

Mid-Month Visit – August 2025

I have been wrestling with the idea of putting pen to paper regarding the recently completed Breaker Morant Tour – for no reason other than that I have mixed feelings about its longevity and success. Surveys received back from those who were on the tour pegged the tour as excellent, however, from a marketing and execution aspect, my thoughts are mixed. This is not related to whether Morant and Handcock were dealt a 'bad' deal, but because of the condition of the memorials, the content, and the roads which make up the tour.

Starting with a visit to the grave of Morant and Handcock and then travelling to Bela-Bela (formerly Warmbaths) to visit a well-preserved Blockhouse, and the battlesite where Willey and Bisdee were awarded their V.C.s, we ended up at our accommodation for the weekend, the Lalapanzi Hotel. Although this is a trip of over 400 km, the breaks at Pretoria and Bela-Bela certainly broke up the trip. Future trips will hopefully, once more research has been done, include a stop at two serious train derailments which happened in 1901, the time that the Bushveld Carbineers were active in the area.

Without going into too much detail of stops during the next two days, at which there was much to see of interest, were the sights pertinent to Breaker Morant, the man?

Charles Leach, the 'subject matter expert' on the area and the activities of the Bushveld Carbineers, led us to many memorials along the route – the 'moveable' Metal Fort (one of three that were erected in the area, the first being in 1888), the van Rensburg Trekkers memorial, the memorial where the six Boers were massacred, Captain Taylor's office at Bristow's farm, the site of Fort Victoria, and the 'battlesite' of Vliegenpan. To the many questions – "*was Morant here?*" the answer was "*not actually, but he gave the orders*".



Picture: A 'moveable' Metal Fort

In my opinion, and I have read many books on the Morant saga, the one stop that has a huge bearing on Morant's 'state of mind' was the stop at the original Viljoen House. Hunt with his small party of Bushveld Carbineers were informed that there were Boers present in the house, and Hunt planned to take Viljoen and his Boer compatriots capture. The attack went badly, due to the Boers having been made aware of the Carbineers' presence days before, and in the attack Captain Hunt and Sergeant Eland were killed.



Well, there is no house there anymore, the foundations and the remains of the stoep, together with the memorial are overgrown, so, unless one knows where the site is, it would be impossible to find.

Even with Charles' presence, it took a bit of 'bundu bashing' to locate the remains.

Picture: Memorial to Hunt where the house originally stood

So, for me, what was missing to make this a great tour? I feel that a visit to the grave of Hunt, and a visit to where the Reverend Heese was apparently murdered and to his grave, are really a must for a Breaker Morant tour. This is a tourist opportunity waiting to happen. Most Australians, when referring to the Boer War, mention Breaker Morant. KwaZuluNatal have the siege of Ladysmith and the Anglo-Zulu War to attract tourists, Kimberley has the Siege of Kimberley and the North-West Province hosts the Mafeking Siege Tour. Limpopo could very easily establish a Breaker Morant Tour.

Getting back to the house where Hunt was killed, having studied the background to Morant, the following could be important to understanding the man and/or forming an opinion. Without reading too many books on Morant, Wikipedia has a great summary of Breaker Morant – his life, his time in South Africa, his trial and his execution. Through these references, one can almost gain an understanding of Morant's mind-set which could indicate the reasons for his subsequent actions:

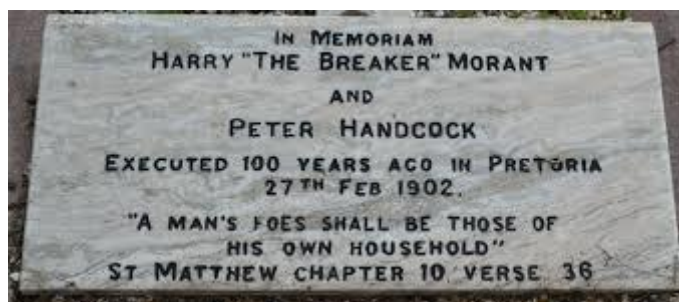
- Morant left South Africa in July 1900 and returned in October of the same year. Peter FitzSimonds in his book, published in 2020 records – *"To keep his options open for a return to South Africa, he attempted to secure a place with the police force being established by Major General Robert Baden-Powell – the South African Constabulary – to safeguard law and order in the occupied Boer republics. For help with this task Morant looked to useful bureaucrats in the administration. One of these was Lieutenant Percy Hunt, a regular British Army officer formerly of the 13th Hussars who, like Morant, was a lover of both horses and polo".* Wikipedia records – *"When news of Hunt's death reached the fort, Morant immediately ordered every available man out on patrol and broke down and cried while giving the news to the men. Captain Taylor then ordered the patrol to avenge the combat death of their captain and to, 'Give no quarter'."* Hunt was shot on 6 August 1901.
- Wikipedia records – *"Morant's second-in-command was Sergeant Frank Eland, a settler from the district who Morant considered an excellent non-commissioned officer and with whom he quickly established a warm friendship."*



- An earlier incident on 4 July 1901, also influenced Morant's 'state of mind'. Bill Woolmore records in his book 'The Bushveld Carbineers' (page 67) – *"an armoured train was blown up near Potgietersrust and attacked by a vastly superior force of Boers. In the attack Lieutenant Best of the Gordon Highlanders was killed. Morant was very cut up as Best was a great chum of his. Details have come to hand about that affair and the Boers, who outnumbered our fellows nearly 20 to 1, seem to have shot men down in cold blood. If we had come up with that party of Boers that night, we would not have taken any prisoners."*

Hamish Paterson a South African military historian and a member of the Military History Society (whom I had the privilege of meeting on several occasions), states: *"I don't think they [the Australian supporters of a Morant pardon] have actually considered what Morant was convicted of. Let's start off with the laws of war. If for example, we have a surrender. You want to surrender and I don't accept your surrender, so I choose not to accept it, that I'm entitled to do. However, the situation changes dramatically once I accept your surrender, then I must remove you from the battlefield to a POW camp and keep you safe. If, for example, Kitchener said, 'take no prisoners', that was very different from 'shoot prisoners'! So Morant and Handcock made two very basic errors: Once you've accepted the surrender, you take them to the railway line and get them shipped off to Bermuda, or wherever. At that point, the sensible thing to do was to ship them off to a POW camp. The next error was to shoot these guys in front of a neutral witness, and then you kill the witness. These are a series of terrible errors of judgement."*

There are still a number of initiatives 'on the go' to have Morant and Handcock pardoned. Does the existing tour and its content give any clarity to what really happened over 120 years ago – I don't think so. However, the more one reads, the more one (certainly this applies to me) appreciates that, should any executions have taken place, there were a number of other 'names' that could have been added to Morant and Handcock.



Picture: The 'wording' on the grave of Morant and Handcock

I certainly am looking forward to the next tour – which will be a little different.

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

Allan Gordon