

**SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE HONOURABLE MINISTER OF DEFENCE AND MILITARY VETERANS MS NN MAPISA-NQAKULA ON THE OCCASION OF THE INAUGURAL DEFENCE FORCES DAY ON 22 FEBRUARY 2013, ATTRIDGEVILLE, PRETORIA**

Programme Director

Ministers and Deputy Ministers

Members of the Portfolio Committee on Defence and Military Veterans

Secretary for Defence,

Chief of the South African National Defence Force

Director General of the Department of Military Veterans

Directors General

Members of the Plenary Defence Staff Council

Members of the Military Command Council

Generals, Admirals, Officers, Warrant Officers, Non Commissioned

Officers

Members on the Parade

Distinguished guests,

Members of the media.

Ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of our Commander-in- Chief, President Jacob Zuma, and each one of our dedicated men and women in uniform, I welcome you to this historic occasion, our country's inaugural Defence Force Day parade.

It is an honour for us that so many of you have taken the time out of your busy schedule, in order to witness the birth of a tradition, that will form part of the fabric of our Defence Force for years to come.

This parade, will become an important event our national calendar, to be held annually during the month of February, coinciding with the commemoration key historic events in the life our defence force.

It is an event that should give South Africans, the opportunity to interact with and celebrate our armed forces. To recognise the selfless contribution made by our soldiers in the defence of our sovereign integrity and national interest.

The parade recognises both our history as well as the future of the Defence Force. It acknowledges that our country has come out of a history of divisions and conflict, and celebrates the progress we have made in forging unity and a common patriotism.

In choosing the 21<sup>st</sup> of February as the appropriate day, we have taken care to identify a historic moment, in the life of the Defence Force, that best represents the values of patriotism, comradeship, valour and common sacrifice. It is these values that identify the Defence Force with our nation's ability to rise above our challenges of the past, to build a democratic and peaceful society based on the respect for human rights for all.

We have a Defence Force that has risen from the ashes of our unjust past, transcended the differences of that history, to become a united national asset we can all be proud of. It is a shining example of the success of the South African story.

Throughout history, our forefathers fought various wars of resistance and wars of liberation in South Africa and in other countries, and endured hardship so that future generations can inherit a better country. They fought with pride, courage and dedication.

Each time we hold a Defence Force Day parade, we honour their memory and their contribution to the freedom of our nation.

As we launch the first Defence Force Day, we take pride in the fact that our Defence Force is a unique example of our Unity in Diversity. Only 19 years ago we succeeded in bringing together more than seven different armed forces who had been sworn enemies.

Yet today, these former enemies, all of them patriots, are united in the South African National Defence Force, serving the nation, and ensuring peace and stability.

This spirit of rising above our adversity and differences, was demonstrated by those patriots who perished together in the tragedy of the *SS Mendi* almost a century ago. It is memory of them and the many who were here before us that we chose the 21<sup>st</sup> of February as the day during which the national Defence Force Day will be celebrated.

The launch of this annual parade, although a day a later, is designed to coincide with the 96<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fateful sinking of the *SS Mendi*. Accordingly, this morning we laid a wreath at the site of the memorial site here in Atteridgeville to commemorate this event.

Just to recap, it was on January 16, 1917 that the *Mendi* troopship took sail from Cape Town en route to La Havre in France carrying the last contingent of the SANLC comprising 805 black privates, 5 white officers and 17 non-commissioned officers as well as 33 crewmembers.

On the morning of 21 February 1917, another ship, the *SS Darro* (10 000 tons) travelling at full speed and emitting no warning signals, rammed the *SS Mendi* (4 230 tons), which sank in 20 minutes. No steps were taken by the *SS Darro* to lower boats or rescue the survivors. She stood off and floated nearby while lifeboats from the *SS Mendi*'s escorting destroyer, *HMS Brisk*, rowed among the survivors, trying to rescue them.

