

*World War I, Wembury
and the South African
Connection*

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Introduction

On November 10th 2018, Wembury Local History Society mounted a substantial exhibition commemorating the centenary of the 1918 Armistice. The core of this exhibition was a series of displays exploring aspects of Wembury during the hostilities. These displays have now been recast and made available as articles downloadable from the Society's website (wemburyhistory.org.uk).

This article incorporates, in a slightly expanded form, the material from two of the displays. These explored, first, the life of Jeremiah Siyabi, a South African buried in the only standard war grave in St Werburgh's old churchyard; and, second, the story of his unit, the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC).

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1 Jeremiah Siyabi – from Blouberg to Wembury

Jeremiah Siyabi was a South African who joined the South African Native Labour Corps, found himself at Renney Camp in Wembury, died in an accident and is buried in a war grave in St Werburgh's old churchyard. How did he come to be there? Much of the story is missing, but we can piece together fragments.

Jeremiah was born in Blouberg 'around 1873', at which time Blouberg was not in South Africa at all, but in the Boer Transvaal Republic, also known as the South African Republic (Figure 1).

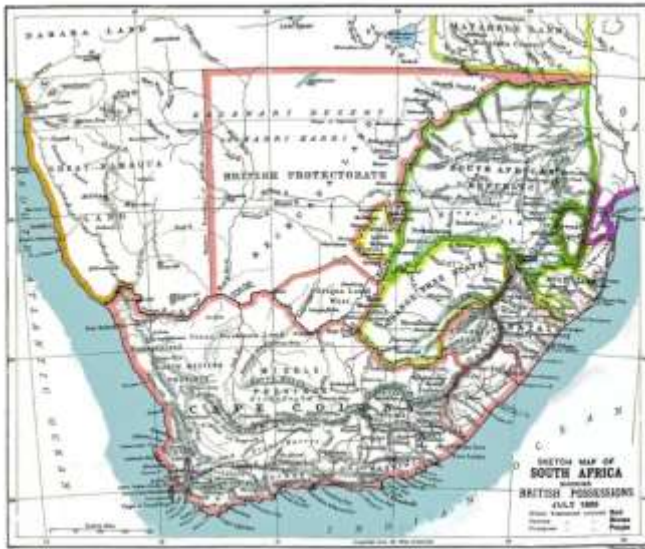


Figure 1 Political map of Southern Africa, 1885. The Transvaal republic is outlined in green.

Between his birth and his decision to volunteer in 1917, all we can be sure of is that he lived through turbulent times, particularly:

- British annexation of the Transvaal (1877)
- Transvaal regaining independence through the First Boer War (1880-81)
- The Second Boer War (1899-1902), leading to Transvaal's transformation into a British colony
- and the colony's ultimate absorption into South Africa (1910)

Our next glimpse of him is on July 31st, 1917, when he presented himself at Ladysmith to 'attest' (volunteer) to join the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC). At the time, Ladysmith would have looked much as it does in Figure 2.



Figure 2 Ladysmith town hall, 1900

The name Jeremiah may reflect the influence of missionaries, who were very active and encouraged Africans to adopt biblical names. It could also mean that he worked in the mines before going to war, as it was common for miners to use their adopted names when dealing with mine managers.

After what was probably a short period of basic training, on September 19th he sailed for Europe on the *Kenilworth Castle*, no doubt along with numerous comrades who had also volunteered. The destination for the vast majority was almost certainly France where, as our later discussion of the SANLC explains, battalions of South African recruits undertook many tasks in support of the fighting troops.



Figure 3 SANLC troops en route to Europe

However, Jeremiah did not make it that far. It seems that the *Kenilworth Castle*, like many other troop ships, called at Plymouth. This is where we meet him next, when he was admitted to hospital

‘in Devonport’ on October 13th. Why he entered hospital is unclear. It is obviously possible that he had been taken ill *en route* and had consequently been put ashore. But it may also be that some of the recruits, including Jeremiah, were actually assigned to the Plymouth area. The Royal Navy’s Devonport Dockyard was heavily defended by numerous coastal fortifications both east and west of Plymouth, and labourers would certainly have been needed at all these sites. If this was the explanation, Jeremiah may not have been ill at all. Admission to hospital might simply have been a matter of quarantine applying to all troops from South Africa, most of whom have left no trace on the record.

