

4053, Private Samuel Lekuba, South African Native Labour Corps

Private Samuel of the South African Native Labour Corps 'was killed by hostile shell fire on January 19th: [1917] at Aveluy Siding about two miles North of Albert.'¹ He is recorded on the CWGC database as 4053 Samuel Lekuba of 2/SA Native Lab Contin and is buried at Aveluy Communal Cemetery Extension along with 612 other men. There is a cross on his headstone.²

Samuel was 40 years old when he died. He was the son of Motjeri Kgobe of Mashashane's Location in Pietersburg, Transvaal and was married to Sesetselsane. Today Pietersburg is known as Polokwane and is in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Mashashane, more commonly referred to as Ga-Mashashane is approximately 40km west from the centre of Polekwanne.

Samuel's death was to cause some concern in South Africa as there had been an understanding that the SANLC would not be placed on the front line. This the Army Council contradicted noting that they 'are not aware of having given an assurance that men of the Native Labour Corps would only be employed on work outside danger Zones.' The conditions under which the men were 'now employed their safety from enemy shell fire is practically assured.'³

An enquiry into Samuel's death was held on 24 January 1917 by order of the Officer Commanding the Labour Contingent. The President was Captain NA Key with Lieutenant WCW Holmes and Lieutenant TJB Pienaar as Members.

Evidence was given by Colour Sergeant Slade of B Company which resulted in the enquiry finding 'that Private Samuel No 4053, was unavoidably killed on duty through no fault of his own or negligence on his part.'

Slade reported:

'... I was in charge of a party of 100 natives working unloading trains. We were being shelled by hostile guns during the morning. At 11.20 we were in the trenches with the natives taking cover.

When I came out during a cessation in the shelling one of the motor lorry men informed me that one of my men was lying dead in the road at the Aveluy end of the road in the Station Yard. I saw the body of a native lying there who afterwards I identified as being that of Private No 4053 Samuel of B Company, 2nd SANLC. He was in a mangled mass with his clothing all torn to ribbons including his overcoat. He was found near a platform made of wood where he had evidently taken cover. I afterwards had him removed to Camp. Private Samuel was on duty at the time and in my opinion his death is not due to any negligence on his part.'

A telegram from the Field Marshal, Commander in Chief to the War Office confirming that the SANLC would be employed behind the lines ended with 'urgent necessity at the time of the death of Private Samuel made it essential to make use of South African Labour in Army Areas.'⁴

¹ CO 616/73 19935

² <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/186687/S%20LEKUBA>

³ CO 616/73 19935 letter dated 18 April 1917

⁴ CO 616/73 19935 telegram dated 13 April 1917 signed G Whitehead to War Office

He embarked in South Africa on 5 November 1916, and arrived at Le Havre on 10 December 1916 having travelled from South Africa to Europe on the *Benguela*. The contingent was employed on road-making in the Somme sector.⁵

Samuel is one of 1,234 South African Labour who died during the First World War commemorated on the CWGC database, of whom the majority died when the SS *Mendi* was sunk in February 1917. 316 are buried in France having died between 27 November 1916 and 25 September 1918. The majority are buried at Arques-La-Bataille British Cemetery.

58 in Tanzania,

35 in Kenya,

5 in Sierra Leone,

137 in South Africa.

Samuel was one of the few Labour men to be killed in action. Apart from the *Mendi* deaths, most of the men in Europe and Africa had died from disease. As with all the other SANLC men who had died during the war, it is likely his family only heard of his death after the war or once the contingent returned home. This was partly to prevent panic and the consequent impact on future recruitment.

The discovery of the enquiry in the Colonial Office correspondence is significant for a few reasons. On first reading, it was assumed Samuel was his surname. It was only on checking the CWGC list using the force number supplied that Samuel was found to be his first name. This raises one of the challenges of researching African names. His immediate superior and 'the system' knew him by his first name and number, not his surname although the latter is in official documents. Knowing his full name enabled a more complete picture of Samuel Lekuba's war time service to be pieced together, and no doubt as more is discovered about 2 Battalion SANLC's service in France, more can be added. Where men survived leaving no clear link to their force number or other names, it is a real challenge to work out where they served and what their experience might have been. Despite the political views of the day, the accountability of the system in having to record and justify deaths and other losses, irrespective of the background of a person, is to be valued.

It is unlikely that Slade wrote to Samuel's wife or father to tell them of their loved one's death; a practice that was common amongst the white fighting forces – if Slade had, I wonder how he would have described Samuel's death given the description he gave to the enquiry team? These letters, where found, tend to protect the family back home from the horrors of war.

Compiled by Dr Anne Samson

June 2021

⁵ SA War Graves Project: <http://www.southafricanwargraves.org/search/details.php?id=13306>; SANDF Doc Centre: SANLC 14: List Members embarked for France