



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemarkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

16 February 2017

Gunners Association, UCT to honour centenary of SS Mendi tragedy

**Ceremony to remember 616 South Africans who perished
Sunday, 26 February 2017 at UCT Lower Campus, Cecil Road, Rosebank
Media are welcome to attend. Media contact: Elijah Moholola, Tel: 083 981 7770**

The Gunners Association Western Province will host a ceremony at the University of Cape Town in honour of the 616 South African men who gave their lives during the First World War on the SS Mendi.

The ceremony will begin at 11h00 on Sunday, 26 February 2017, at the UCT Lower Campus, Cecil Road Extension, in Rosebank. The Acting Vice-Chancellor, Professor Francis Petersen, will represent UCT at the commemoration.

The Mendi Memorial on UCT campus was named a National Heritage Site on 30 December 2016. The memorial – designed by South African artist Madi Phala and installed in 2006 – is at the spot in UCT's Lower Campus that once belonged to the Rosebank Showgrounds in 1917. The Fifth Battalion of the South African Native Labour Contingent spent their last night in South Africa billeted in tents at this location. (This property did not become part of the university until 1928.)

Sinking of the SS Mendi

The men sailed from Cape Town to assist the British as non-combatants in World War One. On the morning of 21 February 1917, just south of the Isle of Wight, they were aboard the 4,000-ton steamship SS Mendi when it was rammed and almost cut in half by an 11,000-ton liner, the SS Darro. The SS Mendi sank in 20 minutes.

A total of 647 people died that morning, of whom 616 were South Africans. Among those who passed away were three Pondoland chiefs: Henry Bokleni, Dokoda Richard Ndamase and Mxonywa Bangani; and the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, who was accompanying the troops as chaplain.

According to Norman Clothier's historical study of the SS Mendi and the South African Native Labour Corps, *Black Valour* (University Of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1987), Rev Dyobha's final words to the dying men were: "Be quiet 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 Xhosa, 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 programme at UCT will include two other events planned by the Centre for African Studies. Both events are open to the public.

- An exhibition of art relating to the Mendi tragedy "Abantu beMendi", will open at 14h00 on 26 February 2017 at the Gallery of the Centre for African Studies, Upper Campus, UCT. The exhibition will feature commissioned artworks on the Mendi and the South African Native Labour Contingent by artist Buhlebezwe Siwani; rare prints by Eastern Cape artist Hilary Graham; poetry, including "Ukutshona kukaMendi" by S.E.K. Mqhayi; rare photographs and documents, including the tonic-sol-fa "Ama-gora e-Mendi" by A.M. Jonas;; and footage of the ceremony at sea which will involve the descendants of Mendi victims, at the site of the Mendi wreck, on 21 February 2017.
- A multidisciplinary conference, "Ukutshona kukaMendi"/ "Ukuzika kukaMendi" will take place on 28 - 30 March 2017 at the Centre for African Studies. Presenters include local and international scholars, film makers, artists and performance artists. Fred Khumalo's new novel about the Mendi, *Dancing the Death Drill* (Umuzi, 2017), will be launched on the evening of Wednesday, 29 March as part of the conference programme.

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Elijah Moholola

Head: Media Liaison
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5674
Fax: (021) 650 3780
Cell: (083) 981 7770
Email: elijah.moholola@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za