

## Mid Month Visit – May 2022

Those who have been on our 1-day Tour in the Magaliesberg are waiting for the next, with new battlefields and places of interest, and it was with this in mind that Andre and I set off in search of the area where the Battle of Middelfontein took place. This battle has been on my radar for some time as it occurred a year after Spioen Kop, and 24 January happens to be my birthday. The battle took place over three days, 23, 24 and 25 January 1901, and the British lost 12 men killed, 50 wounded, and three who went 'missing' but who later re-joined the column.

With the 'hit and run' tactics being adopted by the Boers, Major-General French was determined to corner the Boers and get them to surrender. Early in January he decided to form more mobile columns as the previous tactic of large forces, with many guns, was certainly proving to be very cumbersome.

French was aware of Boer General de la Rey operating south of Olifants Nek and in order to make sure that de la Rey couldn't advance eastwards towards Krugersdorp he ordered the garrison commander at Rustenburg, General Cunningham, to leave the garrison and proceed southwards along the Ventersdorp road.

Cunningham left Rustenburg before dawn on the morning of 23 January 1901, leaving a small force at the garrison.



*Picture: Cunningham's camp was in the valley in front of the hills*

Having passed through Olifants Nek Cunningham's column came into contact with small groups of Boers from the Wolmaranstad Commando under Commandant Potgieter, who skilfully manoeuvred the British column onto the farm Middelfontein which was surrounded by hills that were occupied by the Boers of the commando.

Cunningham soon realised what was happening when he saw the Boers on the skyline of the hills surrounding him. He ordered the transport to be parked under cover of some rising ground. The Worcestershire Regiment were heavily engaged with the Boers, but when support for the Worcester's arrived, the firing died down and the Boers evacuated to the south and to the east of the British position.



At sunset the British advance forces were withdrawn back to camp under cover of artillery fire, and a defensive line of pickets was positioned. Fortunately for the British, they had a position from which they could heliograph messages to Olifants Nek.

On a sadder note, late that afternoon they received a message that Queen Victoria had died the previous day.

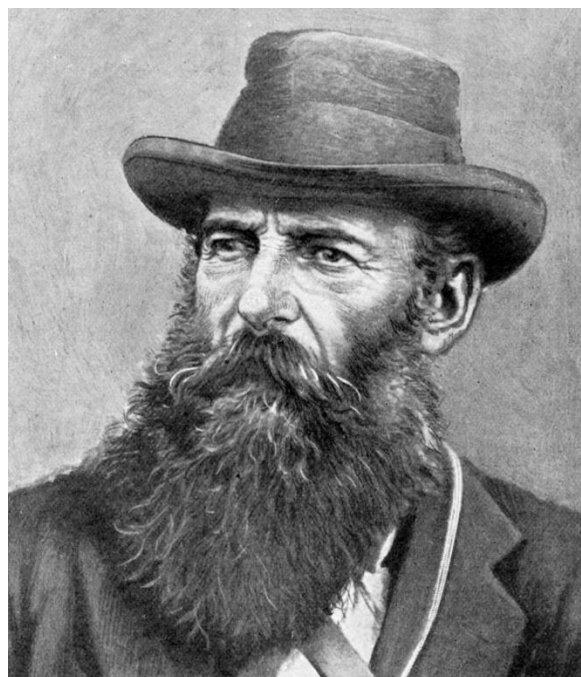
General de la Rey arrived after sunset on 23 January and immediately set about planning an attack for the next day. Potgieter had set the scenario perfectly and with the Wolmaranstad commando, together with de la Rey's Rustenburg Boers, there was a considerable contingent under de la Rey's command.

Lionel Wulfsohn in his book 'Rustenburg at War' describes the events of 24 January (page 154) – *"At 04h45 on the 24<sup>th</sup> January de la Rey attacked and captured a mounted infantry picket which had taken up position on an isolated kopje. From then onwards the Wolmaranstad men now joined by de la Rey's commandos which included the Rustenburgers, fired on the British camp from all points of the compass."*

De la Rey had arrived with a Krupp gun, which together with rifle fire from the Boers, was well placed to fire into the British camp.

At least half of Cunningham's force was ordered out to reinforce the pickets, with the remainder staying in the camp to prevent it, and the supplies, falling into the hands of the Boers.

During the early hours of the morning, under the support of artillery fire, the hills closest the camp were cleared of Boers. This effort was not without heavy casualties.



*Picture: General de la Rey*

By nightfall a 'stale-mate' had been reached with the British feeling that the northern perimeter of their camp was securely held. To keep the Boers 'alert' the British ended the day with a formidable bombardment from their artillery, on the known positions of the Boers in the surrounding hills.

During the night of 24/25 Boer scouts reported to de la Rey that a British relief force was on its way from Ventersdorp. De la Rey decided to withdraw his force leaving enough men to act as rearguard to keep their enemy busy while they withdrew.



At midday, after some sporadic interaction between the two forces, Cunningham's column commenced to retire and both rearguards engaged one another.

Cunningham's main force arrived at Koperfontein, a farm about 2 miles north east of Vlakfontein, at about 4 p.m., with the relief force joining them in camp at sunset. Cunningham spent the night at Koperfontein and then early the following day made his way to Krugersdorp to reprovision his force.

Andre and I managed to find the site of the battle and found a site where we could describe the events perfectly. We were in a VW Polo and it was raining but we took a chance on a 'not so healthy' farm road. However, with the Polo having made the trip it bodes well for anyone coming on the Magaliesberg 1-Day Tour No. 2 – whatever car you come in will make it.

On our way home we passed so many 'plantations' of Cosmos.

Cosmos flowers were brought to South Africa in horse feed, from South America, during the Anglo-Boer War and wherever one finds these flowers in bloom, one can be sure there was a British camp on that site.

These displays can be seen in an assortment of pink, purple and white flowers.



**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) - for regular updates and news.

**Allan Gordon**