

The story of the S.S. Mendi

The “Mendi” was a small passenger vessel of some 4,230GRT owned by the British and African Steam Navigation Company and operated by Elder Dempster Lines. In 1916 the vessel was requisitioned as a troopship by HMG and it was in this capacity that she called in Capetown in January 1917. There she loaded about 1,500 tons of Government cargo and embarked an African labour battalion comprising 823 men, most of whom were black and who came from many of the provinces



S.S. Mendi, Elder Dempster Lines, LOA 370 ft, 4230 GRT, Captain Yardley

of the (then) Union of South Africa. They were volunteer members of The South African Native Labour Corps and, as such, were not permitted to “bear arms” but they carried out vital work as stevedores, builders and general labourers. The vast majority had never seen the sea before and few, if any, could swim.

On departure Capetown in convoy and escorted by the destroyer “Brisk”, the ship called At Lagos, West Africa where a stern gun was fitted and then proceeded on passage to Plymouth. “Mendi” was under the command of Captain Henry Arthur Yardley, holder of a Certificate of Competency (Extra Master).

On the afternoon of February 20th “Mendi” and her escort “Brisk” departed Plymouth bound for Le Havre where the men of the SANLC would disembark. As she proceeded up-Channel the light wind fell away and the mist turned to fog. Three lookouts were posted (one in the crow’s nest and two on the forecastle head) speed was reduced and the whistle was sounded in accordance with the “Col.Reggs”. At 0345 on February 21st, the fog was dense and when the Second and Fourth Officers took the Watch at 0400 the vessel was on “Dead Slow”.

At 0445 the escort destroyer asked Captain Yardley to increase speed as she was finding it difficult to keep station but this the Master refused to do.

About 0500, in a position some 11 miles off St.Catherine’s Point, IOW the Fourth Officer “heard a vessel approaching” and, almost immediately, saw the masthead light and port side light of a larger vessel approaching his starboard side, forward of the beam. The S.S. “Darro”, owned and operated by The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company and commanded by Captain Henry Winchester Stump, holder of a Master’s Certificate of Competency, struck “Mendi” forward of her Bridge structure inflicting lethal damage to the cargo spaces housing many of the Africans, and the surrounding shell plating. It was subsequently ascertained that “Darro” was proceeding at “Full Speed” (with her engine at “Stand By”) and was not sounding her whistle in accordance with the Regulations.

Many of the men below decks aboard “Mendi” were killed outright in the collision and many were trapped. On passage from Capetown, several Accident Drills had been staged and, accordingly, the survivors mustered on the deck as she listed heavily to starboard and began to sink. The port boats could not be lowered and of the starboard boats that were lowered several capsized as the survivors clambered aboard from the icy water.

“Darro” made no effort to assist (as the Master feared a submarine attack) but the escorting destroyer (who had not seen the collision due to the dense fog) put her boats down and rescued a number of crew members and black Africans.

Among those who mustered on the Boat Deck was a Congregational Minister who was an interpreter and he joined the terrified survivors huddling together as “Mendi” slowly but remorselessly sank into the dark icy waters. Realising the dire situation, the Rev.Wauchope “raised his arms aloft and cried out in a loud voice”

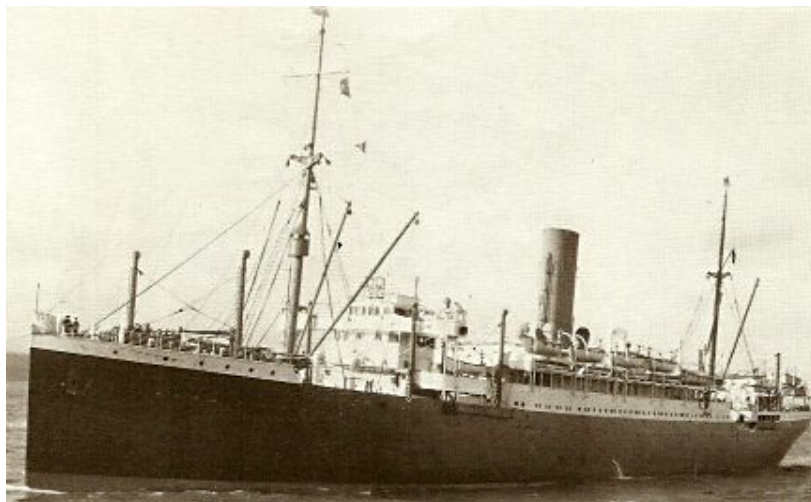
“Be quiet and calm, my countrymen. What is happening now is what you came to do...you are going to die but that is what you came to do.

Brothers, we are drilling the death drill ..I, a Xhosa, say you are my brothersSwazis, Pundos, Basotho....so 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 the bodies”

With that, the men took off their boots and stamped the Death Dance as “Mendi” slipped below the waters taking some 35 crew members, 7 white NCO’s and 618 black soldiers with her.

An investigation led to a formal hearing in July 1917 and the Court totally exonerated Captain Yardley but the Master of the “Darrow” was found guilty of “having travelled at a dangerously high speed in thick fog and of having failed to ensure that his ship emitted the necessary fog sound signals”. His Certificate of Competency was *suspended for one year* - a sentence that drew criticism from many quarters on account of it’s extreme leniency.



S.S. Darro Royal Mail Steam Packet Co.,LOA 501 ft, 11484 GRT, Captain Stump

The Official Report on the findings of the Formal Investigation, dated 8th August 1917, can be found at http://www.plimsoll.org/images/39085a_tcm4336418.pdf

The casualty figures quoted therein are:

30 Crew

2 Military Officers

7 NCOs

607 Native troops

There are many references to the Mendi disaster to be found online and, as usual, caution is advised. Internet generated anomalies abound. Perhaps the Official Report quoted above could be described as the definitive source but I doubt it. It took the Commonwealth War Graves Commission until 2007 to correct the names and spellings for the Memorial at Hollybrook Cemetery.