

# FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

## SS MENDI

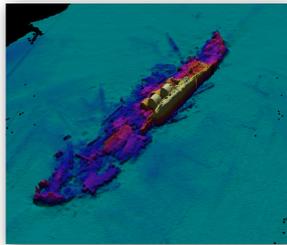


Painting by Mike Greaves.

**More than 1,100 wrecks dating to the First World War lie off the south coast of the UK. These underwater memorials represent a vital, yet little known, aspect of the Great War. The SS Mendi is one of these wrecks, whose tragic story represents bravery in the face of adversity and the little-recognised contribution of other nations to the war effort.**

Built in 1905 for the British & African Steam Navigation Co. Ltd., SS Mendi was requisitioned as a troopship in February 1917. Mendi was heading up the English Channel towards Le Havre on the 21st of February 1917. On board were 802 men of the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC) who were to have become part of a huge but poorly-treated multi-national labour force on the Western Front. Their role was to build the railways, trenches, camps and roads upon which the Allied war effort depended. Many had never seen the sea before.

In thick fog, the much larger cargo ship *Darro*, on its way to Argentina to collect a cargo of meat, accidentally rammed Mendi, causing the ship to sink in just 20 minutes, killing 607 South Africans and 31 crew. South African oral tradition recounts the story of the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, who made a now-famous speech on the ship's deck, leading the doomed men of the Corps in a death dance as the ship went down.



In 1974, the resting place of the *Mendi* was discovered off the Isle of Wight by local diver, Martin Woodward. Historic England and the South African Heritage Resources Agency funded a geophysical survey and desk based assessment on the wreck in 2007 and 2008 and, in 2010, it was designated as a protected place under the Protection of Military Remains Act.



Top left: Geophysical image of the SS Mendi, copyright Ministry of Defence.

Bottom row, left to right: Saucer with the logo of the vessel owners B&ASN Co., a cooking pot, and silverware from the ship. These artefacts are on display at The Shipwreck Centre and Maritime Museum, Isle of Wight.

### Find out more:

Artefacts from the *Mendi* (pictured above) are part of the amazing collection at The Shipwreck Centre and Maritime Museum, Isle of Wight, alongside many others from shipwrecks of the First World War and beyond:  
[www.museum.maritimearchaeologytrust.org](http://www.museum.maritimearchaeologytrust.org)

The ship's bell has also been scanned and turned into a highly detailed 3D model (pictured right). You can view the model online at: [www.bit.do/mendibell](http://www.bit.do/mendibell)

The *Mendi* also features in two booklets: *War Graves of the Sea - Protecting Shipwrecks of the First World War*, and *Black and Asian Seamen of the Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War*. You can see these online at our website below, or get in touch to request a free printed copy.

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