

On the occasion of the Annual Remembrance Day Commemoration of the Fallen Heroes
11 November 2007

SPEECH BY THE EXECUTIVE MAYOR OF JOHANNESBURG, CLR AMOS MASONDO, ON THE OCCASION OF THE ANNUAL REMEMBRANCE DAY COMMEMORATION OF THE FALLEN HEROES, CENOTAPH, HARISSON STREET – JOHANNESBURG

Programme Director

The First Lady of the Republic of South Africa: Mrs Zanele Mbeki

Speaker of Council: Clr Nkele Ntingane

Chief Whip of Council: Clr Bafana Sithole

Members of the Mayoral Committee

Fellow Councillors

Managers and Officials of Council

Colonel Reverend Mantsi Mahopi

Rabbi Ron Hendler

Members of the Community

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Programme Director, thank you for the opportunity to say a few words at this important occasion – the Remembrance Day in commemoration of the fallen heroes.

This occasion provides us with a unique opportunity to honour those who have paid the supreme sacrifice in defence of freedom and liberty – but also to rededicate ourselves to the new struggles that we are engaged in.

It was on this day, 89 years ago – on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918 - when the Armistice to end the First World War came into effect and ended the hostilities.

Since then Remembrance Day ceremonies are held every year on the Sunday closest to 11 November and are being observed in most countries that formed part of the old British Commonwealth. I am told that this is the 87th year in succession that a ceremony is being held at the Cenotaph in Johannesburg.

The First World War was referred to by the political leaders of the time as "the War to end all Wars." Clearly, in terms of statistics it, was the most brutal and devastating conflict of all time – 20 million deaths, 21 million more wounded or maimed for life. More than half of the 20 million casualties were civilians.

Sadly the world did not learn from the mistakes they made and a mere twenty years later the very same powers that fought each other to a standstill in the trenches of France and Belgium were again engaged in blood confrontation. And very little came of the lofty ideal to end all wars, as those who read newspapers and watch the news every night can attest to.

Of the South African soldiers who participated on behalf of the Allied Forces more than 9 400 never returned home and a further 12 000 were wounded in action.

Among the bravest of the brave were a number of black South Africans who were enlisted in the so-called Native Labour Contingent sent to perform menial tasks for the soldiers who were engaged in a "white man's war." Once on the battlefield many of them participated in the hostilities and committed acts of great daring and bravery. Sadly official history has been very silent on the exploits of these South African heroes.

Programme Director, on 16th January 1917 the troop ship SS Mendi troopship sailed from Cape Town to France carrying the Fifth Battalion of the South African Native Labour Contingent. On board were 805 black privates, 22 white officers and 33 crew-members.

On the morning of 21st February 1917, just south of the Isle of Wight, the small steamship was rammed and almost cut in half by an 11 000-ton liner, the SS Darro. The SS Mendi sank in 20 minutes, and 607 black troops, nine white officers and all 33 crew members died in the icy waters of the English Channel.

The Captain of the Darro was later disciplined for travelling at speed through fog without sounding a warning horn. It was also said that he took no steps to save the drowning while lifeboats from other nearby ships rowed among survivors, trying to rescue them. The few survivors of the SS Mendi told tales of magnificent bravery and immense courage in the face of death. One incident that was often recounted was the actions of the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, who calmed the men by crying out his famous prayer:

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 brothers ... Swazis, Pondos, 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 our bodies."

Ladies and Gentlemen, a democratic South African government has taken a number of steps to honour the memory of the valiant men who perished in the English Channel. One of the SA Navy's frigates has been named the SAS Mendi and among our fleet of Warrior-class attack craft we find the SAS Isaac Dyobha - probably one of the few naval warships in the world named after a cleric. The Mendi has also given its name to South Africa's highest award for courage, the Order of the Mendi Decoration for Bravery, bestowed by the President on South African citizens who have performed extraordinary acts of bravery.

And today's Remembrance Day commemorations across the country are dedicated to the sinking of the SS Mendi 90 years ago.

Programme Director, the City of Johannesburg took a decision in 1996 to rededicate this Cenotaph in the memory of all who died in defence of freedom and liberty. This also includes those who paid the ultimate price in the struggle against Apartheid and oppression in South Africa. We honour their memory as much as we do those who participated in war-time service and it is indeed a pleasure to see so many veterans of the liberation struggle and their families together with representatives from statutory forces.

We also use this opportunity to honour the contribution made by members of the South African Police Service and the Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department who have lost

their lives in the line of duty. Our gratitude also goes to those members of Emergency Services who have sacrificed their lives to save others.

We appreciate the presence of family members, colleagues and friends who are honouring the memory of their fallen heroes. Please be assured of the City's appreciation for the sacrifices made by your loved ones and our continuing support for you and your families in the future.

Programme Director, I can think of no better way to remember the sacrifices made by our soldiers than to unite in the battle to create a better Johannesburg, a better Gauteng and a better South Africa. I trust that this day and this ceremony will inspire us to achieve more in our quest to bring a better life for all our people.

I will read a scripture from 1 Corinthians 1: 40-44

"And there are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies; the beauty that belongs to heavenly bodies is different from the beauty that belongs to earthly bodies. The sun has its own beauty, the moon another beauty, and the stars a different beauty; and even among stars there are different kinds of beauty. This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised, it is immortal. When buried, it is ugly and weak; when raised it will be beautiful and strong. When buried, it is a physical body, when raised; it will be a spiritual body. There is, of course, a physical body, so there has to be a spiritual body."

Thank you