAAF.

On receiving his wings he did several conversion courses on Spitfires and Vampire jets. He volunteered for service in the Korean War and although he did a conversion course, the war

ended before his contingent left for Korea and were stood down. His flying career came to a close as he did not want to be transferred from Port Elizabeth, where he worked as a Development Engineer at General Motors.

So he transferred to the South African Army and ended his military career as the curator of the Donkin Military Museum. John joined the Port Elizabeth Branch of the SA Legion in 2005 and was a very loyal supporter of the Legion, as well as the Naval Officers Association of Southern Africa and the SA Sea Cadets. John is survived by his wife Margaret-Ann and two sons.

"I knew a gentleman; Alas! His soul has flown.;"

## **OTHER OBITUARIES**

### **BRAKPAN**

Lgr Louw Rossouw.

### **CAPE TOWN**

Lgr Anthony Venn.

### **DURBAN**

Lgr Mike Hoyer.

Lgr Ken Watkins.

### **EAST LONDON**

Lgr Johan Vosloo.

### **PIETERMARITZBURG**

Lgr Jane Payne.

Lgr Roger Clench.

### **PORT ELIZABETH**

Lgr Peter Wildman.



*Lgr Mike Hoyer receiving a service award.*



## SOUTH AFRICAN LEGION

Springbok, the Journal of the South African Legion, ISSN number 2221-9854, is the responsibility of the Communication Officer Lgr Charles Ross. Body text was set in Calibri 11 and headers, Calibri 12 pt.

### SOUTH AFRICAN LEGION STRUCTURE

#### Patron in Chief:

President of the Republic of South Africa

#### Past Presidents for Life:

- Lgr Jurie Van der Merwe
- Lgr Chris PC de B Venter

#### Honorary Life Vice Presidents:

- Lgr Jurie van der Merwe
- Lgr Arthur Blake
- Lgr Bazil Kriel
- Lgr Rick Andriès
- Lgr Quentin Gibson

National President: Lgr Brian Klopper.

National V/President: Lgr Brian Smith.

National Treasurer: Lgr George Booth.

National Secretary: Lgr Riana Venter van Zyl.

National Liaison/Membership: Lgr Mark Louw.

National Wellbeing: Lgr Rees Davies.

National Ceremonial/Discipline: Lgr Shaun Booth.

National Communication: Lgr Charles Ross.

#### Branches:

- Alexandria
- Atteridgeville
- Benoni
- Bloemfontein
- Botshabelo
- Brakpan
- Cape Canopy
- Cape Town
- Central Wits
- Durban
- East London
- England
- Europe
- Grahamstown
- Kagiso-West Rand
- Kimberley
- King Williams Town
- Kroonstad
- Lower South Coast
- North Coast
- Pietermaritzburg
- Port Alfred
- Port Elizabeth
- Pretoria
- Rooiplaas
- Scotland
- Soweto
- Strand

#### Regional Chairmen:

- Eastern Cape: Vacant.
- Free State: Lgr Jurie Van Der Merwe.
- Gauteng: Lgr Mark Louw
- Kwa-Zulu Natal: Lgr Rick Andriès
- UK & Europe: Lgr Cameron Kinnear

#### SOUTH AFRICAN LEGION,

PO Box 1936, Houghton, 2041

Tel: 010 595 4222

reception@salegion.org