

## **The Cachalots and the Mendi Memorials**

With the centenary of the sinking of the *Mendi* looming, Richard Hellyer, a Cachalot with South African connections (he lived there for 15 years and did his pre-sea training at the General Botha Training School before going to sea with *Union Castle*) asked if this was something that the Cachalots should be involved with and received a positive response. Richard is a volunteer involved with the *HSL 102* (a WWII RAF rescue launch) at Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust and was seeking permission to accompany *SAS Amatola* and *HMS Dragon* to the wreck site where a wreath laying ceremony was to be held on the anniversary of the sinking, 21st Feb.

We also learned that, on Monday the 20th, HRH The Princess Royal would be attending a Memorial Service at Hollybrook Cemetery in Southampton, where there is a Memorial recording the names of those lost in the tragedy. We were not to be included in that event, there being a large contingent from the *Amatola* present and security was very tight.

Richard had also received a positive response from the Naval authorities so, at 0700 on the Tuesday, I joined him at Victory Gate to complete the security procedures and then boarded 102 at her berth next to the *Warrior*.

There were just five of us onboard, the Skipper, Diggory Rose, Richard and another volunteer, 'Knotty' Ray, who were signed on as crew, Councillor Lynne Hook, the Mayor of Gosport, and myself. At 0810 we slipped our berth and left Portsmouth in company with *Dragon* and *Amatola*. While they proceeded out by the main channel to the Nab we were able to head south via Bembridge Ledge. The wind was blowing a good force 4 from the West and by the time we got to the West Princessa bouy, and out of the immediate shelter of the IOW, it was obvious from the sea and the swell that, even if we managed to get to the wreck site 10 miles south of St.Catherine's Point, we would be unable to safely participate in the ceremony. With limited deck space and no outboard rails, our wreaths might not be the only things to end up in the sea. Deciding that discretion is the better part of valour we snuck into Whitecliff Bay, in the lee of Culver Cliff, to cast our wreaths there.

I had come with a bio-degradable wreath, having rejected the normal RBL one which contained a lot of plastic and which surely wouldn't have passed the critical eye of any pollution aware observer. Likewise, Richard had two bio-degradable ones, one on behalf of The Society of Master Mariners South Africa, and the other representing the Mayor of Southampton. Councillor Hook had joined us with little notice and no time to have a wreath made up so was equipped with the conventional RBS poppy wreath. She led us in some moments of quiet contemplation and quoted the words of Isaac Wauchope, "*Be quiet and calm, my countrymen..... so let us die as brothers.*"

The wreaths were then cast into the waters and photographs taken. The two mayoral wreaths were then recovered, something that would probably have been impossible at the wreck site, and we made our way back to Portsmouth, arriving on berth around 1010.

Richard Hellyer took the Southampton wreath straight to the Hollybrook Cemetery and laid it alongside the flowers of the previous day. Councillor Hook took hers back to Gosport with the intention of investigating a report that some of the victims were actually buried in Gosport and laying her wreath there. The number reported, nine, gives rise to the suspicion that there might some confusion with the nine known to be buried at Milton Cemetery in Portsmouth, where another Memorial Service had already been held the previous week.

Some personal reflections:

On the *Mendi*, Captain Yardley, an Extra Master, did all the right things and lost his ship and 646 souls.

On the *Darro*, Captain Stump, did all the wrong things but his ship and crew survived intact. He was steaming at full speed in fog, without sounding any signals, and it seems astounding to a modern seafarer that Stump was not censured for this seemingly reckless behaviour but it was accepted as permissible in war, there being a very real threat from submarines. There are now very few mariners who actually sailed even during the second world war and have any experience of such hostile conditions. Who knows how we ourselves would have behaved.

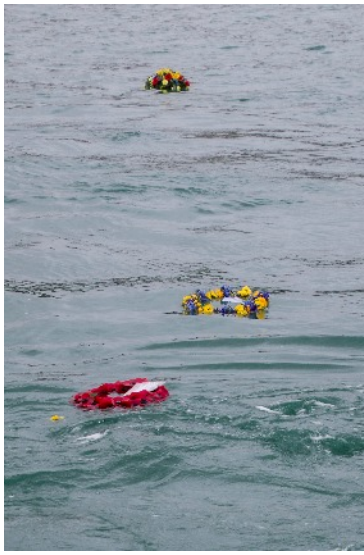
The court found:

*Neither the loss of the s.s. "Mendi," nor the loss of life, nor the material damage sustained by the s.s. "Darro," was caused by the wrongful act or default of the master of the s.s. "Mendi." - The loss of the s.s. "Mendi" and the loss of life, and the material damage sustained by the s.s. "Darro," were caused by the wrongful act and default of the master of the s.s. "Darro." The Court suspends his certificate, No. 017169, for 12 months from the date hereof; not so much because of his neglect to observe the said Regulations under war conditions, as because of his failure to comply with section 422 (1) (a) of the Merchant Shipping Act, 1894, ..... inasmuch as he failed to send away a boat or boats to ascertain the extent of the damage done to the other vessel, and to render to that vessel, her master, crew and passengers such assistance as was practicable and necessary. There was no reasonable cause why he did not so comply, as very shortly after the collision he had the strongest evidence that his own vessel was in no danger of foundering.*

The men of the SANLC were designated as 'volunteers' but we all know that volunteering sometimes don't feel very voluntary. Volunteered by their country, they were not to be used as a fighting force and were forbidden to bear arms as there was a fear that they could revolt against military or civilian authority. It was, after all, just twenty years after the end of the Zulu wars, and only 52 years after the abolition of slavery in the US. Proud men, many from a warrior class, denied even the comfort of their assegais, they were to be used as cheap, expendable labour. They expected to be called upon to die, but not quite in these circumstances. Did the death dance actually occur? Who recorded Isaac Wauchope's stirring words, even mentally, under such chaotic and horrific circumstances? Who knows what actually happened that terrible night? The legend has grown over the years and it has become accepted that, yes, the death dance did actually occur. But Reg Kelso's account on the previous pages is aptly named, 'The STORY of the Mendi' and that is what it is.

I do think that it is shameful that the concept of brotherhood and bravery, reportedly shown by those dying African native labourers, did not extend to those responsible for their fate and in a position to save at least some of them. But we are looking at it from a distance of 100 years and with a different set of *mores*. Through the fog of time, in fact.

Terry Clark



HSL 102, top left, and the memorial wreaths cast.  
Above, Councillor Lynne Hook and Richard Hellyer.