

Mid Month Visit – February 2023

Nearly three years ago, when COVID restricted one's movements, I decided that Diamond Hill was within limits for a visit, so, having only really passed the site of the battle on my way to the Kruger Park, the time was then right for a visit.

I visited the cemetery and climbed to the top of the hill from where one gets a great view of the site of the battle field. On the summit there are still some 'sangars', and a monument to the Boers. But only fairly recently, whilst doing some research on a potential future tour, did I get to understand the significance and scope of the Battle of Diamond Hill.



Picture: View from the hill above the Cemetery with Kleinfontein Ridge & Boschkop in the background

So, when an organised tour, with a professional tour guide, came to my attention, I jumped at the chance of going along. As with many of the battle-sites from the South African War (1899-1902), unless one knows the owner of the farm on which the battle took place, access is prohibited. Also, to get to the cemetery, one has to make prior arrangements and provide details of all members of the visiting party. Each person is verified before the boom is raised to allow entrance into the estate. Sadly, with what is happening to many heritage sites in the country at the moment, this is the only way that our history is going to survive. For those who have visited Kedar Lodge, it is so sad to report that some of the smaller brass sculptures have been stolen, and the bigger ones damaged, for the price that is available for 'scrap metal'.

Diamond Hill was the battle fought immediately after the fall of Pretoria, and when one climbs the hills that formed the Boer defensive line, ones gets an idea of what was behind the thinking of the great Boer General – Louis Botha. The man was a genius when it came to warfare. Jan Smuts, in the book 'Jan Smuts Memoirs of the Boer War' says the following (page 175) – *"In March 1900, after the death of General P.J. Joubert, Kruger announced that it had been the latter's wish that Botha should succeed him as Commandant-General of the South African Republic. Botha had thus risen within seven months from being an ordinary burgher to the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Transvaal forces."* In the book 'Louis Botha – A Man Apart', by Richard Steyn, Sir Winston Churchill is quoted to have said – *"Few men that I have known have interested me more than this grand, rugged figure, the Father of his country, the wise and profound statesman, the farmer-warrior the deep, sure man of solitude."*



But – back to the tour. We started off with a wonderful breakfast and a thorough explanation of the battle, which certainly answered many of the questions I had about events that took place on 11 and 12 June 1900. When one hears about the Battle of Diamond Hill, and one drives on the N4 to Kruger Park, one goes through a pass, and I wonder how many appreciate that this was the 'centre point' of a Boer defence line that stretched for about 20 km. Also, how many understand, or even know, that there were between 6 000 and 8 000 Boers in position, to take on 16 000 British troops? And that these Boers had been establishing this position for almost a week?



Picture: an example of a Boer 'sangaar'

When one sees the 'sangaars', the gun positions, and even the 'lines of retreat' that were prepared by the Boers, only then does the sheer magnitude of this battle sink in.

Having said that, although many stories have been written about the battle, and any personal recollections from soldiers who were there have been collated, there are still many 'knots that need to be tied' and there are Tour Guides and historians working on what really happened.

Many occurrences and records just don't make sense – such as the event relating to Winston Churchill waving a white handkerchief to the British artillery, indicating the gun Boer position. The descriptions of the gully, the 'plateau', and the gun position don't tie-up with the facts currently on hand. But, hey – it is a good story.

Our tour party spent most of the morning walking around the hills at Rhenosterfontein and Rhenoster Kop which were on the left flank of the Boer position. When one summits the hills one has a view, for miles, of any troop movements that would have happened, and it is across this open terrain that the British Mounted Infantry and cavalry, under the command of Lieutenant-General Hamilton advanced on the Boers. On the first day of the battle Hamilton failed to break through the Boers' left flank and a request by Hamilton to attack the Boers' centre was turned down by Lord Roberts, as the latter wanted to avoid unnecessary casualties. The following day, at first light, divisions under Lieutenant-Generals Gordon, Broadwood and Dawson launched an attack on the Boers and it was during this attack that Lord Airlie was killed. Our guide pointed out many of the 'sangaars' which the Boers had erected to protect their withdrawal, which they used on the night after the second day's fighting.

We then made our way to Diamond Hill and the cemetery. Above the cemetery is a hill, which like Rhenoster Kop, gives a fantastic view of any advancing troops. One can see Pretoria in the distance, and the advance of the British would certainly have got the adrenalin pumping amongst



the Boers waiting for action. Bosch Kop and the Kleinfontein Ridge, which the CIV and the Royal Sussex regiment had taken on 11 June, but were not able to 'dig in' before night fell, are clearly visible.

We didn't manage to get to the positions occupied by the Boers' right flank – one day is not long enough to do justice to this battle, if one wants to walk and experience various aspects of the battle and view 'sangars' and gun positions still there. However, what we experienced, and the thorough explanation of the battle given by our guide, gave everyone a good perspective of what happened to the British troops under the command of Lieutenant-General French and his encounter with Boer General de la Rey.



Picture: Boer War Gun Position on Rhenoster Kop – on top of the 'knoll'

Richard Steyn's Book records the following about the Battle of Diamond Hill (pages 88 & 89) – *"Despite the huge disparity in numbers, the re-energised Boers now set about preventing the British from proceeding further eastwards down the railway line. Marshalling a force of 4 000 burghers and 30 guns, Botha positioned his men along a series of low hills in the north eastern Magaliesberg, some 30 kilometres from Pretoria, across the rail line to Machadadorp. If it hadn't dawned on Roberts, he now understood there would be no Boer surrender. On 11th June, he sent his own force of 14 000 men and 70 guns to attack Boer positions at both ends of their 40 kilometre defensive front.*

After two days of fierce fighting, the British succeeded in driving the Boers off the western slopes of Donkerhoek, a key ridge rising above the road and railway line. Once again, a pitched battle came to an inconclusive end in the dead of night, with the Boers stealing away and making for other vantage points from where they could continue to fire away on the enemy. While neither side was defeated at Donkerhoek, the Boers sustained far fewer losses than the enemy's 175 killed or wounded, and their performance in one of the last set-piece battles of the war filled them with fresh heart. An important reason for their improved morale was the confidence they had in their commandant-general's tactical acumen and uncanny 'feel' for the battlefield."

Richard Steyn's book is a great read – and a must read for anyone who wants to know more about Louis Botha, really, A Man Apart.

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

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