



## A CENTURY LATER AND THE BELLS WILL CHIME A Memorial to SS Mendi

A Century ago, during World War I a 4200 ton troop ship, left the Port of Plymouth on the south coast of England and steamed up the icy waters of the English Channel bound for Le Havre on the northern coast of France.

On board the steamer, the SS Mendi, were 805 Black troops, 22 white Officers of the 5th Battalion of South African Native Corps and 33 crew members – a total of 860 men on route to France in support of the European War effort.

It was freezing and still dark on that tragic morning of February 21, 1917 – the SS Mendi steamed slowly through the fog up the channel, foghorn blasting, escorted by the destroyer HMS Brisk.

At 05H00 tragedy struck as Mendi was accidentally

rammed on her starboard quarter and almost split in half by the 11,500 ton cargo vessel SS Darro.

Within 20 minutes the SS Mendi sank taking with her 607 black troops, of which 137 were from the Eastern Cape, 9 White Officers and all 33 crew members – there were only 211 survivors.

The Mendi disaster was surely one of South Africa's worst World War I tragedies, only second to the horrific battle of Delville Wood in France.

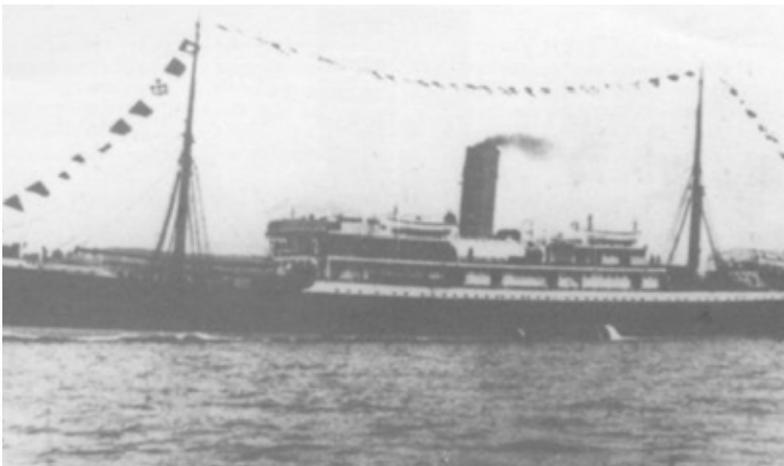
Those brave South Africans that perished in the Mendi disaster have been remembered in different ways over the last 100 years since the sinking of SS Mendi.

The Hollybrook Memorial in Southampton,

England and another memorial in Port Elizabeth were erected in memory of those courageous South Africans.

In 1995 Queen Elizabeth unveiled the memorial at the Avalon Cemetery in Soweto to commemorate the disaster, and the modern South African Navy honoured those South African too, by naming one of their frigates the SAS Mendi.

In an emotional wreath-laying ceremony at sea, on the 23 August 2004, eighty seven years after the sinking of the SS Mendi, some 20 nautical miles off the south coast of the Isle of Wight, the SAS Mendi and the British navy's HMS Nottingham met at the exact site of the disaster to honour those that died.



*S.S. Mendi carrying troops in support of the European War.*



*The modern Navy's SAS Mendi.*

### *The Order of the Mendi Decoration.*

Closer to home, South African's highest award for courage bears the Mendi name –The Order of the Mendi Decoration for Bravery, bestowed by the president on South African citizens who have performed extra ordinary acts of bravery....



Surely the most fitting recognition is the memorial that stand 170 feet high in the Port Elizabeth Harbour.

***But what is the connection to SS Mendi ?***

Well the Campanile, that towers above the harbour and the City centre, was built in 1923 to honour the landing of the 1820 Settlers in the Bay.

With its 23 bells, housed in the belfry, which were funded by descendants of the 1820 Settlers, and were hung in 1936, it was now deemed necessary to rehabilitate the tower as a whole, the clock with its 4 large dials and the 23 bells, that have a collective weight of over 16 tons – that have chimed for over 75 years.

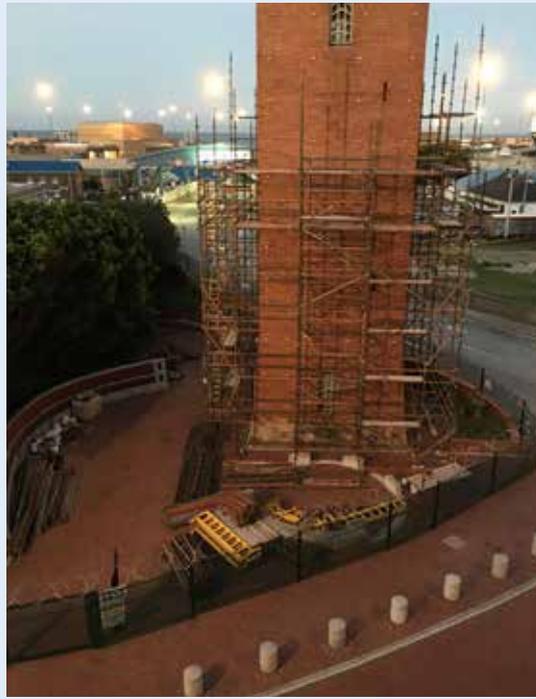
In 2015 The Nelson Mandela Development Agency

appointed **IBHAYI CONTRACTING** to carry out the rehabilitation work on the Campanile.

They in turn were requested by the municipality to contact the original British manufacturers of the bells to cast another two, one in honour of those South Africans who perished when the SS Mendi sank and the other bell being donated by the citizens of Nelson Mandela Bay.



*Scaffolding being erected up the 52meter high Campanile in preparation for phase 1 of the restoration process.*



*The Campanile towering over the city.*

Most of the restoration work on the Campanile was completed by **IBHAYI CONTRACTING** early in 2017 – structurally sound, windows fitted, a new steel structure installed to house the 23 restored Bells..... *it was almost time for those bells to ring out again.*



*Large bell being hoisted into position.*



*Ibhayi contractors hanging a restored bell in the belfry.*



**All that remains is to install the custom made lift, that saves visitors climbing the 204 steps to the observation floor and the hanging of the two new Bells – number 24 and 25.**

**The 24th Brass Bell has the following words embossed on it:**

*“isikhumbuzo samagorha azika no S.S. Mendi”*



*In honour to the heroes who went down with the SS Mendi.*

**The 25th Brass Bell bears the following words:**

*“isuka kubemi base – Nelson Mandela Bay”*



*From the citizens of Nelson Mandela Bay.*

**What a tribute to those brave 616 South Africans who perished. 🌀**

