

Minister Nxesi accompanies President Jacob Zuma to France - to honour South African troops who died in wars

Public Works Minister TW Nxesi has accompanied President Jacob Zuma on a three-day state visit to France.

The purpose of the visit to Delville Wood Memorial Museum in France is to mark 100 years of the battle of Deville Wood, and to unveil the Memorial Garden - honouring all South African soldiers who died in the World Wars.

The Department of Public Works has played a significant role in the transformation of Delville Wood Memorial Museum by providing infrastructural and technical support.

The visit to France follows an announcement by President Zuma during his State of the Nation Address where he promised that the Delville Wood Memorial Museum will be transformed to restore dignity and humanity of the black soldiers who died in the First World War.

The Delville Wood Memorial Museum, in its current form, reflects a very biased South African military history. The representation of roles by South African soldiers during the wars is very minimal and distorts the important role they played in various theatres of the wars.

Therefore, the makeover of the Memorial site by the Department of Public Works is aimed at assisting to transform the history of Delville Wood Memorial Museum to reflect an unbiased, just and authentic South African military history of World Wars.

The white South African soldiers who served during the First World War were buried in Delville Wood, while their fellow black South Africans who served in the same war were buried elsewhere in France.

The black soldiers were enlisted as the South African Native Labour Corps. In short, the role played by the South African Native Labour Corps hardly received any attention in the South African military history. They were considered unfit to serve as combatants because of their skin colour.

Therefore, the re-interment of the first member of the South African Native Labour Corps to die in France in the First World War, Private Beleza Myengwa, was a major step in rehabilitating the South African military history.