



sa navy

Department:
Defence
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

MEDIA INVITE

Page 1 of 3

SA NAVY TO DEPLOY A FRIGATE TO EUROPE AND COUNTRIES ON THE AFRICAN WEST COAST

The 21st of February 2017 will be the centenary commemoration of the sinking of the SS MENDI, a troop ship with South African soldiers on it, which sank during World War I in the English Channel near the Isle of Wight (see history below). The SAS AMATOLA, a Valour Class Frigate, from the South African Navy will be in the United Kingdom to commemorate this sad occasion that took place a hundred years ago.

Although this is the main reason for the deployment of the SAS AMATOLA the ship will also participate in the British Operational Sea Training (BOST) whilst in England. On completion of BOST and the SS MENDI commemoration, the ship will proceed to Germany for an exercise with the German Armed forces, Exercise GOOD HOPE VII. This exercise normally takes place every second year in South Africa. However, Germany has requested that the exercise takes place in Germany in 2017.

The ship will also do borderline protection patrols whilst in South African waters which will switch over to an anti-piracy patrol on the west coast of Africa. En route back to South Africa the ship will do diplomatic visits to four African countries; Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, Angola and Namibia.

The ship will depart Simon's Town on 16 January 2017 and arrive in Rota, Spain on 2 February where the ship will refuel. On 4 February the ship will sail to Plymouth, England, to arrive on 8 February. SAS AMATOLA will participate in BOST from 8 to 18 February and proceed to Portsmouth to arrive on 19 February.

Between 19 and 24 February there will be various activities to commemorate the sinking of the SS MENDI. The main activity will be where some of the relatives of the soldiers that passed-away will go to sea with the SAS AMATOLA to lay a wreath at the position where the SS MENDI sank.

The ship will depart Portsmouth on 24 February to arrive in Kiel on 27 February. Exercise GOOD HOPE VII will take place from 27 February to 5 March. On completion of the exercise the ship will do a historic visit to Rostock (previously part of East Germany) before sailing back to Rota in Spain to once again re-fuel between 19 and 21 March.

From Spain the SAS AMATOLA will be visiting the following ports in order to execute diplomatic visits:

- Tema, Ghana 30 March – 03 April.
- Malabo, Equatorial Guinea 06 – 08 April.
- Luanda, Angola 11 – 13 April.
- Walvis Bay, Namibia 17 – 19 April.

The SAS AMATOLA is scheduled to be back in Simon's Town on 22 April.



Members of the media are cordially invited to attend a Media Briefing on Friday 13 January at 09h30 on board the SAS AMATOLA in the Naval Dockyard East, Simon's Town.

Please inform Lieutenant Commander Portia Mogotlhe at Cell No 074 440 4767 or Email: porschem4@gmail.com if you will be attending and to make arrangements to enter the harbour.

History of the Sinking of the SS MENDI

On January 16, 1917 the *Mendi* troopship sailed from Cape Town en route to La Havre in France carrying the last contingent of the SANLC comprising 805 black private, 5 white officers and 17 non-commissioned officers as well as 33 crewmembers.

On the morning of 21 February 1917, another ship, the *SS Darro* (10 000 tons) travelling at full speed and emitting no warning signals, rammed the *SS Mendi* (4 230 tons), which sank in 20 minutes. No steps were taken by the *SS Darro* to lower boats or rescue the survivors. She stood off and floated nearby while lifeboats from the *SS Mendi's* escorting destroyer, *HMS Brisk*, rowed among the survivors, trying to rescue them.

There are many stories of bravery about the men's bravery as the ship went down. One of them is that of the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, who cried words of encouragement to the dying men.

"Be quite and calm my countrymen, for what is taking place now is what you came here to do. We are all going to die, and that is what we came for. Brothers, we are drilling the death drill. I, a Zulu, say here and now that you are all my brothers... Xhosas, Swazis, Pondos, Basotho and all others, let us die like warriors. We are the sons of Africa. Raise your war cries my brothers, for though they made us leave our assegais back in the kraals, our voices are left with our bodies..."

The men sang and stamped the death dance together as the *SS Mendi* sank, taking with her all still on board and many who leapt into the icy waters (607 black troops along with 9 of their fellow white countrymen and all 33 crewmembers). Of note is that, regardless of clan or tribe, these men faced death together as South Africans.

Other heart wrenching tales of valour are told of those trying to survive in the freezing water. It is said that the cries of the men dying of hypothermia echoed in the misty dawn: "Ho, 'so and so', child of my mother, are you dead that you do not hear my voice?" and "Ho, to me, men of 'so and so', that we may all die together?" Joseph Tshite, a schoolmaster from near Pretoria, encouraged those around him with hymns and prayers until he died. A white sergeant was supported by two black compatriots, who swam with him and found place for him on a raft.

Among the black Africans lost were some prominent men such as the Pondoland chiefs Henry Bokleni, Dokoda Richard Ndamase, Mxonywa Bangani, Mongameli and the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha.

On receiving the news (on 9 March 1917) of the disaster, all the members of the South African House of Assembly, under the then Prime Minister Louis Botha and a celebrated Boer War hero, rose in their seats as a token of respect to their fellow South Africans who had gone down with *SS Mendi*. Lore has it that the black tribes in South Africa were aware of the disaster before they were officially advised by the government.

The survivors were to continue with their military service in France. One of the highlights was when some of them met the King and Queen of England at Rouen in July 1917. One of them, Koos Matli (of the Bahaduba tribe) recalled: "One day we were all called together and we went to another ship. On the deck we met King George V and Queen Mary. The King addressed us personally and thanked us for the services we had rendered. He told us that we were going home within a few days, and when we reached home we must tell our Chiefs and fathers how he had thanked us.

Like so many other military disasters, the story of the *SS Mendi* is a story of supreme courage in the face of death and valour shown between brothers toward each other in dire circumstances. The courage displayed by these men has remained a legend in South African military history.

Issued by: SANDF Media Liaison

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