

## Mid-Month Visit – August 2023

I have mentioned in previous newsletters that there is a touring party travelling from the U.K. later in the year and I will be with them for three days, taking them to several battles fought during the Guerrilla Phase of the Boer War. The first two weeks of their tour will take them to Natal, Ladysmith, Kimberley and Bloemfontein, and they will cover many of the Anglo-Zulu War and Boer War battles and places of interest. Thereafter they head to Gauteng.

Over and above the 'group tour', there is a couple who want to visit a great grandparent's grave in Kroonstad, and I have been asked to accompany them. Their relative died of disease in Kroonstad and, having made the effort to get to South Africa, they feel it is only right for them to pay their respects. I have, after quite a few 'phone calls, established that the grave, in the Kroonstad Cemetery, is in a relatively good condition, however the cemetery as a tourist attraction, is very embarrassing. I have explained this to the couple, but they are not concerned.

I have one full day with this couple, and only seeing one grave on the 400 km route seems a little pointless. I have, therefore, been researching other places of interest on the trip with Boer War relevance and have identified two stops – one to discuss the Battle at Roodewal, which took place on 7 June 1900 and the other at Heuningspruit, which took place on 22 June 1900. This has 'opened up' a whole new world for me and my 800-page book with all the Boer War casualties has once again come out of 'cold storage'.

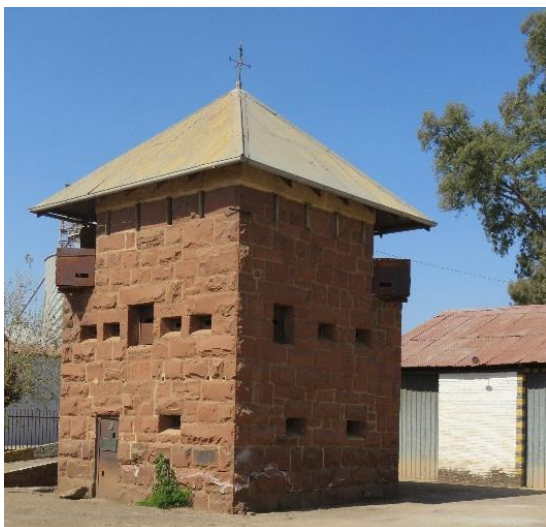
Both battles were attacks on the railway link from Kroonstad to the Transvaal, and both attacks were planned and executed by General de Wet.

The rail link was very strategic for the British, as Johannesburg and Pretoria had both recently been occupied by Lord Roberts' force, and replenishing a weary force was paramount.

*Picture: A train wreck from one of the attacks in 1900*



In researching these battles, apart from the many reference books I have, my 'journey' took me to Bela-Bela (previously known as Warmbaths) to meet Johan van Niekerk. Johan has written a book which is now out of print, and instead of corresponding electronically, I decided to pay him a visit. And guess what – this visit has 'opened up' another potential tour – Johan is researching battles fought in the old Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo) and is very passionate about the Boer War.



He hasn't been in Bela Bela for long, but it has been long enough for him to rescue the Blockhouse, which was being used by the Municipality as a storeroom.

He has had it cleaned and has plans to restore it to its original state. As it stands today, it is probably one of the better examples of a Blockhouse in the country.

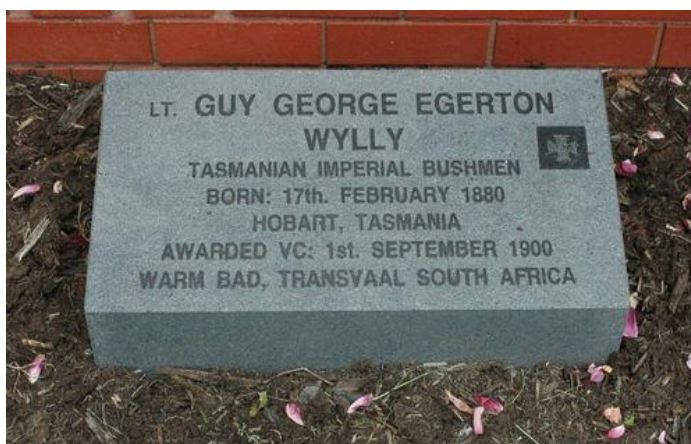
*Picture: The Blockhouse in Bela-Bela (Warmbaths)*

Johan is busy planning a Heritage Society in the area and has identified a number of battles and positions of British garrisons. He recently planned for the identification of another battle site and had organised a team of 'metal detectors' to help identify gun positions and places of troop positions, through the remains of bullets and shell finds. However, the governing body of protected historical sites made him call off this exercise. Apparently, all Boer War sites are protected areas – unless you have a qualified, approved surveyor with you.

Johan speaks passionately about the fact that two Australians were awarded V.C.s at a battle fought on the outskirts of Bela-Bela early in September 1900.

Lieutenant Wylly and Trooper Bisdee, both serving with the Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen were the recipients.

My September newsletter will feature one of the above as my 'V.C. of the Month'.

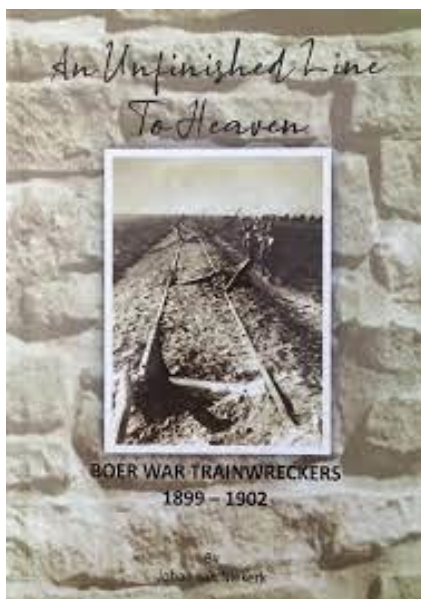


*Picture: Lieutenant Wylly V.C.s grave*

I have a number of books relating to the Australian involvement in the war, and to quote from the book 'The War with Johnny Boer' by Max Chamberlain & Robin Droogleever, on the engagement above, and a quote from a letter from Captain R.C. Lewis to his brother (page 335) – "At 11.30 a.m. I received an order to provide 20 men with an officer to go with Captain Brooke of the Army Service Department, to protect his men in rounding up some cattle out west. Lieutenant Wylly and his men were started off at noon. Later in the evening news came that the patrol had been badly cut up. They had been taken through a pass into the hills. Three days ago I had taken a strong party through this, and proceeded about four miles. After returning I reported it unsafe for small patrols to proceed through it, or go further without being strongly supported with artillery."



I have no doubt that there is much to explore and formalise in the Bela-Bela district.



To end with, I am not a book salesman, but if anyone is interested in Johan's book, please let me know by return email – if there is sufficient interest, I am sure he will do a re-run.

The title of his book is – 'An Unfinished Line To Heaven – Boer War Trainwreckers – 1899-1902'.

The title was taken from a quote by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle as he passed the damaged railway lines, north of Kroonstad – *"The lines were blown upwards by dynamite, until they appeared like an unfinished line to heaven."*

*Picture: The cover of Johan van Niekerk's book*

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**Allan Gordon**