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Department:
Defence
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



**ADDRESS AT ARQUES-LA-BATAILLE CEMETERY BY MAJOR GENERAL ROY ANDERSEN SOUTH AFRICAN
NATIONAL DEFENCE FORCE, ON 5 JULY 2013**

Ladies and gentlemen, we are here today to pay our respects to the many brave South Africans buried in this cemetery.

The South African Labour Contingent came to France early in 1917 and No 1 General Labour Hospital was established at its camp at Arques-la-Bataille near Dieppe. Many of those who died in France lie in Arques-la-Bataille Cemetery. Here, there are 381 burials of the First World War of which 260 graves are of men of the Contingent, including some of whom were exhumed from Ste Marie Cemetery, Le Havere.

Inscribed, on the Great War Stone before you are words:

To the memory of those Members of the South African Labour Corps who crossed the seas..... and laid down their lives in France, during the Great War 1914-1918, this Memorial is erected by their comrades.



These words are repeated in Sesotho and Xhosa. The families of many of the deceased buried here lived in rural areas and thus never found out how their loved ones died – they simply never returned.

Next year sees the centenary of the commencement of World War I which was meant to be the war that ended all wars.

In July 2016, South Africa will be commemorating the centenary of the Battle of Delville Wood in France.

In the third week of July 1916, the 1st South African Infantry Brigade comprising men drawn on a volunteer basis from many famous regiments found themselves here in France.

They came from offices, shops, factories, villages and farms of South Africa. Many of them had never been in action before. They had, however, volunteered as many South Africans had done before or have done since, to fight for their country and for the freedom of the world. On July 15th 1916 three battalions of this fine group of young men marched out of trenches near the ruined village of Montauban, two hours before dawn with orders to take and hold, Delville Wood, at all costs.

By seven that morning they had established themselves in the wood and a pattern of attack, counter-attack, shelling and destruction developed. Fighting at times hand-to-hand the South Africans clung tenaciously to the wood. Their ordeal lasted six days and five nights.

Of the Brigade's 121 Officers and 3 032 men who entered the wood, only 5 officers and 750 men paraded before Brigadier General Lukin after the battle. Gen Lukin took the salute with bared head and with tears running down his cheeks.

In 2017 we will remember the more than 600 young black soldier sons of South Africa who went down in the troopship "Mendi" in the English channel on their way to France on the early, ice-cold morning of 21 February 1917 and who, by the noble way they faced death in prayer and in song made of that disaster one of the most inspiring and shining examples of heroism in the annals of South African history.

Next year, on the 27th April, we will commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the first fully democratic and free elections in South Africa. In doing so, we will also remember the courageous Struggle for Freedom and those who laid down their lives for a better South Africa.

This Cemetery which is so beautifully maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the people of France is not only testimony to South Africa's proud military past, but it also carries a message for future generations. It is reminder of the military lessons learnt from previous wars and should never be forgotten, and should be taken to heart.

It tells us that peace only lasts until the next war, and that we should take the necessary steps to prepare ourselves to meet any threat at any given moment.

And so, I leave you with the message that those who made supreme sacrifice for liberty should not be forgotten.

Thank you all for joining us today on this important occasion.