



The South African Military History Society

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

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NEWSLETTER - NOVEMBER 2017

The Chairman, Jan-Willem Hoorweg, opened the meeting and welcomed those visiting for the first time. The visit to Kedar Lodge for the unveiling of the bust of the Boer War heroine, Emily Back, was attended by a score of members; David Scholtz was thanked for his arranging of the bus.

A sad note was introduced when it was announced that Malcolm King, a past Chairman and active committee member had found it necessary to retire from the committee for personal reasons. The Society presented him with a token of thanks for his dedicated service over many years.

An appeal was made for people to consider volunteering to serve on the Committee which was being eroded by members having to retire for various reasons.

Several problems which had led to non-publication of the Journal during 2017 have now been resolved. The Society will in future be publishing the Journal and people wishing to contribute articles are asked to direct them to the Society only: at scribe@samilitaryhistory.org
The Editorial team will endeavour to publish the next volume as soon as possible.

The Chairman then introduced the evening's speakers; Charles Ross and Katherine Munro.

Captain Charles Ross, S.A. Navy (Retired) has been active in the affairs of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) for many years and his lecture dealt with the its work in connection with those lost at sea. In his description of how the CWGC came into being during WW I and the increasing importance of being able to memorialise the fallen, the scale of which on the Western Front was enormous, Charles detailed how the gradual importance of the registration of graves and cemeteries came about.

The War however, in the manner in which it was fought in the trenches, made it difficult, if not impossible at times, to locate and identify bodies with the result that many thousands of casualties were never buried in the cemeteries, of which there are a huge number scattered all over parts of France and Belgium. The graves there are beautifully recorded and maintained but it was left to the CWGC to motivate, in association with various Governments and organisations, the erection of Memorials and Monuments. Thiepval, Menin Gate and the Delville Wood Memorial are mere examples of the many which have been erected around the world to commemorate soldiers fallen and never traced. But what about the many thousands of those lost at sea?

While British and thus Commonwealth battle casualties were traditionally gathered up and buried

on the battlefield, the same, naturally, could not apply at sea. The losses of Naval Personnel, Merchant Mariners and Airforce crews who had died at sea would need attention and this is evidenced by the gradual proliferation of memorials on shore. Initially we find naval memorials in the so-called "home ports" such as Portsmouth, Plymouth and Falmouth. These were memorials dedicated to men of the Royal Navy, and recorded with the names of those lost only at sea. Later additional motivations for the Merchant Marine, Fleet Air Arm Airmen and Soldiers lost at Sea saw dedicated Memorials being built and unveiled. Included among the many references to these memorials was the loss of the SS *Mendi* which has special significance to South African.

This latter event co-incidentally tied in with the Main Lecture of the evening presented by Katherine Munro.

Professor Munro, whose subject concerned the 'South African Native Labour Corps and the sinking of the *Mendi*,' detailed some of the events surrounding the challengeable circumstances for the creation of the Native Labour Corps. This body recruited between 1916 and 1918, mainly amongst men from rural areas all over South Africa rather besmirched the call to serve "for King and Country." From the very inception of the Corps it was never the intention that these men would serve as fighting soldiers but that they would provide a labour-force with varied duties all over the rear areas of the Western Front to free men for fighting. Very controversial conditions came into being for transporting and housing the men who were being sent into a totally alien climate from that in which they lived. Such recreational areas as were laid down were in conflict with general European conditions, but pertaining heavily in line with the approach to indentured "Native Labour" which governed South African conditions, specifically the mining industry. The significance of the Corps would be lost to history had it not been for the horrific events of the night of 21st February 1917 when the S.S. *Mendi*, a converted cargo ship carrying troops was struck amidships and sunk.

The tragedy took place in dense fog and wartime conditions in the chilly English Channel and the loss of life was huge. Very few survived the wreck but the significance of the event has been emphasized during the 100th anniversary of the tragedy. Some have equated it with the South African tragedy of Delville Wood. Much controversy has accompanied the event ranging from the fact that amateur divers have stripped the wreck of memorabilia with little chance of such items ever reaching persons or organisations of interest. This is despite the wreck being declared a "War Grave."

Tying in with the curtain raiser lecture, Kathy, whose interest is sparked by her architectural background on various War Memorials, was able to enumerate in some detail the many memorials which have been constructed to commemorate the event. These range from additions which have, somewhat bizarrely, been made to the famous Delville Wood Memorial to the Avalon Cemetery Memorial in Soweto. This latter somehow, despite its great significance to the bulk of the South African population, has, sadly, become victim to the increasing evidence of a lax attitude to preservation of memorials, grave-sites, etc. and seems to be falling into disrepair. Remote tribal villages have erected memorials of some kind or another and the one at the University of Cape Town seems in good repair. Significant is the way the grief of the loss of loved ones to some or other confusing defence of a totally alien "King and Empire" across the seas affected a people, some of whom, sadly, are only motivated to remember when some sort of politicization is invoked.

Both talks aroused a lot of audience interest and the meeting ended at 21: 40

Colin Harris
Scribe.

On-site Research library at SAAF Memorial

Researchers might want to make use of this facility: Contact person WO2 Alan Taylor
Acting reference & technical librarian (m) 082 962-0119 (e) alantaylor@telkomsa.net

FORTHCOMING LECTURES

Johannesburg:

Thursday 9th November

CR: Ian Thurston **Rosie and the bloody 100th**
ML: Col Jan Malan **4 SAI Bn destruction of 21 FAPLA Brigade on 13 January**
 1988 at Cuito Canavale - events and lessons

Donations for the SA Legion's Remembrance Day Poppies will be gratefully received

Thursday 14th December

CR: Capt. Jeremy Carew **The Royal Fleet Auxiliary in the Falklands War**
ML: A DVD entitled **The Story of the Spitfire**

KZN in Durban:

Thursday 9th November

DDH: Donald Davies **Radio-waves along Durban's Shore-line**
ML: Don Porter **The Natal Light Horse and the action at Kheis**

Cape Town:

Thursday 9th November

A brief look at developments in the world military situation in 2017
by Major Helmoed-Römer Heitman

SAMHSEC:

Saturday 18th November 2017 at the SAAF Museum, Port Elizabeth starting at 10h30

Michael Mills **Allister Miller's historic flight from Cape Town to Port**
 Elizabeth on 8th November 1917
CR: Anton de Wit **South Africa's Mobile Watch Units.**
ML: **to be confirmed**

R= curtain raiser; ML= main lecture; DDH = Darrell D Hall Memorial Lecture;