[http://www.navy.mil.za/newnavy/mendi\\_history/i040813\\_ss\\_mendi\\_map.jpg](http://www.navy.mil.za/newnavy/mendi_history/i040813_ss_mendi_map.jpg) The men sang and stamped the death dance together as the *SS Mendi* sank, taking with her all still on board and many who leapt into the icy waters (607 black troops along with 9 of their fellow white countrymen and all 33 crewmembers). Of note is that, regardless of clan or tribe, these men faced death together as South Africans.

On receiving the news (on 9 March 1917) of the disaster, all the members of the South African House of Assembly, under the then Prime Minister Louis Botha and a celebrated Boer War hero, rose in their seats as a token of respect to their fellow South Africans who had gone down with *SS Mendi*. Lore has it that the black tribes in South Africa were aware of the disaster before they were officially advised by the government.

The survivors were to continue with their military service in France. One of the highlights was when some of them met the King and Queen of England at Rouen in July 1917. One of them, Koos Matli (of the Bahaduba tribe) recalled: "One day we were all called together and we went to another ship. On the deck we met King George V and Queen Mary. The King addressed us personally and thanked us for the services we had rendered. He told us that we were going home within a few days, and when we reached home we must tell our Chiefs and fathers how he had thanked us."

Like so many other military disasters, the story of the *SS Mendi* is a story of supreme courage in the face of death and valour shown between brothers toward each other in dire circumstances. The courage displayed by these men has remained a legend in South African military history. The courage shown by these men has been transplanted to the South African National Defence Force of today.

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is important that, on a day like this, members of the public should learn firsthand about the work of the SANDF and its meaning and relevance in their day to day life.

The South African National Defence Force derives its mandate primarily from Section 200(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. This mandate is given substance by the Defence Act, 2002, the White paper on Defence (1996) and the Defence Review (1998) and delegated legislation. The South African National Defence Force is

established in terms of Section 199 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the Defence Act.

The mission of the Defence Force calls for it to “provide, manage, prepare and employ Defence capabilities commensurate with the needs of South Africa as regulated by the Constitution, national legislation and Parliamentary and executive Direction.”

In this regard the Defence Force prepares and deploys its capabilities, in line with the domestic and global needs of South Africa “allowing it to serve as the last line of Defence for our country.

In order to meet its mandate the South African National Defence Force is primarily organised into four main components:

- The Landward component consisting of the SA Army.
- The Air component consisting of the SA Air Force.
- The Maritime component consisting of the SA Navy.
- The Medical component consisting of the SA Military Health Service.

Forces are employed in a joint fashion and train specifically to effect jointness in the execution of any task, although employment can take place in an individual capacity as a unique component depending on the task at hand.

Without the serving members found in our SANDF this force would be a hollow crust with no capability of carrying out its tasks at all. The men and women serving in the South African National Defence Force are the

single most valuable asset of the Force and form the basis of the organisation.

As part of its mandate under a democratic dispensation, The South African National Defence Force has continued to play a crucial role in supporting the South African government's foreign policy, by being ready to respond to calls to promote and support peace and stability on the continent whether on a bi-lateral or multi-lateral level.

This ongoing support to government foreign policy initiatives, has sparked increased cooperation between the armed forces regional and continental level, thereby promoting stability and security in the continent.

This environment of stability and peace is essential to the economic, social and political interest of the country, the SADC region and the African continent.

In the recent past we have seen our man and women play a key role through in supporting peace in the DRC, the CAR and Sudan as well as counter-piracy operations with South African vessels patrolling the Mozambique Channel.

These operations have required the deployment of 2538 members to carry out these tasks.

As stated by the President in his State of the Nation Address South Africa will continue supporting Africa's peace efforts including through

mediation, troop contribution for peace keeping, and by providing material and financial assistance.

Colleagues and friends,

Another central task of the South African National Defence Force in the region is the provision of disaster support, humanitarian assistance and the provisioning of essential services when required. Only recently, 238 tons of food and equipment were delivered, and more than 400 people rescued from the flood affected areas, in both the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces, as well as in Mozambique.

Furthermore, the protection of territorial integrity requires an increased focus on domestic security including the need to safeguard our borders.

The border safeguarding responsibility encompasses all three environments of land, air and maritime. Although a phased approach is being followed to carry out this task, it has seen the South African National Defence Force deployed for border safeguarding along the borders of the Republic of South Africa since April 2010. Currently, a total of 2119 members are deployed in border safeguarding in Limpopo, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State and the Eastern Cape.