Whatever the explanation, which facility he was admitted to is uncertain, but Devonport’s Royal Albert Hospital (which had been taken over by the navy) or the Royal Naval Hospital are strong possibilities (Figure 4).



Figure 4 The Royal Albert Hospital (above) and the Royal Naval Hospital (below)

One thing is certainly clear: Jeremiah could not have been seriously ill. After only four days in hospital he was discharged and attached to the 'Plymouth Army Depot'. This was the base for the Royal Garrison Artillery, whose members were the elite gunners who manned the heaviest gun batteries guarding the naval port in particular, and the city in general.

Two of these coastal batteries – Renney and Lentney – were in Wembury, south of Plymouth Sound. Between the two was Renney Camp, a cluster of standard army huts and a few more permanent buildings that served as a base for those manning the batteries. Figures 5, 6 and 7 provide an overview of the batteries' locations and their appearance today. (A longer discussion of these defences, ***Frontline Wembury***, can be downloaded from the Wembury Local History Society website.)



Figure 5 Location of Renney Camp

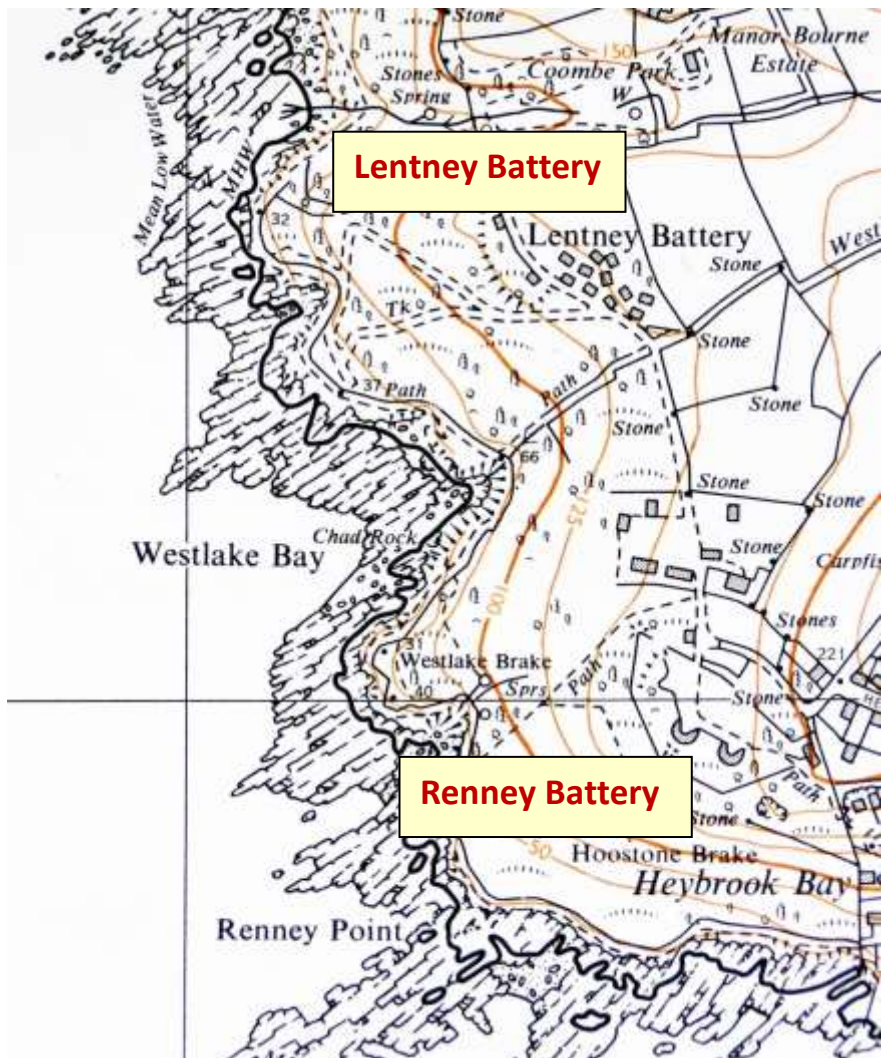


Figure 6 Sites of Renney and Lentney Batteries. The map dates from 1954 and may not show the exact arrangement of the huts as they were in WWI. Crown copyright. Reproduced under the Ordnance Survey's 50-year rule.



Figure 7 Recent photograph of Renney Battery from the air (above) and the rear of Lentney Battery (below)

Here there would have been plenty of need for labourers, especially as – by this stage in the war - many of the ordinary British soldiers supporting the gunners would have been posted to France to replace casualties there. It was to Renney Camp that Jeremiah was posted.

Sadly, it was also at Renney that he died. On March 30th, 1918, his body was found on the rocks below the low cliff, presumably having suffered a fall (Figure 8). And, as must have been inevitable in a time of war, only three days later he was given a war grave at St Werburgh's, in the parish churchyard.



Figure 8 Low cliffs and rocks between Renney and Lentney Batteries

Only one other mention of Jeremiah can be found: a payment of £3.2s.0d, which must have been the earnings owed to him. Hopefully this eventually reached his next of kin, listed in his records as Grace Dhalamini of Roosboom near Ladysmith. Unfortunately, there is no clue as to what her relationship to him was.

