

Mid-Month Visit – January 2024

I am working on a new two-day tour which will cover battles and events of interest, during the Boer War, in the old Eastern Transvaal. My starting point is a battle which has been of interest to me for some time, but I haven't been able to 'pin-point' what happened in terms of the events of the day. Towards the end of 2023 I was fortunate enough to find someone who was familiar with the battlefield of Rhenosterkop – the battle having taken place on 29 November 1900.

I had been out there a number of times, but with no signage it is almost impossible to recreate what happened. The mountain after which the battle is named, is very identifiable, but the road leading up to the top of the mountain is 'private property', so access to what I had hoped would lead me to being able to identify what happened, was denied.



'The Times History of the War' (Vol. V page 63) has the following introduction to the battle – *"This action, which was fought on the day that Lord Roberts left Pretoria for England, marks the end of one military era and the beginning of another. It was the last orthodox pitched battle of the sort that had been so common in the early Natal campaigns, and in Roberts' great advance through the territory of the republics."*

The above got me thinking – what was the last 'set piece' battle of the South African War (1899-1902)? Various commentaries and books on the war record that Diamond Hill (11-12 June 1900) was the last set piece battle. Others record that Bergendal (28 August 1900) was the last set piece battle. And now we have 'The Times History of the War' recording that *"it was the last orthodox pitched battle of the sort that had been so common in the early Natal campaigns"*. So, not being a 'military' man, what is the definition of a set piece battle – the time that a force had to set up a defensive position?, or the size of the defending and/or the attacking force?, or the size of the forces involved?, or the duration of the battle?, or maybe something else or a combination of any of the above?

Diamond Hill was fought over two days. After Pretoria had fallen (5 June 1900) to Roberts' force, the Boers had just under a week to set up a defensive position, about 20 km east of Pretoria. Their defensive position stretched for 40 km, with the Pretoria/Delagoa Bay Railway line dissecting this position. David Humphrey, in an article in Medal News, September 2001, records that the strength of the Boer force was 5 000 burghers, and the British force 16 000. British casualties were 15 killed in action, 14 died of wounds received and 159 wounded.



Other than 'engagements' against Buller's force that was working its way from Ladysmith to Belfast, and Roberts' force which was moving along the Pretoria/Delagoa Bay railway line from the above battle at Diamond Hill, to Belfast, there was no 'real, set piece battle' recorded from 12 June to 28 August 1900.

The Battle of Bergendal didn't last a day. The Boer defensive line spanned 25 km and was manned by just over 5 000 burghers. Buller's attacking force comprised 40 guns and 9 000 officers and men. At 11 a.m. the bombardment of Bergendal Kopje began from Gun Ridge at a distance of approximately 3,6 km. It was the most intense bombardment of the war – 19 shells falling every minute. Just after 2 p.m. the attack on the Boer position, in main, the ZARP position began. This attack lasted less than an hour. Casualties on the Boer side were 12 ZARPs killed and 28 wounded and/or captured. British casualties were 12 killed, 11 who died of wounds received, and 85 men wounded.

Ben Viljoen, after a successful attack on the garrison and railway station at Balmoral had been informed that a British column, under the command of Major-General Paget, was on their way to engage the Boers. Viljoen identified an ideal defensive position at the base of Rhenosterkop, and having harried the British on their advance, with 'scouting' parties, the British camped approximately 6,5 km from the Boers. The Boer defensive line spanned 7 km.



Picture: General Ben Viljoen

There are conflicting accounts on the relative strength of the two forces, but it appears that the Boer strength was 500 men, with Paget's force being 2 500. On the morning of 29 November 1900, the British commenced with an artillery bombardment of the Boer position, before initiating a frontal attack. The battle lasted the whole day, with the Boers retreating that night, having heard that another British column, under the command of Major-General Lyttleton was on its way from Middleburg, which would have cut off their retreat to their supply wagons, which Viljoen had sent from the battlefield on 28 November 1900.

British casualties were 14 killed, six who died of wounds received and 68 wounded. Boer casualties are unknown. So, in reading widely, about the South African War (1899-1902), we have references to the 'last set piece battle' of the war covering three battles – in summary:

Battle	Date (1900)	Duration	KiA	DoW	Wounded	Total
Diamond Hill	11 & 12 June	2 days	15	14	159	188
Bergendal	27 August	½ day	12	11	85	108
Rhenosterkop	29 November	1 day	14	6	68	88

*** casualty figures differ depending on different references.



I have been warned before that 'analysis paralysis' proves nothing – but I am a research person, and I do believe that statistics sometimes tell a story. After all sporting teams nearly always get selected on the statistics of individuals.

So, what is the definition of a set-piece battle? ... and which one was the last one of the South African War (1899-1902)? As a medal collector, two of the above battles have a 'battle bar' associated with the battle, which men who fought at those battles, had attached to their Queen South Africa (QSA) medals – Diamond Hill and Bergendal (Belfast). Rhenosterkop is identified on the QSA by the bar Transvaal. Does this go some-way into the thinking of those who were responsible for their recording of the events and battles of the war?



Picture: QSA Medals showing bars for Diamond Hill, Belfast and Transvaal

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