

Acting DDG visits France in preparation for the Battle of Delville Wood commemoration

Public Works' Acting Deputy Director-General (DDG) Projects and Professional Services, Mr Sam Thobakgale, has embarked on a two week journey to France for the Centenary Commemoration of the Battle of Delville Wood.

Mr Thobakgale is accompanied by a technical team from the Professional Services that will ensure that everything is in order before the South African President Mr Jacob Zuma and Public Works Minister TW Nxesi travels there to commemorate the lives of black soldiers who died in the First World War.

The event will mark the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Deville Wood.

The announcement of the plans to go to France were made during the State of the Nation Address, with a schedule to unveil a memorial in order to praise and restore the dignity of the South African black soldiers who served and died in the Battle of Deville Wood.

The unveiling, scheduled to take place on 12 July 2016, also coincides with the state visit to France by President Jacob Zuma, which is on the 11th of July 2016.

The South African National Memorial commonly known as Delville Wood is situated in the North of France, about 170 km from the capital city of Paris.

In 1920, to erect a National Memorial for South African soldiers, the South African government bought the Delville Wood from the French government to honour South African soldiers who died during World War I. In 1926 the Memorial was inaugurated, and twenty-six years later, in 1952, an alter stone was added to celebrate the South African soldiers who died during the Second World War.

Currently, the Deville Wood Memorial Museum represents the blasphemies and prejudices of the past. The South African military history has a very biased representation in the museum, with the role played by the soldiers of colour in the war being distorted by not being vividly shown, and having minimal presentation of the roles the soldiers played in various stations of the war. It is widely known that only white South African soldiers who rendered services to France during World War are buried at Deville Wood, with black South Africans, considered unfit to serve as combatants because of their skin colour, buried in different parts of France. The black soldiers were enlisted as the South African Native Labour Corps.

The re-burial of Private Beleza Myengwa, remembered as being the first member of the South African Labour Corps to die in France during the war, was officiated by Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa in France in July 2014. It became a major step in reorienting South African military history. A Memorial Garden honouring South Africans who died in the Wars will be erected.