On March 30th, 2018, exactly 100 hundred years after he died, a commemoration service was held at Jeremiah's grave.



Figure 9 Rev Martin Kirkbride leading the graveside service on the centenary of Jeremiah's death, March 30th, 2018

Later, on the centenary of the World War I Armistice, November 11th 2018, Jeremiah and the entire South African Native Labour Corps, were made the centrepiece of Wembury's Remembrance Day service. At this a packed congregation, both military and civilian, witnessed the presentation of a War Service medal (Figure 10). This was an honour which all members of the SANLC had been denied by the South African government when they returned home after WWI. Wreath layers included the South African Deputy High Commissioner, Mr Azwitamisi Golden Neswiswi, and Lord David Owen, a distinguished former Foreign Secretary.



Figure 10 The War Service medal presented to Jeremiah during the Centenary Remembrance Day Service, November 11th, 2018.

At a second service in the churchyard, in bright sunshine and with panoramic views of Wembury Bay, Jeremiah and the SANLC were remembered and the South African National Anthem was played.



Figure 11 Graveside Centenary Remembrance Day Service, November 11th, 2018. In the top photo the three figures to the right of the gravestone are (r to l) the Rev. Martin Kirkbride, Mr Azwitamisi Golden Neswiswi (South African Deputy High Commissioner) and former Foreign Secretary Lord (David) Owen.



Figure 12 Jeremiah Siyabi's war grave and commemorative plaque, unveiled by the South African Deputy High Commissioner on the Centenary of the 1918 Armistice

2 The South African Native Labour Corps

In 1916, as casualties mounted on the Western Front, the British Government adopted a policy of recruiting 'native labour' from the Empire and beyond. They included workers from India, Egypt, China and Japan.

The South African government responded by creating the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC), which eventually numbered 25,000 volunteers.



Figure 13 SANLC recruits en route to Europe

21,000 of these volunteers were sent to France, chiefly to work in the ports and the supporting areas behind the Western Front. Here they undertook numerous tasks (Figures 14 – 16) which released British soldiers to go to the front. These tasks included:

- labouring as dockers to maintain the flow of war supplies,
- constructing military railways
- and – a novel activity – salvaging re-usable parts from the innumerable wrecked lorries and cars.



