

Mid Month Visit – January 2023

The New Year started with an enquiry for a tour to South Africa to visit South African War (1899-1902) battlefields around Pretoria and Bronkhorstspuit. On doing a little digging, the Bronkhorstspuit interest was around the attack on the force commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Anstruther of the 94th Regiment of Foot (later to become the Connaught Rangers), by a Boer force, in December 1880, at the beginning of the 1st Boer War. Although my interest is primarily the South African War (1899-1902), this enquiry prompted me to pursue my interest in the town of Balmoral, which is a town about 80 km east of Pretoria and 30 km further along the road, past Bronkhorstspuit, to Belfast. My thoughts were that if we were going to go to Bronkhorstspuit, why not go to Balmoral?

Having often travelled that road to either get to the Kruger National Park, and/or to visit the battlefields in the old Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga), Balmoral has interested me as an obvious place to have a comfort break.

If one was leaving Pretoria and visiting the battlefield of Diamond Hill, on one's way to the Battle of Bergendal, Balmoral, if there was a reason to stop there (because of activities during the South African War (1899-1902)), would be a winner.



Picture: Memorial plaque to the Battle of Balmoral

After the Battle of Diamond Hill (11 and 12 June 1900) the Boer forces retreated to Balmoral. The Long Tom, which was mounted on a railway carriage, covered the retreat. It was here that the Boer leaders held a *kryjsraad* (Council of War) and decided to adopt a new military tactic.

To quote from the book 'The War Reporter' by J.E.H. Grobler (page 79) – *"The defensive or passive tactics employed earlier on, which left the initiative in the hands of the enemy, will be completely abandoned. In their stead the Boers will employ active tactics, attacking the enemy as often as possible and especially attempting to disrupt their communication routes. Small groups of Boers will act independently of each other, forcing the Khaki commanders to divide their own forces and make them more vulnerable."*

Many people know that I have a publication, 'The Boer War Casualty Roll 1899-1902' by Alexander M Palmer, and I have yet to come across someone else who has a copy in their library/collection. The book has 800 pages and there are on average 70 entries per page – quite an exercise to



gather information. The entries cover killed in action, wounded in action, missing in action, prisoner of war, died of disease, killed by lightning, etc., etc. Palmer has endeavoured to list every casualty. Each entry lists – Surname, Initials, Regimental Number, Rank, Casualty (how), Place, Date, Remarks, and Unit. So, in doing research, one can do it by any category, however the search is manual. When I research casualties for battles, or places of casualties, or dates, I go through the book – line by line. So to research, and then to record my findings in an Excel spreadsheet, takes weeks. Towards the end of last year I decided to see what I could find out about Balmoral. My search identified 71 casualties – 56 listed as being in Balmoral and 15 near Balmoral. The breakdown of the casualties found are:

Category	Qty
Killed in Action	20
Died of Wounds	7
Dangerously Wounded	4
Severely Wounded	10
Slightly Wounded	16
Wounded	12
Prisoner of War	2
Total	71

Manual exercises, like the ones I do, invariably have omissions, but I am sure I have recorded most, if not all the casualties. From the above numbers, there were three major engagements, which accounted for over 50% of the casualties – 19 November 1900, 18 May 1901 and 17 April 1902.

On 19 November 1900 all casualties were inflicted on the East Kent Regiment (The Buffs). The book 'British Regiments in South Africa, 1899-1902' by John Stirling, records (page 56) – "*In August 1900 the Buffs were taken to the Delagoa Railway line. In his telegram of 20th November Lord Roberts says: 'General Lyttleton reports that on the 19th an outpost of Buffs, south-west of Balmoral was surprised. Our casualties, 6 killed, and 5 wounded: 1 officer and 30 men taken prisoners'.*"

