

Mid-Month Visit – June 2023

Another gem in the Magaliesberg – a battle which has two names, either Kwaggafontein or Slypsteenkop, depending on which account one accesses. I can certainly understand why people flock to Natal and Kimberley, Natal because of the Zulu War Battlefields and the Siege of Ladysmith, and Kimberley because of the Siege. But the Magaliesberg has so many battles and skirmishes, which were fought over a period of nearly two years during the guerrilla phase of the war, which should be a major 'focus' area for anyone interested in the South African War (1899-1902).

This battle was fought on 31 August 1900 on the farm Quaggafontein about 10 km east of Derby. A British Column, under the command of Lieutenant-General Methuen, after much activity in the Zeerust/Swartruggens District had been promised rest in Zeerust, but on 25 August they were ordered to progress to Krugersdorp in order to help General Hart with Boer activity in the area. Boer General de la Rey, had in the meantime, after the withdrawal of General Baden-Powell, re-occupied Rustenburg. De la Rey had posted his men along the Magaliesberg from where he could threaten any movement of British troops.



Picture: British Memorial to the Kaffrarian Rifles

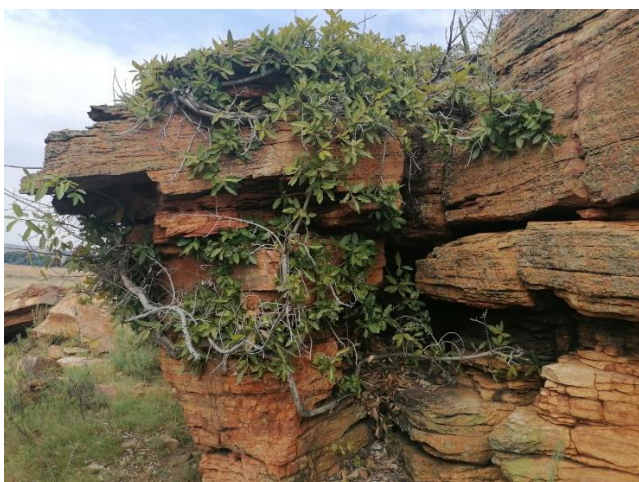
De la Rey planned an ambush, about 15 km south of Olifantsnek, and placed some of his scouts on Slypsteenkoppie in order to monitor the British movements. Colonel Dalgety who was approaching from the farm Quaggafontein observed the scouts and launched an immediate attack. Francis Coleman in his book 'The Kaffrarian Rifles' records (page 77) – *"As the battle developed, de la Rey arrived with 600 more men and more artillery, the latter, fortunately for the British, not being usable in the confusion. To enable the Cavalry Brigade to withdraw, Dalgety sent the Kaffrarian Rifles on an enveloping attack around the left flank of the Boer position. They bore the brunt of the enemy fire as the cavalry pulled back. Once this was accomplished, the Border Horse under Major Robertson were ordered to attack on the right flank, whilst the Kaffrarians advanced on the other. In doing so, they encountered heavy fire from the Boers, who had taken up position in a group of rocky kopies. In their traditional fashion they held fire until the opposition was very close before losing a withering hail of bullets upon them. Three squadrons of the regiment reached a point only some 350 metres away before being pinned down. They remained in this exposed*



position until sunset. In a similar, parlous state was a detachment of the 9th Lancers which had come up in support. These men also were unable either to advance or retreat until darkness shielded them. Meantime, as the Boer reinforcements extended their line, so all regimental reserves were brought into use."

Peet Coetzee provides the following information on the battle – *"At 11 a.m. Captain Farrarr (Kaffrarian Rifles) was severely wounded in the groin, but he stayed with his men all day. Lieutenant Skeffington-Smyth was also wounded very early in the fight. The British were subjected to very heavy rifle fire from the Boers, and they were pinned down in open veld west, south-west and south of Slypsteenkop. One of the Kaffrarian Rifles wrote after the battle ... 'we had no cover but the grass and had to take our hats off and lay our heads close to the ground and wait for darkness'."*

Peet goes on – *"The British guns were also exposed to very heavy rifle fire from the Boers and their fire had no effect on the Boers who had excellent cover behind the very large boulders strewn all over Slypsteenkop. Lieutenant-Colonel Colvin noted in the Regimental History on the 9th Lancers that ... 'our guns were now blazing away at pretty close quarters, but little impression could be made on the Boers'. Late in the afternoon the 16th and 17th Lancers entered the battlefield. Colonel Dalgety then ordered the Border Horse to rush the hill from the roadside, but their commanding officer Major Robertson was wounded and they could advance no further."*



Picture: Typical rock formations at Slypsteenkop

As darkness fell the British retreated to the main column. Colonel Dalgety recorded in his official report on the battle that 'finding that withdrawal in daylight would mean great loss of life, I remained in my position until dark. The retirement was carried out steadily under cover of darkness.'

The column resumed its journey to Krugersdorp the following day, reaching their destination on 3 September. Along the way they encountered Boer activity and were involved in a number of skirmishes with de la Rey and Commandant Liebenberg.

There are a number of references relating to British casualties and the figures range from 11 to 14 'killed in action' and 22 to 32 injured. The Boers had five killed and eight wounded.



The reason why we were there was to lay a wreath at the Boer memorial to the 5th Boer who was killed in the battle – a burgher Prinsloo. When the original Boer Memorial was erected, only four Boers could be identified, and their names were inscribed on the plaque, however, Peet Coetzee, who knows more about the battles around this area than anyone else, undertook to find the 5th Boer, and after many years of research, finally identified the man.

What was also very interesting was the fact that most accounts of the battle indicate that the Boer strength was over 500 men. Peet Coetzee's grandfather, who was at the battle, and who took Peet to the site of the battle as a young boy, was of the opinion that there were only just over 100 Boers at the battle.

Picture: Boer Memorial at Sloopsteenkop

A wonderful outing and special event, at a site that is on a private farm, away from the public eye ... but, it is being protected and well looked after by people concerned with preserving our history.

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

Allan Gordon