

Mid Month Visit – March 2021

In January 2003 I attended a talk at the Military History Society of South Africa on the Battle of Helvetia, given by Peter Goodship. The largest portion of the garrison at Helvetia was of men of the 1st Liverpool Regiment, and being a Liverpool Football supporter there was an immediate interest. At the end of the talk I was 'hooked' on the events that transpired on 29 December 1900. Boer General Ben Viljoen attacked the garrison at Helvetia where many of the soldiers encamped there were still either hung over from Christmas celebrations, or 'practising' for New Year. Many of the soldiers captured were too inebriated to 'march into captivity'. What a disaster.

Helvetia was a trading station occupying a strategic position on a supply route between Lydenburg and Machadadorp, with supply columns using this route twice a week. The garrison consisted of a main camp, with four nearby hills being continually manned. On the eastern hill was the Naval 4.7 inch gun called the Lady Roberts. General Viljoen and his commandos launched their attack in the early hours of the morning of 29 December 1900. By 7.30 am the battle was over and the Boers started withdrawing with their prisoners and spoils, amongst which was the Lady Roberts.



The Remains of the Trading Station at Helvetia

Ben Viljoen in his book 'My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War' writes (Page 176) – "*A great quantity of rum and other spirits was found among the enemy's commissariat, and as soon as the British soldiers made prisoners were disarmed, they ran up to it, filled their flasks, and drank so freely that about thirty of them were soon unable to walk.*"

Commandant Schikkerling in his book 'Commando Courageous' writes (page 117) – "In one of the forts were several barrels of rum, and from these many of the soldiers filled



their water bottles. Some indeed were so drunk at starting time that we could not take them away; others fell by the way on the march."

Despite all this, the most westerly hill, King's Kopje, held out until re-enforcements came that night at about 8 pm. There are accounts in a number of books about Helvetia. There was a commission of enquiry and Major Cotton, who commanded the garrison, was made the scapegoat. He was found guilty of shamefully surrendering to the enemy. Clemency was denied and he was cashiered in November 1901. There is however more to this story and the King granted him a pardon. He was given an honourable discharge and put on early retirement with a pension. For those interested in reading accounts of the aftermath, there is a connection between Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the commission of inquiry.

I have visited the battle-site often, and did so again on 14 March 2021. The graves are not signposted and unless you know where they were it would be almost impossible to locate them. In 2001 I was fortunate enough to go on a guided tour with Marion Moir and the ruins of the Helvetia Trading Station were very visible, and I managed to photograph them. The whole area, including the hills comprising the garrison are now forest. The land is owned by a forestry company and totally covered with trees.



The Cemetery at Helvetia

In the small cemetery at Helvetia is a marble stone which commemorates four Boers who lost their lives in the battle:

| | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Lieutenant Morkel | Pretoria Police |
| Lieutenant P.J.J. Nortje | Pretoria Police |
| Constable M.J. Viljoen | Pretoria Police |
| Constable J.S. Lewis | Johannesburg Police |



Corporal J.C. Coetzee is also commemorated – he died of wounds and is buried in Dullstroom.

There are nine soldiers from the Liverpool Regiment commemorated at this cemetery. They are – Sergeant Swallow, Lance Corporal Hopkins, Corporal Adams, and Privates Clarke, McGann, Pidgeon, Whittaker, Woods and Young.

In my collection I am fortunate to have the medal to 4935 Private B. Pope who was wounded at the battle, and to 3651 Private J. Higgins who was taken prisoner. I have always wondered whether he was one of those who decided that the best way to go into captivity was with the aid of alcohol.

Having spent a few days in the Kruger Park, a favourite place of mine to 'un-wind', we returned to Johannesburg via the Long Tom Pass, Lydenburg, Dullstroom and Belfast. As one approaches Dullstroom, there is a private farm on the right, where there is a small cemetery and two stone sangars on a hill above the cemetery. There is a flag pole next to each sangar, and sometimes there is a Union Jack and a Boer Vierkleur flag flying, one from each pole. We stopped in Dullstroom for a milkshake, and as is my want, I started asking questions about the farm and the cemetery. Without going into too much detail of the conversations, we were eventually given permission, after a number of 'phone calls, to visit the cemetery. There are 10 marked graves and three unmarked graves (the bottom three names are probably the unmarked graves).



The Cemetery and one of the Sangars near Dullstroom



| No. | Rank | Init | Surname | Regiment | How | Date | Where |
|------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|--------------------------|------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| 6732 | Pte. | G. | Ashinford | Royal Warwickshire | DoW | 22/12/1901 | Windhoek (near Dullstroom) |
| 4200 | L.Cpl | F. | Bell | 19 th Hussars | DoW | 17/04/1901 | Dullstroom |
| 4212 | Pte. | E. | Dowsett | 19 th Hussars | KiA | 02/05/1901 | Dullstroom |
| 4305 | Pte. | A. | Gurney | 19 th Hussars | DoW | 04/05/1901 | Dullstroom |
| | Maj | A.T.P. | Hudson | Manchester | DoW | 20/12/1901 | Elandspruit |
| 4435 | L.Cpl | R.H.A. | Hunter | 18 th Hussars | DoW | 16/04/1901 | Near Dullstroom |
| 5078 | Sgt | D | Leitch | Seaforth Highlanders | KiA | 22/12/1901 | Dullstroom |
| | Capt | A | Menzies | Manchester | DoW | 22/01/1901 | Windhoek (near Dullstroom) |
| 31776 | Tpr | LR | Stewart | Scottish Horse | DoW | 12/07/1901 | Witpoort |
| 3156 | L. Cpl | H.F. | Thurston | Shropshire L.I. | DoW | 25/01/1902 | Houtenbeck |
| | Scout | | Bayesane | Scottish Horse | KiA | 01/05/1901 | Near Dullstroom |
| 4161 | Pte. | D. | Caddis | 18 th Hussars | DoW | 05/09/1900 | Dullstroom |
| 3873 | Cpl. | G. | Hood | 18 th Hussars | KiA | 16/04/1901 | near Dullstroom |



The Cemetery near Dullstroom



In Steve Watts book 'In Memoriam' he lists a further name, with a (?) against where the soldier has been interred. Other than the three unmarked graves described above there are no other marked and/or unmarked graves in this cemetery so the mystery remains. If Steve Watt was unsure, and being the absolute 'guru' on this subject, unless we find a marked grave for the name below, in some Boer War cemetery, then his final resting place will remain a mystery.

| <u>No.</u> | <u>Rank</u> | <u>Init</u> | <u>Surname</u> | <u>Regiment</u> | <u>How</u> | <u>Date</u> | <u>Where</u> |
|------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| 31819 | Cpl. | J.M. | Blackham | Scottish Horse | KiA | 30/04/1901 | Roodekrantz (near Dullstroom) |

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Allan Gordon