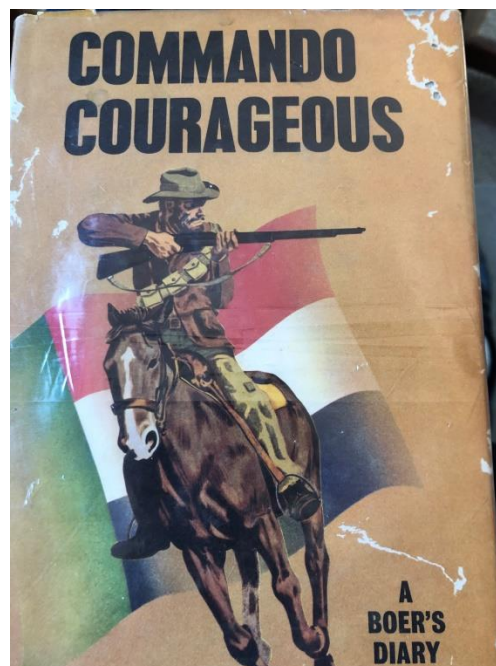
Before I list the breakdown of the casualties that I have extracted, I don't believe that any prisoners were taken – after the Battle of Bergendal the Boers were not 'taking prisoners' as they had nowhere to 'house' anyone they had captured. Additionally, being a mobile unit, they certainly did not want to be slowed down by prisoners who were 'pedestrian'. The British prisoners captured during the early stages of the war, and housed at various camps were released as it became impossible to keep them in the various camps. This included the Nooitgedacht Camp, east of Waterval Onder, where all prisoners were released following the Boer defeat at Bergendal.



Ben Viljoen's book, 'My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War' records (page 119) – *"I accordingly resolved to notify the prisoners that for military reasons, it would be impossible to keep them in confinement any longer. The next morning I mustered them outside the camp. They were told that they had ceased to be prisoners-of-war, at which they seemed to be very much amazed."*

My breakdown on the above table, taken from Palmer's publication, for this action on 19 November 1900 is – seven killed in action, two dangerously wounded, three severely wounded, six slightly wounded, and one wounded.

For anyone interested in this engagement, Schickerling, in his book, 'Commando Courageous – A Boer's Diary' has over 10 pages describing his and his commando's involvement in this action, which took place close to the railway station at Balmoral.



Picture: The cover of the book 'Commando Courageous'

The engagement on 18 May 1901 records all the casualties being suffered by the 15th Southern Division of the Royal Garrison Artillery. I need to do more research on this.

On 17 April 1902, the casualties were suffered by the South Staffordshire and Colonial Light Horse Regiments, and I have found nothing recorded on this engagement – so here's hoping that I find my local historian.

Early this year I stopped at Balmoral, at the 'Boer War' restaurant named Sergeant Pepper.

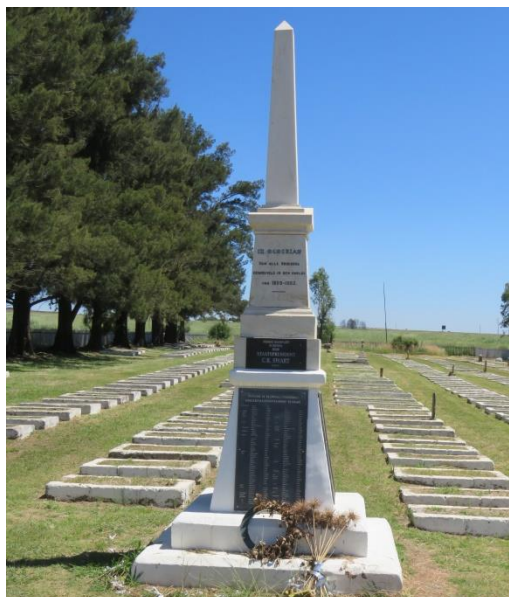
I was hoping to be able to find the details of a historian in the area who could help me with making Balmoral a 'Boer War must visit'.

The manager of the restaurant has promised to try and find such a person, and pass my details on.





However, on the farm, which houses the restaurant, is the Boer War Concentration Camp.



In the book 'Guide to the Anglo Boer War in the Eastern Transvaal' by Gert & Erika van der Westhuizen, the following is recorded about this Concentration Camp (page 303) – *"According to the War Museum in Bloemfontein the total deaths for the Balmoral Camp were 417 – 329 children and 88 older than 15 years. This figure agrees with the name lists of the National Monuments Council."*

The obelisk at the entrance to the cemetery lists all the names and ages of the casualties, and in reading these names, it was certainly sobering to see ages of deaths of under one year.

Picture: Obelisk at the entrance to the cemetery in Balmoral

If for nothing other than a comfort break, a cold drink, and a walk around the cemetery, Balmoral is an interesting stop on the road to Belfast.

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

Allan Gordon