

Chaplain at SS Mendi Parade

Rallies the Men

Article and Photographs by: Lt Cdr Glenn von Zeil

“If man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”

With these words attributed to Martin Luther King is how Padre Tony Bethke began his sermon at the annual SS Mendi Memorial Parade at the University of Cape Town on Sunday, 22 February 2015. The company of the SAS MENDI provided sentries whilst the SA Army band ensured that hymns, Last Post, Reveille and the National Anthem were played to perfection.

The parade was hosted by the Gunners’ Association and attended by Hugh Amooore, Registrar of the University of Cape Town, representatives of the British and French Embassies, Director of Military

Veterans representative, SANMVA, ex Servicemen’s Association, various Cape Town-based units, Maj Gen (Ret) Phil Pretorius, RAdm (JG) Guy Jamieson, RAdm (JG) Ralph Ndabambi, Director Naval Reserves, Capt (RN) Rex Cox, OC and Officers from HMS DRAGON as well as wardens and head students from surrounding residences.



Left to Right: The Admiral and his men: Sea Arron Graham, Sea Brian Sokhulu, RAdm Ralph Ndabambi, Director Naval Reserves, Capt (SAN) Rammutloa, SSO1 SANDF Reserves Western Cape, Sea Sizwe Thusi and Sea Oliver Wale. All UCT mechanical engineering students on the SANR University Reserve Training Programme.



Padre Tony Bethke delivers his sermon on the role of the Reverend Isaac Dyobha, the chaplain to the 5th Battalion of the South African Labour Corps during the sinking of the SS Mendi.





Wreaths laid at the SS Mendi memorial at the University of Cape Town.



RAdm (JG) Guy Jamieson lays a wreath on behalf of the SA Navy at the SS Mendi Memorial, University of Cape Town.



Capt (SAN) Rammutloa, SSO SANDF Reserves Western Cape, and Cpl Sarah Calver, a member of the SA Army Band. Both are UCT alumni.

Padre Bethke's sermon focussed on the role of the padre, Reverend Isaac Dyobha, the chaplain to the 5th Battalion of the South African Labour Corps. As he was educated by missionaries, he would have led these men on a spiritual journey, including daily fellowship and the singing of various hymns in their mother tongue. Whilst the Mendi stopped at Lagos, Nigeria, to have a gun fitted to the stern, he would have had additional time to minister to and build a strong bond with the men on the voyage to Plymouth.

Therefore, in their hour of need after the fateful collision in the English Channel in thick fog on 21 February 1917, he would have been well-placed to play a defining role in what transpired. Oral tradition passed down from those who survived records that Rev Dyobha raised his arms and said aloud: "Be quiet and calm, my countrymen. What is happening now is 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 to you who are my brothers...Swazis, Pondos and Basotho's...let us die like brothers. We are



the sons of Africa. Raise your war cries, brothers, for though they made us leave our assegais in the kraal, our voices are left with our bodies.”

Many men were killed outright in the collision and some were trapped below deck. Those who survived the collision gathered on the listing upper deck of the sinking Mendi. Dyobha’s actions and words would have brought calm, especially to those who could not swim and had to enter life boats or the icy waters.

Padres, who serve in the SANDF, have maintained this tradition of building strong bonds with those who share the same uniform and continue to provide leadership and calm during difficult times.

Also attending the parade was the great-grandson of Col Sgt Fitzclarence Jarvis Fitzpatrick, Jacques De Vries. Fitzpatrick was born in King William’s Town, and, during World War 1, attested in the Union Defence Force in the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC). As a member of the 5th Battalion C Company, he embarked at Cape Town on HMT (His Majesty’s Troopship) Mendi on 15 January 1917. He would have had a first-hand account of what transpired that fateful day and have had a story to tell. Following his rescue, he re-joined the SANLC in France. However, he was eventually declared medically unfit and discharged owing to the debilitating effects to his lungs and body after exposure to the icy waters. He later settled in Cradock and passed away at the age of 55 on 14 June 1933.

Also attending the parade were members of various SANDF Reserve Units and especially members of the SAN Reserve, including, RAdm (JG) Ralph Ndabambi, Director Naval Reserves, as well as four current University Reserve Training Programme (URTP) UCT engineering students.



Officers and gentlemen pay their respects at the SS Mendi Memorial at the University of Cape Town.

Left to Right: Gunner Kevin Ashton, RAdm (JG) Guy Jamieson, RAdm (JG) Ralph Ndabambi, Capt (RN) Rex Cox, OC SAS DRAGON.

The service had special significance for Capt (SAN) Rammutloa, SSO SANDF Reserves Western Cape, and Cpl Sarah Calver, a member of the SA Army Band, as both are UCT alumni.

As has become the norm at this parade, round Atlantic beach pebbles were placed on the memorial instead of individual flowers to create a scene of a beach in the English Channel.

Thank you to all who were involved in organising and ensuring that this annual event ran smoothly. You have ensured that this generation has kept the promise that “at the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them”. 🌀

