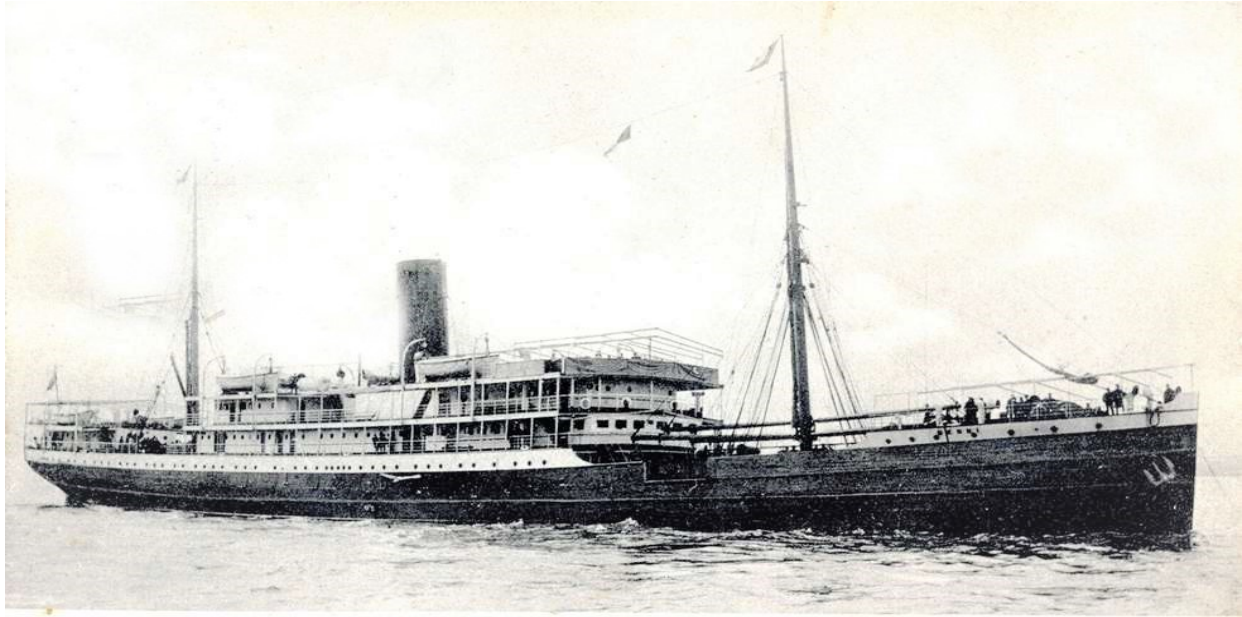


SS Mendi

The greatest Maritime disaster to occur in Isle of Wight Waters. 650 men perished after the SS Mendi collided with SS Darro.



R. M. S. "Mendi" British & African Steam Navigation Co.

Photo courtesy of the John Gribble Collection

Many in the UK have never heard of SS Mendi, yet in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province she is as famous as RMS Titanic.

SS Mendi was a British 4,230 tons GRT passenger steamship that was built in 1905. Alexander Stephen and Sons of Linthouse in Glasgow, Scotland launched her on 18th June 1905 for the British and African Steam Navigation Company, which appointed group company Elder Dempster & Co to manage her on their Liverpool-West Africa trades. She was named after the Mendi tribe in Sierra Leone. In 1916 during the First World War the UK Admiralty chartered her as a troopship.

THE JOURNEY

(Her previous journey was the transport of Nigerian troops from Lagos to Mombasa for service in German East Africa)

On the 16th January 1917, the SS *Mendi* (troopship) sailed from Cape Town en route to Europe carrying a contingent of the SANLC, comprising 802 Black soldiers, 5 white officers and 17 NCO's as well as 89 crew members and 56 military passengers. They sailed at noon forming up in convoy with four ships carrying South African and Australian troops, and gold. They were escorted by the cruiser HMS *Cornwall*.

The *Mendi* was commanded by the experienced Captain Henry Arthur Yardley.

On 21 February 1917 a large cargo steamship, *Darro*, collided with her in the English Channel south of the Isle of Wight, 9 miles (14.4 km) off St Catherine's point. The *Mendi* sank killing 646 people, most of whom were black South African troops.

The new port Admin Building at the Port of Ngqura, South Africa, has been named eMendi in commemoration of the SS Mendi.

