

Salute bravery of our armed forces

AS DURBAN prepares to celebrate the annual Armed Forces Day on Tuesday, the pride in our soldiers, sailors, air force and medical personnel, will be tinged with sadness at the tragic turn of events at the Salisbury Island naval station, where six people died yesterday.

Apparently workers from the Department of Public Works were working in a sewer pit when their lives were put at risk by a methane gas leak. Their cries for help were answered by

nearby military personnel. Three of these rescuers were also overcome by the fumes when they went into the pit to rescue the workers.

According to a spokesperson for the Department of Labour, 21 Navy officers who tried to rescue those in the pit were rushed to hospital as they were also affected by the gas. Investigations are under way from the Navy, the police and the Department of Labour.

First reports seem to suggest those rescuers who died and those admitted to hospital

behaved in the finest tradition of our military by putting their own lives at risk to save others.

This is all the more poignant given that next Tuesday, the country will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the SS Mendi in the English Channel, with the loss of 616 South African servicemen, 607 of them black. The men were on their way to France as part of the Native Labour Corps, not to fight but to help those who were fighting in World War I.

An SA navy frigate, the SAS Amatola, will play host to dignitaries taking part in the commemoration at the site where the Mendi sank.

On the same day in Durban the public will watch a parade of military vehicles and soldiers as the navy and air force take part in the salute.

It is a chance for the people of our city and province to show appreciation for the role our democratic-era defence force plays in times of natural disaster and as keepers of the peace.