

**RAISING PRIVATE MTOLO PART 2**

# A soldier borne on the waves

Though he died with so many others on SS Mendi, his identification papers survived the odds, writes **Shaun Smillie**

**CHAPTER ONE**

IN A box buried deep in an archive in The Netherlands, Mark Sijlman stumbled on a surprising discovery. He had expected to find the usual death certificates for the people of Zandvoort — single sheets of paper simply listing the names of the dead and the causes of death. But the document he found was different, made from unusually thick paper and greasy to the touch. He realised he was holding a small miracle. The document was an identification pass that black South Africans carried nearly 100 years ago. It had been taken off the body of Sikaniso Mtole and had survived two months in the North Sea. Remarkably, the paper showed little

in my hands, knowing that Mr Mtole had it on him when he died," Sijlman said. The pass told Sijlman that Mtole was 30 years old when the document was issued four months before he died, that he stood five foot seven inches tall, and that he lived on a farm owned by a white farmer, near Richmond in what was then the province of Natal. Mtole's body washed up on a beach near Zandvoort on April 29 1917 — 67 days after he drowned when the SS Mendi sank. In all, 646 people, most of them black South African troops, died when the steamship sank. The next day the public prosecutor in Haarlem in a statement declared that there were no objections to the burial of a male "presumably kaffer (sic)" whose name was Sikanisu (sic) Mtole and whose death "may be assumed to be drowning". In the days thereafter a clerk took the pass that was found on the body and attached it to Mtole's death certificate and stashed it alongside other clerical documents.

There it stayed until the morning of January 22 2014, when Sijlman travelled from his home town of Noordwijk to the Haarlem archives, a journey of about 25km.

For a long time the amateur historian had ignored the gravestone that stood alongside the wall in Noordwijk cemetery. It was a gravestone for the remains of four South Africans, all casualties of the SS Mendi. He avoided the South African graves because he felt finding information about them would be difficult and he didn't know where to start.

So, for years, he traced the personal histories of the occupants of the other war graves in the cemetery — the British, the German and the Canadian victims who had washed up on the Dutch shore. He has been fascinated with World War 1 since childhood. "I am not so interested in the military strategies of the war, but the personal stories," he explained. He pieces together stories from various snippets of information gleaned from archives across the world. Sometimes he gets lucky and finds a photograph. If he can, he makes contact with the serviceman's relatives. "Sometimes they tell me something about the dead person, sometimes they know nothing and I will tell them," Sijlman said. In 2014 Sijlman knew the time was right to look into the stories of the South Africans.

"I waited until I had researched all the others, then I decided let's give it a go," he said. Mtole and the other three South Africans — Natal Kazimula, Sitebe Molide and Arosi Zenzile — were moved to the Noordwijk cemetery after their remains were exhumed in Zandvoort in



FAR FROM HOME: Mark Sijlman at the cemetery in Noordwijk, Netherlands, where four South African victims of the SS Mendi sinking are buried

Picture: TACO VAN DER EB



SMALL MIRACLE: The identification pass issued to Sikaniso Mtole

**I am not particularly interested in the military strategies of World War 1, I am more interested in the personal stories of those who fought**

damage — the sea water had not dissolved the ink, and the lettering was readable as the day the letter and Mtole's body slipped into the ocean. "This was something special, it was a strange feeling to have this piece of paper



FROM HERE TO ETERNITY: A newspaper clipping from 1920, noting the reburial of lieutenant James Alexander McIntosh. He and other war dead, including Sikaniso Mtole, were reburied in centralised war cemeteries

1920. It was a move to centralise the war cemeteries scattered along the coast. Sijlman had neither heard of Richmond nor could he get his tongue around the names of the clans on the document. But what Sijlman did know was the piece of paper he held gingerly in his

hands that winter morning was a clue. From that information he could possibly make contact with the descendants of Mtole's family and they could perhaps tell him the back story of how the body of a black South African soldier ended up on a beach in the Netherlands.



IN THE HALF-LIGHT: On November 11 2015, Mark Sijlman organised a memorial for all foreign war casualties washed ashore or buried in Noordwijk. Every casualty was represented by a child with a lantern who stood in front of a headstone

Picture: TACO VAN DER EB



MOVING THE SPIRIT: Martin Mtole, Mbizweni Mtole and Gayeni Mtole, all grandchildren of Sikaniso Mtole

Picture: KHAYA NGWENYA

**CHAPTER TWO**

THE Mtoles were a family in turmoil. A month after Sijlman found the identification pass, they received news from a man that he had found their grandfather's grave in a far-off land.

"We were happy and sad at the same time, when we heard the news," says Martin Mtole, one of Mtole's grandsons.

"Happy because we now knew where he was buried, sad because in Zulu culture he is meant to be home," Sijlman contacted the Ditsong National Museum of Military History in Johannesburg on the day he found the document.

"Then things started to roll," says Sijlman. Researchers at the museum were able to track down the descendants.

At first the family was confused. They believed Sijlman was preventing the repatriation of the body. Sijlman received angry e-mails from the family.

"I had to explain to them that I was only a historian looking for information," says Sijlman.

The Mtoles phoned the presidential hotline at Easter, asking for help to bring their patriarch home. Their request was forwarded to the Department of Military Veterans. But the Mtoles were given bad news. Because Mtole was buried in a Commonwealth War Grave Commission grave, exhumation was out of the question.

The commission's principles, set down after World War 1, state that remains cannot be repatriated.

The family considered going overseas to perform the rituals to bring home Mtole's spirit.

"This, too, proved to be difficult. The Department of Military Veterans' ruling is that they don't fund such

trips — it's too expensive. Two years have passed and three of Mtole's grandchildren reach a clearing in a eucalyptus plantation that overlooks the Nsingozi River. They stand staring at a place they never knew.

Across a valley just below the crown of a hill is where their grandfather's kraal once stood. Getting to their destination requires following a zigzag of logging roads through a forest plantation near Richmond. They are guided by Mbizweni, the only grandson who remembers the route.

What little they know is that their grandmother Thoko left the kraal shortly after Mtole's death.

"After he died, everything became a mess, his wife moved back to her family's kraal," says Martin.

Later, they explain, the family was forced to move from the homestead Mtole once headed.

If the Mtoles get their wish and their grandfather's remains are brought back, the plan is that he be buried in this place, next to his brother.

But they know that this is increasingly unlikely.

"If we don't get the remains back, [the government] must take us to the Netherlands," says Martin.

They will go to the grave that sits next to the wall of the Noordwijk cemetery. Then they will speak to him and explain that his body must stay in that foreign land but they will invite his spirit to travel back with them to the hills and steep valleys it will recognise.

"I will not give up until I die," Martin says.

Visit [www.timeslive.co.za](http://www.timeslive.co.za) for a gallery of images and an audio interview with Mark Sijlman.



GREEN HILLS OF HOME: Phatheni township in Richmond, KwaZulu-Natal, the home town of Gayeni Mtole, Sikaniso's grandson

Picture: KHAYA NGWENYA