

BIG **ST** STORY

Veterans snub SS Mendi heroes

By **BOBBY JORDAN**

● More than 600 mainly black South African soldiers died in a World War 1 shipping accident but the department of military veterans says it will no longer honour them because they were involved in an “imperial” war.

The department has previously supported annual Gunners Association commemoration ceremonies at the SS Mendi memorial in Cape Town. But no more. “We can’t be encouraging an approach that says we still belong to an imperial past,” said department spokesperson Mbulelo Musi.



The SS Mendi, a painting by Peter Belas.

Kevin Ashton, the chair of the Gunners Association, said the decision – which means there will be no formal military presence at Sunday’s memorial – was an insult to the descendants of the 646 Mendi dead. **Page 6**

Military snubs Mendi's fallen troops

By BOBBY JORDAN

The department of military veterans has withdrawn support for an "imperial" commemoration of a World War 1 shipping disaster in which 646 mainly black South Africans died.

The department said this week it would not take part in the annual commemoration of the SS Mendi sinking.

The annual ceremony, organised by the Gunners Association, is due to take place on Sunday at the SS Mendi memorial in Cape Town, just three days after President Cyril Ramaphosa visits the same site for a separate Armed Forces Day ceremony.

The Gunners Association event has previously enjoyed support from the department of military veterans and the South African

National Defence Force, but it has now been labelled politically incorrect.

Department spokesperson Mbulelo Musi said it had decided to support only "unified" ceremonies that did not involve formations rooted in the imperial and apartheid past, such as the Gunners Association.

'Wars of colonialism'

"Now in a democratic dispensation, we can't be encouraging an approach that says we still belong to an imperial past," he said.

"It cannot be, for it defeats the purpose of what our democratic government stands for, which is reconciliation, social cohesion and nation building."

Musi said both world wars were "wars of colonialism" that had little to do with SA's democratic freedom.

"Colonialism was by nature divisive – it is the opposite of what we stand for as South Africans post-'94," Musi said. "We must therefore be very sensitive to these matters."

Musi said the department would take part in Armed Forces Day on Thursday "in the spirit of trying to say we are all together. It is unfortunate that people move outside the efforts of the nation."

Kevin Ashton, chairman of the Gunners Association Western Cape branch, said the decision was an unfortunate break from tradition and an insult to the families of the deceased.

A department staffer informed him of the decision in a phone call two weeks ago.

"He said the DMV will not support colonial memorials. I said, 'what are you talking about?'," Ashton said, adding that the Mendi

commemoration was a deeply symbolic event.

He said the department also withdrew support for last year's Cape Town commemoration of the 1916 Battle of Delville Wood, in which about 2,500 South Africans died in France during World War 1.

No military bands

A retired senior military officer this week described the department's decision as "abominable and a disgrace".

He said: "This means no military band or guards – in fact no formal military presence at a memorial for South Africans who died on service in war."

But Musi insisted the department's intention was not to dishonour victims but to avoid "reopening old wounds".



The SS Mendi, on which 646 South African soldiers died in 1917. Painting by Peter Bilas