Foggy passage

Diver Martin Woodward was the first person to find and identify the wreck of SS Mendi in 1974.

He discovered the tragic story behind the artefacts that he brought to the surface. Martin, owner of The Shipwreck and Maritime Museum in the Isle of Wight said: "The ship was coming up through the Channel destined for Le Havre."

As part of the British Empire, South Africa was automatically at war with Germany. Thousands of men were recruited as labourers, to dig trenches more than 5,000 miles (8,000 km) away from their homes.

The 4,000-ton Mendi was hit in fog by The Darro, almost three times the size of the troopship, and sank in 20 minutes. Martin explained: "A lot of people who were in the holds were drowned instantly."



Martin Woodward discovered the wreck of SS Mendi in 1974

Left to drown

Most of the crew were unable to swim and had no knowledge of the sea, so their chances of survival were very slim.

Mystery still surrounds the events that happened immediately after the collision, as Martin explained:

"There was a huge amount of blame attributed to the captain of Darro. He did not stop, even though he knew there were people in the water shouting for help."

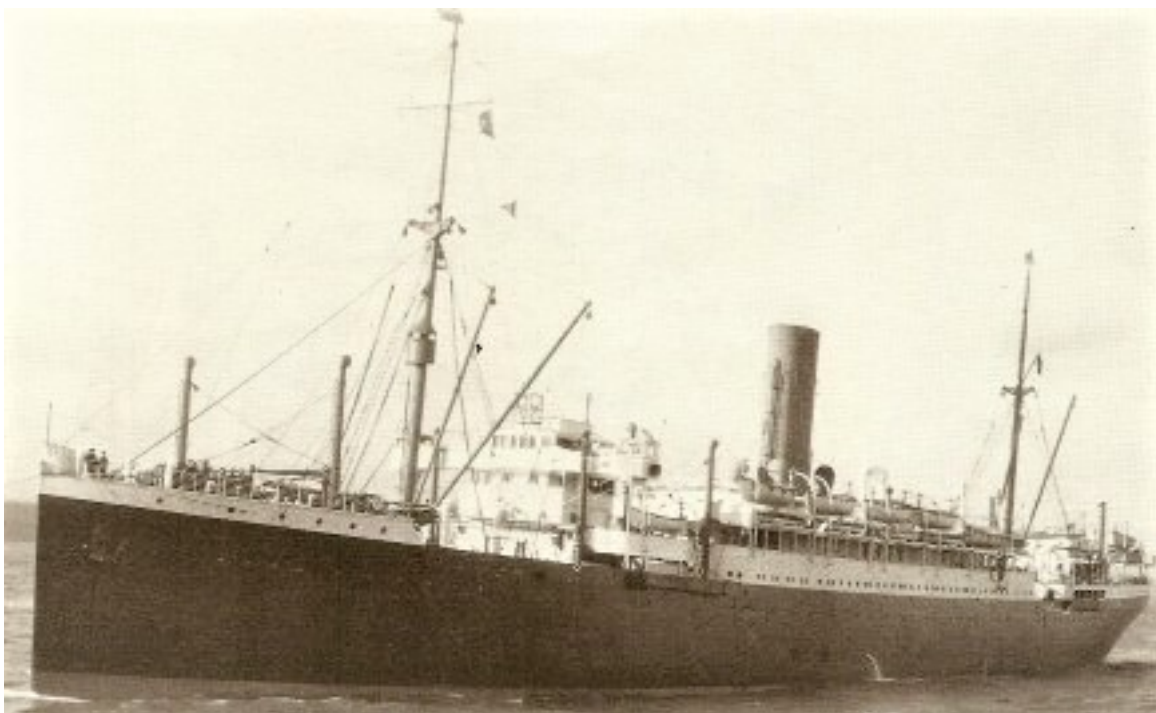
This action would see *Captain Stump* of the SS Darro having his Captains license suspended for a year.

Mama Pauline McGotyelwa's grandfather, Chief Hendry Bokleni, was one of the many from a village near the town of Mthatha, who volunteered for service and had hoped to serve as soldiers.

But in the apartheid ravaged country, the authorities would not allow black South Africans to be trained in modern weaponry.



Mama Pauline McGotyelwa lost her grandfather on SS Mendi



Never forgotten

The propaganda at the time did not admit to that. The rebuff that black South Africans received when they volunteered their services, was that this was a white man's war. In the 80 years between the loss of Mendi and democracy in South Africa, the bravery of the men on board was never forgotten.

