

Mid Month Visit – February 2022

I am very fortunate to belong to the Magaliesberg Historical Society, a special interest group which organises regular talks on events that occurred in the Magaliesberg district. I have attended a number of talks on battles fought during the South African War (1899-1902), the latest of which was the Battle of Hekpoort. The talks take place at a family restaurant, Meet and Eat, nestled at the foot of the southern slopes of the Magaliesberg, very close to the site of the Battle of Nooitgedacht.

The Battle of Hekpoort was fought on 19 December 1900, less than a week after the British disaster at Nooitgedacht. The Boers had just celebrated their most religious day on 16 December – the Day of the Covenant, or Dingaan's Day.

Some background on this day is that in 1838, 450 Boers had avenged the murder of their leader Piet Retief, against a force of over 10 000 Zulu Warriors at the Battle of Blood River.

Before the battle, the Boers made a promise to God that if he rescued them out of the hands of the Zulus, they would honour that day as a Holy Day in remembrance of what God had done for them.



Picture: Monument at the Battle of Blood River

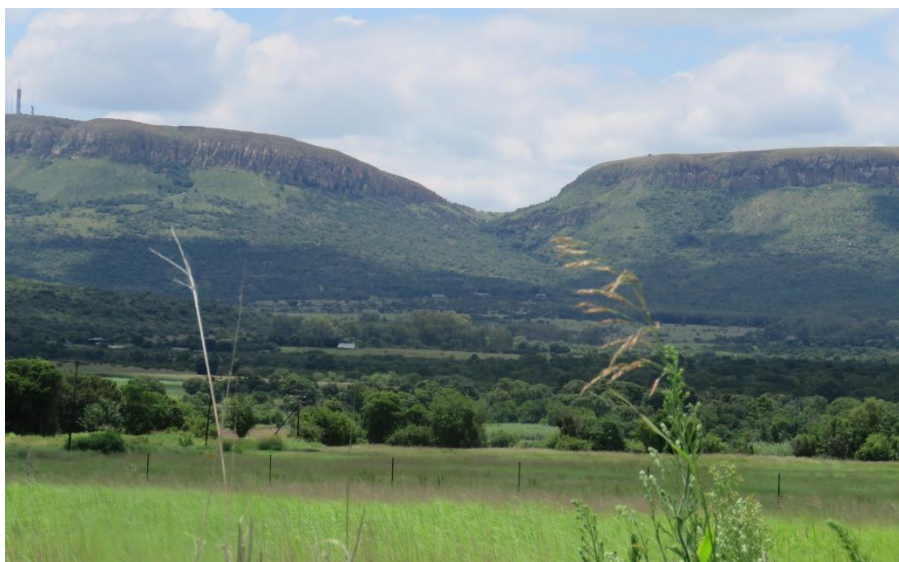
One of the better books on The South African War (1899-1902), guerrilla phase, is 'Jan Smuts Memoirs of the Boer War' edited by SB Spies and Gail Nattrass. It records the following events after a solemn service on 16 December 1900, held on Commandant Steenkamp's farm in Naauwpoort, attended by Boers from all neighbouring districts – (page 157) – *"But even as we were in mingled sadness and joy lingering by the solemn and hallowed memories of the past, we could hear the distant approach of trouble – reports of the tremendous efforts which Clements was making in order to clear the Moot for good of these troublesome guerrillas."*

After Nooitgedacht, Major-General Clements had retreated to the base at Rietfontein West to regroup, re-arm, and replenish his force in order to confront the Boers gathered in the area south of the slopes of the Magaliesberg. Smuts' book carries on – *"On the 17th we still waited for the nearer approach of the enemy and on the 18th we moved forward to meet him on the historic ground below Nooitgedacht."*

Together with Clements were Brigadier-General Alderson and Lieutenant-Colonel Cookson, with a total force of 4 500 men and 25 guns. The Boer strength under Generals de la Rey, Smuts and Beyers was 3 500 men and three guns. The Boers were certainly outnumbered, but they believed they had a plan.



This plan is clearly articulated in Smuts' book (page 158) – *"Our plan was to fight a stiff frontal action in the terrain below Nooitgedacht and then to lead the enemy on by falling back with part of our forces to the stronger position at the Maanhaar Rand some nine miles further west, while the rest of the forces were to secrete themselves in the flanking mountains so as to be on the flanks and rear of the enemy in the principal action at the Maanhaar Rand."*



Picture: Current view of Nooitgedacht – the Battle of Hekpoort took place predominantly in the foreground of the pass

The book 'The War Memories of Commandant Ludwig Krause', which is part of the Van Riebeeck Society Series, and edited by Jerold Taitz, records (page 133) – *"About 5.00 am General Clements advanced onto the positions occupied by Generals Beyers and de la Rey. From our hiding place in the mountains we were able to get a birds-eye view of the whole affair. At 6.00 am the English infantry were suddenly stopped by Boers opening fire on them at 1 000 yards range. And then the engagement became general. As usual the enemy vehemently bombarded the Boer positions, and again and again we saw their mounted infantry advance under the cover of this bombardment, only to turn back again and scurry out of range of the Boer rifles as quickly as their horses would carry them."*

Unbeknown to the Boer force, the British had the same plan in mind. Generals French and Gordon were advancing from Krugersdorp with a force of just under 3 000 men to attack the Boers on their right flank.

In the book 'De la Rey, Lion of the West', Johan Meintjies records (page 191) – *"Hardly had the fight begun when de la Rey was informed that General French had set out that morning from Krugersdorp and was close by. French was known for his rapid flanking movements, and now he was on their side with a strong force of mounted infantry. De la Rey and his men had their hands full to resist the force from Pretoria and had no men left to halt French. They thus ran the danger of encirclement, for which the terrain at Hekpoort was most favourable, so de la Rey ordered his men to withdraw to Maanhaar Rand, where there was a superb defensive position."*



Picture: Part of the British Artillery used against the Boer forces

Just after midday on 19 December 1900 the Boers started their retreat and by mid-afternoon Generals de la Rey, Smuts and Beyers, with their commandos were in position at Maanhaar Rand. That afternoon it rained heavily and as Smuts' book records (page 161) – *"The Boer officers did not see much advantage in fighting a purely defensive action against the enemy in this defensive position. It was therefore decided to fall back that night. When the enemy's scouts approached the position the next day they must have felt very happy in observing that the Boers had vacated the night before."*

The Boers then decided to break up their forces, as by having a concentration of commandos together, just invited a bigger concentration of British, who totally outnumbered the Boers in both men and weaponry.

Casualties during the Battle of Hekpoort were relatively low, taking into account the number of troops involved. British casualties were three killed, or died of wounds received, and seven wounded. The Boers recorded two of their men having been killed and one wounded.

The presentation given by Andre Wederpohl (known to those who have been on our 1-day Magaliesberg Tour) was excellent, with many maps indicating troop movements and times. Hekpoort and its surrounds now take on a new meaning to those who attended. Those who stay close by, these talks are well worth attending.

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

Allan Gordon