Figure 14 Handling heavy shells in the docks



Figure 15 Railway maintenance



Figure 16 Dismantling wrecked vehicles

The fact that the South Africans were labourers, and were not put in the front line to fight, did not come from a desire to protect them. The policy was imposed by the South African government, which was determined that the volunteers should do nothing that implied they were equal to white soldiers. Even a well-known Cape liberal stated that

“[we] regard the introduction of our Native labourers to the social conditions of Europe with alarm.”

One consequence of this policy was that, when not working, the volunteers were confined to tightly guarded compounds, which they could not leave unless under escort. Regulations stated that:

“[Compounds] should be surrounded by an unclimbable fence or wall, in which all openings [are] guarded. Enclosure fences [are] to be six feet high, with barbed wire running along the top to prevent natives from climbing over.”

Some photographs from the time highlight opportunities for the volunteers to enjoy life, for example through traditional activities, or swapping jokes around a camp brazier.

But conditions in the compounds were hard, food was generally poor, and this only added to deepening resentment, not least because the South Africans were the only volunteers treated in this way (Figures 17 and 18). This in turn led white SANLC commanders, probably fearing mutiny, to call for the compound policy to be abandoned.



Figure 17 SANLC members in a camp in France. Although the men appear cheery, conditions are clearly hard.



Figure 18 SANLC members trench digging. The camp fence can be seen in the background.

Rather than capitulate to liberalisation, however, the South African government disbanded the SANLC in January 1918 and repatriated its men to South Africa.

Although SANLC members did not fight, accidents and illness still made their lives hazardous. The greatest blow came in February, 1917, when the troop carrier *SS Mendi*, sailing south of the Isle of Wight, collided in fog with a much larger ship. The *Mendi* sank, and 607 SANLC troops, plus 9 white officers and NCOs, were drowned.



Figure 19
The *SS Mendi*

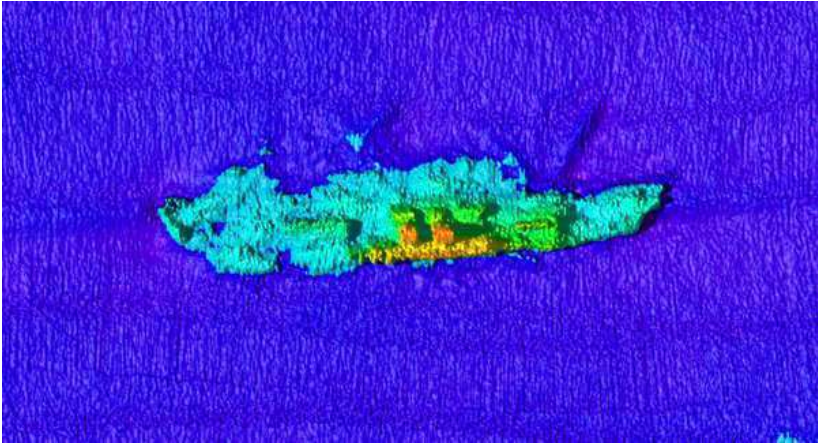


Figure 20 Radar image of the Mendi wreck (above), and the wreck itself (below). The vessel was located in 1974.



Figure 21 The Mendi's ship's bell. Thought to have been retrieved by divers in the 1980s, the bell's whereabouts were unknown until 2017, when it was given anonymously to a BBC employee. It is now displayed in the Sea City Museum, Southampton.

Altogether, 1,304 SANLC troops are known to have lost their lives in Europe. The war cemetery at Arques-la-Bataille, near the port of Dieppe, contains a memorial to all of them (Figure 22). Almost 400 SANLC members are buried there.



Figure 22 Two views of the SANLC War Cemetery at Arques-la-Bataille, France

After the war the South African government refused to issue to SANLC members War Service medal, which was created for all 'native troops' that served. They also declined to strike a South African war service medal for them. Thus the colour bar which eventually evolved into Apartheid was already firmly entrenched.



Figure 23 The War Service medal to which SANLC troops were entitled. At the Centenary Remembrance Day Service held in St Werburgh's Church, Wembury, Jeremiah Siyabi was symbolically presented with a mint version of this medal.