

Mid-Month Visit – August 2024

The BattleToursZA Tour to the 'old' South-Eastern Transvaal is now a thing of the past, and for those who missed it, it will be repeated as, although a long tour, it was a huge success. However, I was taken aback by the lack of both signage and 'Blue Plaques' at almost every place we visited, and it has opened the door for me to find out how one goes about making sure that possible corrective action is taken.

Over the past six months, since my last visit, several 'Blue Plaques' have been erected at a number of gravesites in the old Middelburg Cemetery, many of which I haven't had time to visit, as they had no relevance to the Boer War. However, there are two which I did visit – those to Henri Slegtkamp and Jack Hindon, both Boer heroes during the South Africa War (1899-1902). For those who are unaware of what a 'Blue Plaque' is, Wikipedia describes it as follows – *"A blue plaque is a sign installed in a public place to commemorate a famous person, event, or former building."* And ... *"London's Blue Plaques Scheme, run by English Heritage, celebrates the links between notable figures of the past and the buildings in which they lived and worked. Founded in 1866, it has inspired many similar schemes in the UK and around the world."*



Picture: Blue Plaque in memory of Henri Slegtkamp



Picture: Blue Plaque in memory of Jack Hindon

I know that there are many battlesites around the Magaliesburg which have been honoured with Blue Plaques – Silkaatsnek, Dwarsvlei, Elands River, and Slypsteenkop, to name a few. However, other than Diamond Hill, there were none on our recent tour. To 'add insult to injury' there is no road signage, certainly at the battlesites we visited, indicating the event of the past. If one didn't know where the Battle of Bakenlaagte took place, one would never find it. Why do I mention Bakenlaagte – well – the Battle of Diamond Hill lasted two days and there were in total 193 casualties. The Battle of Bakenlaagte lasted one day and there were 237 casualties – certainly an event which deserves some kind of recognition.

So, how does one go about proposing sites that need to be recognised? Next year is the 125th anniversary of the commencement of the guerrilla phase of the war. Hopefully there will be



commemorative tours from overseas visitors. I know that Colin Ross is working on a tour to commemorate the Battle of Diamond Hill, and if he gets traction, these visitors need to be taken to other sites in the area. How great would it be to have these sites road-signed, and if possible recognised by 'blue plaques'?"

But, back to the tour. At the end of last year, before a 10-day tour of Boer War battlesites, a visiting couple asked if I could take them to Kroonstad to view an ancestor's grave. The condition of the cemetery and the headstone was an embarrassment, but they insisted on the visit. I wanted to make the trip as memorable as possible, so I identified a visit to the Battle of Roodewal as a 'value add'. The visit to Roodewal rounded off the day very well, and I believe made the day well worthwhile. This 'value add' got me thinking about how to round off the 2-day 'old' South-Eastern Transvaal tour, instead of just travelling back to Johannesburg, after a morning spent driving around the district of Val (which is very interesting). I needed a final stop of interest. My research took me to the Battle of Grootvlei.



Picture: Our Overnight Accommodation – The Val Hotel

Without beating the drum to pieces, relating to the lack of road-signage and any indication of a battle having taken place in the area, I visited a number of farmers/people in the area and drew blanks – until I met up with Ludwig Ankiewicz. His family had been resident in the area during the war and he had studied events in the district in great detail. He, not being a military person, but being interested in the greater history of the district, has produced four books going back to the stone ages, up to current times. Without giving details of the events of 26 December 1900, he was able to tell me that the mine was not a gold mine, but a coal mine, and that the original shaft and head-gear, were now submerged in the waters of the Grootvlei Dam.

Without going into the details of the battle, a scene set from 'The Times History of the War' records (Vol V, page 119) – *"Colonel Colville's column of 1,400 men had been occupied during December in clearing farms between Standerton and Heidelberg. There were constant petty skirmishes, culminating on the 26th in an affair of more serious moment. On this day, Captain R.E. Radclyffe's company of the Rifle Brigade and a pom-pom were left in camp at South Rand Mine,*



twelve miles west of Greylingstad, while the rest of the column left at 7 a.m. to raid farms in the vicinity. A commando of Heidelbergers, about 600 strong, under Commandant Buys, had concentrated in the neighbourhood, and while Buys with 200 active skirmishers occupied the attention of Colville, who had only a miserable allowance of 50 mounted men, the rest of the Boer force, under Trichardt, fell upon Radclyffe's small detachment in the camp."



Picture: The Battle of Grootvlei being explained as part of the tour

'The Times History' ends their record of the battle by recording (Vol V, page 120 – "At last the guns of the returning column were heard, and at 3.30 p.m. the Boers beat a retreat. Out of 140 men engaged in this very plucky defence, 61 had been killed or wounded. Colville himself had been warmly engaged on the road back and had lost 17 men."

As with all casualty figures, from various publications, my extract from 'The Boer War Casualty Roll (1899-1902)' by Alexander M Palmer indicates that there were (in total), nine killed in action, four who died of wounds received, 47 injured, and 20 taken prisoner – 80 in total. The prisoners were later released as the Boers had no prisoner camps due to the fact that they were a 'force on the constant move'. So, this was more than just skirmish, and really worthy of more prominence.

And so ended a very, long, special, and enjoyable tour.

Last month's Mid-Month newsletter ended – should Mackay have been the first double Victoria Cross recipient? What a commemorative Sgian-Dubh this would then have been had this been the case? I am ordering mine – any other takers? The Sgian-Dubh is almost complete ... hopefully pictures this time next month?

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

Allan Gordon