

New research uncovered in the South African archives has revealed the names of 1666 black South Africans who served and died in the First World War, but up until now have not been honoured by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) This is now being rectified, but it further highlights the importance of recognising, remembering and commemorating black South African contributions to the war. Many of these men distinguished themselves through their service and it is time they were given full and proper acknowledgment of that fact.

These men largely belonged to labour and transport units, most of whom saw service in the East African campaign. Without their vital contribution the war in Africa could not have been fought, let alone won. Yet this story is not well known, despite the enormous cost in lives.

A new memorial will ensure each of their sacrifices can be remembered.

The proposed memorial will bear the names of 1,666 men who lost their lives during the First World War. They served with a variety of units including the Cape Coloured Labour Regiment, Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport, the Military Labour Bureau and the Military Labour Corps.

Unlike the South African Native Labour Contingent, which would serve in Europe and is well known for its connection to the SS Mendi, these men joined in Africa for service in Africa. Believed to be buried either in South Africa or elsewhere on the African continent, this memorial will be a permanent reminder of their sacrifice, while providing space for additional names should more come to light in the future.

What did we know about these men and what might their experiences have been?

The First World War in Africa was not a European story. While the fighting forces of the British Empire during the East African campaign alone exceeded 150,000 men, more than one million Africans served in supporting roles in the same operations. They quite literally carried the burden of battle.

Not only did Africans serve here in greater numbers than Europeans, they also died in greater numbers. The official death toll for British imperial troops fighting in East Africa was 11,189, while it is widely accepted that no fewer than 100,000 African carriers died during the same operations. It would not be too wide of the mark to assume that for every one soldier lost on operations, 10 carriers lost their lives.

In the mobile campaigns seen in Africa, serving away from the frontlines provided little in the way of safety, and the stories of these men are no less deserving of being preserved and shared. Their deaths are testament to the often gruelling service they gave, and include men like Dolly Jenniker and Zulu Madhliwa.

Dolly and Zulu were enlisted as Boat Men and employed by the South African Railways and Harbours Department at The Point in Durban. While working on loan to the South African Defence Department, they were drowned on 23 January 1915 when the craft they were piloting capsized while transporting supplies across the Orange River while it was in flood.

Dolly never got to return to his wife, Molly Jenniker, in South End, Port Elizabeth. Zulu's father, Ngobongwana, never saw him again. His son never came home to Amanzimtoti, only his £3 of unpaid wages.

Service for the vast majority of Africans in the First World War involved working in labour units, undertaking building and clearing tasks, but most critically moving supplies. For many, but

particularly those employed in East Africa, this meant carrier service on foot. Elsewhere, however, the railways also played an important role.

With all mechanical transport comes the risk of accident. European history tends to remember the death of Sir George Farrar, a British colonel killed after a rail crash in May 1915. His driver Albert John Henwood, of the South African Engineers, also died in the crash yet is seldom mentioned. More significantly, however, a number of black South African personnel have until now not been commemorated despite dying in similar incidents. The CWGC's new memorial in South Africa will list some of those who sadly met this fate.

Casualties include George Ramutloa, who was run over by a wagon. He died at Kalkfeldt, in what is now Namibia, on 19 July 1915. Ten days earlier a peace deal ended the fighting in German South West Africa, so the timing suggests not only that George died in a tragic accident, but that it was during the removal of vital equipment and supplies after hostilities had ended.

These reminders that death in war can happen far from the battlefield are maybe best known in South Africa through the story of the SS Mendi, and the 600 South Africans lost when the ship sank in the English Channel in 1917. Lesser known, however, is the fate of those who died on board the SS Aragon.

Like the Mendi, the Aragon was transporting African labour units. Like the Mendi, hundreds of men died on the ship. There the similarity ends, however, as those on board the Aragon lost their lives to exhaustion and disease following their service in East Africa, where malaria and dysentery was rife.

Maeli Makhaleyane was among those. Attesting at Kimberley on 21 November 1916, he sailed for East Africa on the Glen Cluny, but by the beginning of the following year was admitted to Kilwa Hospital, most likely suffering from Malaria. After another hospital stay, he was invalided by medical staff and boarded the Aragon on 30 March for repatriation to South Africa. He died on board on 15 April, never seeing home again.

All these men died as a result of their service, and a century later their names will be immortalised for future generations to remember.