Pauline says their story has been passed down through generations by word of mouth.

She said: "I was 13 years old when I heard this story. I was living with my grandmother."

The men's wives knew nothing about the sinking of the ship until they were offered black mourning clothes. Pauline explained: "They were brought black attire to wear but did not know why. After a while they were told the soldiers had sank. They all had small children and nobody to support them."

Some 200 men survived and returned to South Africa with tales of great bravery.

Reverend Isaac Dyobha is said to have calmed the panicked men by raising his arms and shouting: "Be quiet and calm my countrymen. We are the sons of Africa so let us die like brothers."



Each February, those who perished are remembered

Martin Woodward said "She settled on the seabed upright. In recent years she has collapsed and more of the ship is laying in her starboard (right) side.

"We have not re-found the story; we have just located it. This brings what was thought to have been lost history back to life."

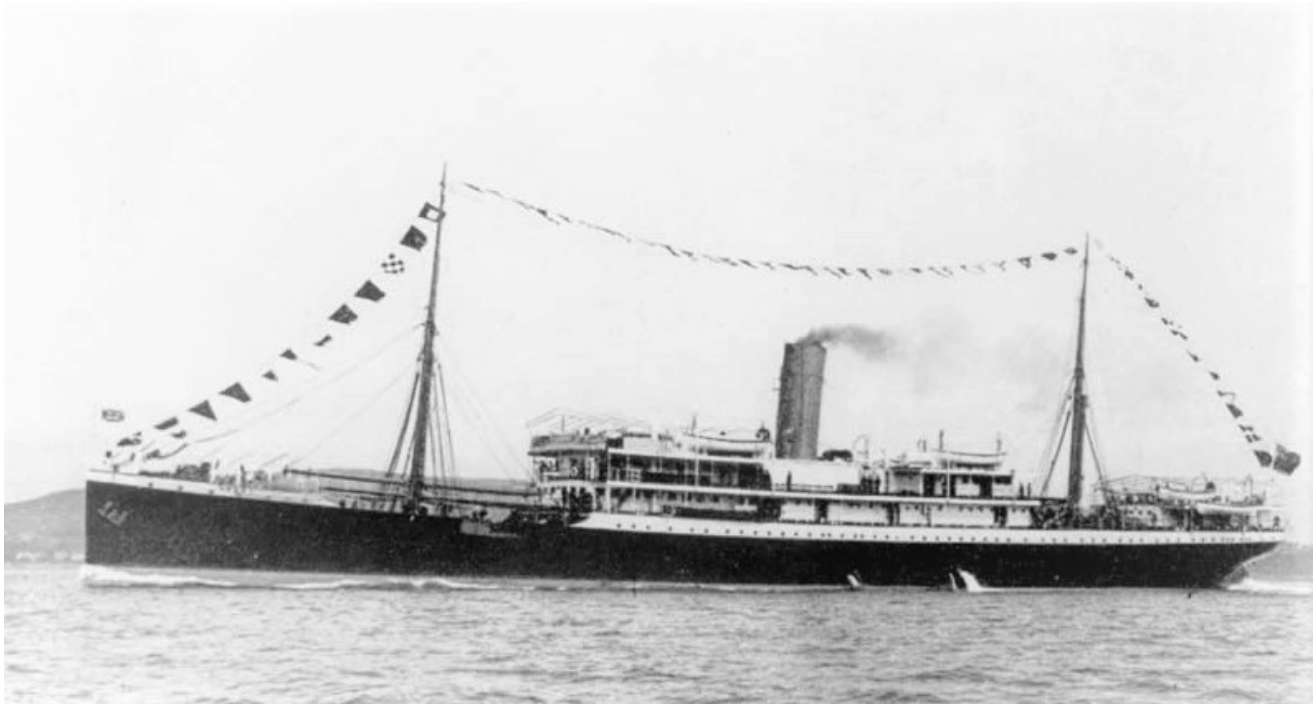
A lasting memorial to those lost on SS Mendi stands in Holybrook cemetery in Southampton.



A memorial stands in a Southampton graveyard.



Black privates standing at their last parade before boarding the SS Mendi [Image source](#)



The SS Mendi: Dressed over all.

Sources:

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Further Reading

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[SS Mendi: A story worth telling](#)

[PE museum to remember 607 victims of SS Mendi](#)

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