

Mid-Month Visit – February 2024

Thanks to the number of Australians visiting South Africa with an interest in the South African War (1899-1902), and wanting to experience where Australians saw action, I have had my focus directed in that direction.

One of the battles that is currently on my radar is the Battle of Bakenlaagte. For those looking at the casualty lists for that battle, and the composition of Colonel Benson's column, the connection with Australia might seem strange.

However, there were a number of Australians present, mainly Victorians, who signed up for a second term of action – with the Scottish Horse Regiment.



Quoting from the book 'The Colonials in South Africa (1899-1902)' by John Stirling (pages 282 & 283) – *"In November 1900 Lord Kitchener sanctioned the raising of a regiment to be known as the Scottish Horse. Lord Tullibardine soon started recruiting from Scotsmen, or men of Scottish descent, in South Africa, chiefly in Natal, and on 4th February 1901 he took to the field with three squadrons."* The initial formation became the 1st Scottish Horse and their success encouraged another drive of recruitment, to form the 2nd Scottish Horse. Stirling carries on – *"Recruiting was not confined to South Africa. Great Britain and the other Colonies were appealed to, and the Caledonian Societies in London and over the seas did grand work. The Marquis' father, the Duke of Atholl, personally raised 831 men before the war was over. The Society in Melbourne took up the matter with enthusiasm, and about 300 men joined. These were a splendid draft, very fine riders, and all Victorians. Later on more men joined from Australia."*

Most Australians are unaware of the above, but through my research, I am able to show them the facts, and prove to them the presence of Australians at Bakenlaagte, as, amongst the casualties were men from Victoria, Australia.

A little-known fact is that the Battle of Bakenlaagte was not fought on the farm Bakenlaagte – it was in fact fought on the farm Nooitgedacht. However, almost a year prior to the Battle of Bakenlaagte, the Battle of Nooitgedacht was fought in the Magaliesburg, and due to the magnitude, and 'adverse' publicity, that this battle received, the name Nooitgedacht stuck. Probably, to avoid confusion, another name had to be found. With reference to 'The Times History of the War' (page 367, Vol. V) – *"Close to this point the boundaries of three farm-lands – Nooitgedacht, Schaapkraal and Bakenlaagte – meet. Though the coming action has always been called after Bakenlaagte, it was actually fought within the borders of Nooitgedacht."*

For the Boers the Battle of Bakenlaagte was a huge success. General Botha, who had just returned from his unsuccessful 'foray' into Natal, joined the Boer force the day before the battle. Colonel



Benson had been selected to head up a British system of night raids against Boer commandos in the Highveld, and during the months of September and October 1901 had captured over 1 000 Boer 'supporters' and destroyed many farms supportive of the Boer cause. The Boers identified Benson as their number-one target. Robin Smith in his book 'Practically Over' records (page 177) – *"Benson was particularly successful. His men were well-trained with scouts who had intimate knowledge of the locality and its people. There were infantry and artillery to protect the campsites and mounted men to ride out nightly to targets pointed out by scouts directed by his intelligence officer. It took some months for his column to become fully trained and by October 1901 his very success caused the Boers to want to find some way to eliminate him."*



Benson had set out from Middelburg on 20 October 1901 and had achieved what his column had set out to do – clear the district of Boers and Boer sympathisers. However, by 28 October, running short of supplies and ammunition, he decided to return to the Brugspruit Station and then to Middelburg. This decision would probably have been successful, but for two facts – the return of Botha to lead the Boer attack, and seasonal rains which had just started.

30 October 1901 was the day that the Boers achieved their goal.

Picture: Colonel Benson

The story of the battle is a story for another day. I am planning a 2-Day Tour for around April, which will take in a visit to this battle-site. In summary, the British lost 66 men killed in action and 165 men wounded, together with two guns being captured by the Boers. Benson was to lose his life from wounds received. There were a number of defensive positions set up by Benson to try and defeat the Boers and one of these, a hill east of the main camp, is described by 'The Times History' (page 374, Vol.V) – *"So ended a fight unique in the annals of war. The defenders of the hill had been almost annihilated. All the officers present were killed or wounded. Of 79 Scottish Horse only 6 were unhurt; of 32 gunners only 3; of 20 60th Rifles only 3, and of 60 Yorkshiremen only 5."*

I have made contact with a farmer in the area and am awaiting an invitation to return to his farm and visit him. Hopefully after this visit I will be able to add a personal touch to what happened in the area on 30 October 1901.

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

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