In addition to this the South African National Defence Force provided support in the securing for the 2013 African Cup of Nations (AFCON).

Further to the operations carried out and support provided, the capabilities of our SANDF are diverse and have also been utilised in support of the people of South Africa where their collateral utility has

been tested to its limits. Engineers within the SA Army have constructed bailey bridges in communities in distress and in dire need of access to social amenities.

The South African National Defence Force is in partnership with other government departments to roll out a National Youth Service program. Through this service, young people are benefitting through the development of skills and competences provided in our defence facilities.

The National Youth Service is intended to play a key role in dealing with the consequences of youth unemployment and to the national goal of poverty eradication. The service will not offer training for military engagement, but will draw on the potential of military training to promote discipline, self-esteem, confidence and a sense of duty to society.

We are very proud that we have finally been able to get this program off the ground and that through these partnerships, the various capacities of the Defence Force are being put at the disposal of our communities.

Program Director

Our Reserves are an integral part of the South African National Defence Force and provide the expansion capability in the case of an emergency or a state of national defence. We are very proud that the members of the Reserve Force, who now have other life commitments outside the Defence Force, continue to make a significant contribution to both internal and external operations of the South African National Defence Force.

I must also report that the University Reserve Training Program (URTP), which allows selected students to undergo officers-training during university holidays, has been a great success. It is programs like these, that I want the Defence Force to strengthen as they bring the scarce skills required in the defence force.

I am therefore making a call to our young people to take advantage of the youth entry programs that we have, to join and be part of this highly skilled new cadre of our Defence Force.

As we rejuvenate our Force with new blood, we are also taking steps to ensure that the military is women friendly and that it allows for both the contribution and growth of women soldiers.

.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our intention is to build a Defence Force that is modernised and designed to be at the cutting edge of our nation's innovation in research and technology.

The Military is no longer the place to dump the worst that society has. If its true potential and value is to be realised, the Military should be a place where the best we have are recruited.

Our Air force needs the best pilots and airmen, our navy has outstanding programs in maritime engineering fields where we need the best engineers and also require the best medical professionals in the SA

Military Health Services. The weaponry we use in the Army is at the top of technological innovation and they are designed for and operated by this new type of soldier that we require.

It is important that as a country, we should raise the profile of the nobility of the role a soldier. This will in turn allow society to understand, and to give back in equal measure, the respect and gratitude that our soldiers so rightly deserve.

We have committed ourselves, as employers, to recognise that the Military is a unique profession, that restrict some of the normal rights accorded in the normal workplace. As a result, it is the responsibility of to ensure that our soldiers are taken care of. One of our key responsibilities should be to ensure that, their right to work in conditions of safety, dignity and fulfilment, is protected.

In this regard, I am pleased with the progress that the process of the Defence Review has made in strengthening policies that improve conditions of work and grievance procedures for the soldiers. I have made an undertaking that the Review should be finalised by the end of next month.

Let me once more reiterate how excited I am that we have been able to declare a national Defence Force Day.

In my view, it is important for the country to set aside one special day to publicly show appreciation to our soldiers, for their invaluable and selfless service to our nation.

The Chief of the Defence Force informs me that an amazing program of fanfare has been organised to entertain us, and I am inviting all of you to stay and enjoy it.

Finally, may I say, that this day should be more than just an event in the calendar of the Defence Force, but be part of the fabric of our society's heritage.

Let our Defence Force always stand as a stark example of what we can achieve by working together. Like those who died together in the sinking of the **SS Mendi**, let it be the symbol of our ability to rise above the petty differences that divide us.

May we forever see the ugly past of the history of our armed forces, and the conflict that divided our people for so long, as a reminder of a place where our country should never return.

We are building a Defence Force that has come to be known, amongst the people of our continent, as a force for peace and goodwill, the pride of our nation.

This is in keeping with the general nature of our nation - a nation that is at peace with itself and its neighbours.

Thank you all, and a very Happy National Defence Force Day to you.