

Mid-Month Visit – April 2024

A battlesite which I have always wanted to visit, but it has always just been 'out of the way' with regards to timings and schedules, is the Battle of Leliefontein, sometimes referred to as the Battle of Witkloof – both because of the names of the farms on which action took place. The battle took place on 6 and 7 November 1900 and the farms are between Belfast and Carolina. As I normally do when I visit battlesites I consult a 1:50 000 map of the area so as to get an idea of the roads and terrain which I am going to have to travel. What struck me when I first glanced at the map, was that I was looking at farms in the area in which General Buller had suffered many casualties on his way to the Battle of Bergendal on 27 August 1900.

The map which covers an area of approximately 1 000 square kilometres covers the farms Geluk, Waaikraal, van Wyk's Vlei, Frischgewaagd and others, where Buller suffered huge casualties. Also on the map are the farms of Bergendal and Dalmanutha. This of course opens up a new opportunity – a visit to all these battlesites, probably over a weekend. However, to identify exactly where these engagements took place, and to gain access to the sites, which are now on private farms, would take some time, and who would be interested in spending a weekend visiting these sites – with no cemeteries and/or limited monuments indicating what happened?

Casualties, just covering Buller's movements, and the Battle of Leliefontein were:

Battle	Killed in Action	Died of Wounds	Injured	Missing/ PoW
Buller's movements: 21 – 26 August 1900	36	14	191	34
Battle of Bergendal	12	11	85	
Battle of Leliefontein	8		32	
TOTALS	56	25	308	34

Significant numbers – but if one researches what happened in the area in 1901 and 1902, one would find many more engagements where the British suffered casualties. General French's column, which marched from Machadadorp late in October 1900, also suffered casualties on the farm Geluk. French had been ordered to proceed to Heidelberg with a huge column, to clear the area of Boers.



But, to get back to Leliefontein: Major-General Smith-Dorrien, who was based in Belfast, had been tasked with protecting the Pretoria/Delagoa Bay line which, after the Battle of Bergendal, had been threatened by the Boers' activity in the area. After an unsuccessful attempt against the Boers at the beginning of November 1900, Smith-Dorrien launched a second attempt on the Boers on 6 November.

Picture: Major-General Smith-Dorrien



Although there was activity between the two forces on 6 November, the main engagement took place on 7 November when the guns of the Canadians were threatened by the Boers. In the action to save the guns Victoria Crosses were awarded to Lieutenants Cockburn and Turner, and Sergeant Holland, all of the Royal Canadian Dragoons. However, during this attack by the Boers, Boer General Fourie and Commandant Prinsloo lost their lives.

In 1925 Smith-Dorrien launched a collection campaign in England to raise money to erect a memorial to Fourie and Prinsloo for their bravery in trying to capture the British guns. His efforts generated great support, both in South Africa and the U.K. and today a memorial to Fourie and Prinsloo stands on the farm Witkloof where the battle for the guns took place.

The book 'Guide to the Anglo Boer War in the Eastern Transvaal' by Gert and Erika van der Westhuizen records (page 121) – *"Smith-Dorrien admired the Boers for their brave head-on attack on the British superior. He even compared it to the renowned 'Charge of the Light Brigade' at Balaklava during the Krim War. After Smith-Dorrien told the story of the Boer's head-on attack to the London Times, he raised funds (213 pounds) in Britain for the erecting of a memorial for General Fourie and Commandant Prinsloo. On 7 November 1927 Smith-Dorrien attended the unveiling of the memorial at Witkloof."*



Picture: The memorial to Fourie & Prinsloo

Another happy/successful end to the above also took place, in 1925 – relating to Prinsloo. Prinsloo was injured at the Battle of Spioenkop, and after undergoing medical treatment to facial injuries received, President Kruger presented Prinsloo with a Sporting Mauser. In February 1901 an Australian contingent arrived at the Prinsloo farm to move the family to a camp and burn the farm. Captain McKenzie of the Australians saw the rifle and claimed it as a 'prize'. Smith-Dorrien, who knew of the whereabouts of the rifle, successfully negotiated its return to the Prinsloo family and it hung in the Carolina Church Hall together with a picture of Prinsloo for many years. Its final resting place was the Ditsong War Museum in Saxonwold.

Last weekend an attempt was made to visit the battlesite however a burning truck carrying coal from a nearby colliery totally blocked the road and a lengthy wait to get through presented itself. It was decided a visit would have to wait until another day.

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) for regular updates and news.

Allan Gordon