

Mid Month Visit – December 2020

Some feedback with which to start. In last month's correspondence I wrote about my visit to Spearman's Cemetery and mentioned that there were six graves which I couldn't match up with and/or identify through reference documentation at my disposal. Well, I have established that 'Hallings' is in fact 'Hollings' ... and according to David Biggings' records, T. Levock received a QSA and KSA, which meant that he 'survived' the hostilities ... so there remains some work to be done here.

On my recent trip to Ladysmith, I revisited a few of the battlefields which I have visited in the past and I now have a different respect for Platrand. I am not sure what I was thinking, or why I didn't appreciate where this battle fitted into the bigger picture of the Siege of Ladysmith, and I am not going to blame the Tour Guides. But I now have a different perspective on this battle. One only has to stand at the Boer Burgher 'Hand' Memorial at Platrand to realise the strategic importance of the battle to both the British and Boer forces during the Siege. Platrand is flanked by Wagon Hill on the west and Caesar's Camp on the east and was identified by General George White, commander of the British garrison, as being of the utmost strategic importance. The strategic importance was also recognised by the Boers and they believed that if they could take Platrand, then Ladysmith would have to surrender.



Boer Burgher 'Hand' Memorial at Platrand



To quote from Ruari Chisholm's book, Ladysmith. He has the following to say about Platrand – *"Platrand, a two-and-a-half-mile ridge, 600 feet high, boulder-strewn and barren, except for a few flowering thorns, runs east-west to the south of Ladysmith. Since the beginning of the Siege it had been held by the British, and many among the Boer besiegers were quite content that it should remain so. But other Boers – more adventurous and with a greater sense of strategy – looked up covetously at this feature, held by the Manchester Regiment at the eastern end (which the British called Caesar's Camp), and by the Imperial Light Horse to the west, on Wagon Hill. For Platrand was the key to Ladysmith. From there, the town itself was but 3 000 yards away – downhill. And, once captured, there would be no British position in the entire perimeter which would not be vulnerable to artillery attack, and even long range rifle fire, from both flanks and rear."* (page - 167)

As a side-line, Caesar's Camp was named after a feature in Aldershot, which offers an uninterrupted scenic view for miles into the distance. Aldershot is known as the 'Home of the British Army', and many of the men who set up the camp in Ladysmith would have spent some time in Aldershot.

Before we get to the actual Battle of Platrand which was fought on 6 January 1900, the Boers had identified the stronghold as strategic and on 8 November 1899 had mounted an attack on Caesar's Camp. Diversion attacks by the Boers on Observation Hill in the north and on Cemetery and Helpmekaar Hills in the east failed to create the desired result. The Vryheid Commando managed to entrench themselves on the southern slopes of Platrand but were driven off by the Manchester and the Imperial Light Horse Regiments.



These are the graves of two Manchester soldiers killed at Caesar's Camp on different dates.

Their graves are located 'off the beaten track' on top of Platrand ...

- 5212 Lance Corporal S.F. Whitehead – killed on 9 November 1899
- 1975 Private W. Frampton – killed on 6 January 1900



It is probably appropriate to make reference to the state of the Boer forces at the stage of the Siege of Ladysmith. General Ben Viljoen had had a serious confrontation with the Boer Commander-in-Chief, Piet Joubert after the Battles of Talana and Elandslaagte. After the defeat at Elandslaagte many Boers headed home.



Picture: General Ben Viljoen

Ben Viljoen's words from his book 'My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War', "I soon discovered that a small number of our burghers did not seem inclined to join in the prolongation of the struggle."

After gathering all the men of his Johannesburg Commando he addressed them – "I therefore requested those who had neither the courage nor the inclination to return to the front to fall out, and about 30 men fell back, bowing their heads in shame.

They were jeered at and chaffed by their fellows. General Viljoen then gave each of the 30 a personal letter, and a pass to return to Johannesburg.

The letter read – "Permit to go to Johannesburg on account of cowardice, at Government's expense." The recipients of these letters never read the contents, they gathered their kit, put the letters in their pocket, and made their way to the train waiting at the station." (page – 44)

Many of the other Boer Commandos were experiencing the same challenge that faced Ben Viljoen. It is reported that the Pretoria Commando that was involved in the diversion attack on the eastern targets on 8 November only numbered half of what the strength should have been. So the Boer Generals had their hands full. Ben Viljoen in his book goes on to refer to – *"the disastrous morale.....and the subsequent difficulty of getting a commando up to its original strength."* (page – 44)

The Boers leaders could not agree in December 1899 on a full out attack to take Ladysmith, however, at a Krijnsraad (Boer Council-of-War) early in January 1900 an agreement was reached for an attack. The Boers realised that, with British forces arriving in numbers to relieve Ladysmith,



an effort to take Ladysmith was a priority in order to release a number of their men who were deployed in the sieging of the town.

The Boer plan was as follows (with acknowledgement to 'Bombardment of Ladysmith Anticipated – The Diary of a Siege' by Alan Chalmers) – *"The ridge was to be assaulted simultaneously along its entire front, while at the same time there was to be an attack on Observation Hill and demonstrations around the entire perimeter to keep the British troops in their positions and prevent their assisting their colleagues on Caesar's Camp. The attack was to be a joint Transvaal-Orange Free State operation. General Schalk Burger was to be in overall charge of the Transvaal component. Nine Hundred men from the Heidelberg, Wakkerstroom, Standerton, Krugersdorp and Utrecht Commandos were to attack the east and south-east end of the ridge, while 600 men from the Vryheid, German and Winburg Commandos stormed from the south.*

Four hundred Free Staters from the Harrismith, Heilbron and Kroonstad Commandos (under the command of Commandant de Villiers) were to seize Wagon Point and secure the south-western end of the ridge. Reserves were to consist of a strong mounted force stationed behind Mounted Infantry Hill and in the bed of Flagstaff Spruit. In addition, a force of 600 was to be brought up from the trenches at Colenso to provide a special reserve. Artillery support was to be provided by the Creosut on Bulwana and six guns brought up from Colenso. The final date for the attack was to be given at short notice to prevent the Ladysmith garrison being forewarned." (page – 116)



Map of Platrand

There are many accounts of the battle in all books on the Siege of Ladysmith, and I have written a comprehensive account of the battle where I have broken it into the actions on Caesar's Camp and Wagon Hill. The most comprehensive account that I have come across is in Cassell's History of the Boer War. For the purpose of giving readers an appreciation of the Battle of Platrand, I have quoted from an article on the Internet – reference (Rickard, J (5 February 2007), *Battle of the Platrand*, 6 January 1900, http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_platrand.html).



The British recognised the importance of the Platrand and had fortified the hills at each end. At Caesar's Camp, on the eastern end of the ridge, they had built walls seven feet high. There they had 400 men from the Manchester Regiment, HMS Powerful and the Natal Naval Volunteers, and one 12 pounder gun. Wagon Hill, at the west end of the ridge, was not so strongly fortified, but work was in hand on two gun emplacements. The garrison of Wagon Hill was 600 strong (three companies of the 1st Kings Royal Rifle Corp and the Imperial Light Horse, as well as a detachment from the Royal Engineers). The Natal Naval Volunteers moved a three pounder gun onto Wagon Hill the day before the Boer attack, and two naval guns were being moved onto the hill when the attack began. The British commander on the Platrand, Colonel Ian Hamilton, had around 1 000 men to defend the two and a half mile long position.

The attack went in at 2.30am on 6 January. Under cover of darkness the fighting was chaotic. Hamilton was woken by the noise. Finding a strong Boer attack underway, he used a newly installed telephone to call for reinforcements. Amongst other troops, White sent field artillery that played a crucial part in the daylight fighting.

At daybreak the Boer attack had failed to reach the summit of the ridge, but the Boers held a line along the entire southern side of the hill, and threatened to outflank the British position. Boer guns on neighbouring hills now joined in, and the British position looked vulnerable. However, the field guns sent by White now arrived, and helped stabilize the position.

The fighting went on from early morning till noon without a break. After a short break the Boer attack was resumed. By now British reinforcements had arrived on the hill. The Boers failed to make supporting attacks elsewhere around Ladysmith, allowing White to move troops to the Platrand. The Devonshire Regiment made a particularly significant contribution, clearing a pocket of Boers from the southern side of the ridge with a bayonet charge, in the process losing a third of their strength. Finally, as darkness fell at the end of the day the remaining Boers retreated down the hill.

British losses were high. 168 men were killed, out of a total of 417 casualties.

Five V.C.s were won (two posthumously).

Boer losses were probably just as high.

Officially they were reported at 64 dead and 119 wounded, but the Rifle Brigade counted 99 Boer dead on their part of the hill.

Amongst the Boer dead was de Villiers, shot dead in a close encounter with Hamilton.



Picture: Victoria Cross Medal



Much has been written about what happened at the gun pit, and I would like to quote from A. Conan Doyle's book, 'The Great Boer War'. He writes *"In a gun-emplacement a strange encounter took place at point-blank range between a group of Boers and of Britons. De Villiers of the Free State shot Miller-Walnut dead, Ian Hamilton fired at de Villiers with his revolver and missed him. Young Albrecht of the Light Horse shot de Villiers. A Boer named de Jaeger shot Albrecht. Digby-Jones of the Sappers shot de Jaeger. Only a few minutes later the gallant lad, who had already won fame enough for a veteran, was himself mortally wounded, and Dennis, his comrade in arms and in glory, fell by his side."* (page – 228)

- Major Miller-Walnut – Gordon Highlanders.
- Trooper Herman Albrecht – ILH – awarded the V.C.
- Lieutenant Robert James Digby-Jones – Royal Engineers – awarded the V.C. He was also part of the party that neutralised the Boer Long Tom on the night 7/8 December 1899.

The five V.c.'s awarded at the battle of Platrand were to:

- Lieutenant R. J. Digby Jones – Royal Engineers (posthumous award)
- Trooper H. Albrecht – Imperial Light Horse (posthumous award)
- Lieutenant J. E. I. Masterton – Devonshire Regiment
- Private R. Scott – Manchester Regiment
- Private J. Pitts – Manchester Regiment

The action for the first two has already been described. The award to Lieutenant Masterton was for bravery in the final charge that drove the Boers from Platrand. The awards to Scott and Pitts were for bravery on Caesar's Camp. Their citation reads – *"During the attack on Caesar's Camp in Natal, on 6 January 1900, these two men occupied a sangar, on the left of which all men had been shot down and their positions occupied by Boers, and held their post for 15 hours without food or water, all the time under an extremely heavy fire, keeping up their fire and a smart look-out, though the Boers occupied some sangars on their immediate left rear. Private Scott was wounded."* (Ian Uys – Victoria Crosses of the Anglo-Boer War - page – 37)

For those wanting to pay a visit to Platrand, less than half a day cannot do justice to what happened on 6 January 1900.

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) - our blog has regular posts on Anniversaries / Battles / Activities / Births & Deaths / etc.

Allan Gordon