

Mid-Month Visit – March 2023

I am beginning to wonder whether I am going to live long enough to do justice to the many places of interest, with South African War (1899-1902) significance, which are in driving distance from Johannesburg and Pretoria. I have barely touched the surface of what lies in the area of the Magaliesberg mountains, and for this mid-month visit, I decided to travel north, to Ses Myl Spruit (Six Mile Spruit).

Not even half an hour's drive from Johannesburg one comes across what the British would have encountered on 4 June 1900.

The area is now built up and there are many townhouse complexes, a Boutique Hotel and a Country Club which populate the battlefield from that day, but one can still see the Spruit, where the British halted to launch an artillery attack on the Boers in the hills to their north.



Picture: A view of Ses Myl Spruit

As some background, Johannesburg had fallen to the British on 30 May 1900, but Dr. Krause, the Commandant of Johannesburg, had negotiated a 24-hour truce with Lord Roberts, on condition that the gold mines were not dynamited. On 31 May 1900 Lord Roberts rode into Johannesburg and accepted the surrender of the town. By this time many Boers with large quantities of arms, ammunition and needed supplies, were on their way north, and what quantities of gold were trained to Pretoria is anyone's guess.

Lord Roberts set up his headquarters at the then Orange Grove Hotel and spent the next two days preparing his force for the march on Pretoria. On 3 June, Lord Roberts set off from Johannesburg to take Pretoria. The Times History quotes (Vol IV, page 154) – *"But the Boers had no intention of defending Pretoria seriously. On 29th May President Kruger had decided, at an executive council meeting, to leave Pretoria on the 30th, and take with him to Middelburg the official archives and all available funds. General Muller was ordered to dismantle all the forts and to remove the few guns they still contained."* The Times History carries on – *"A message was left for General Botha to arrange for the evacuation of the town, and to delay the British advance as long as possible, but on no account to allow the Transvaal forces to be seriously engaged."*

Paul Kruger, before settling in Pretoria, had farmed in the Rustenburg area, and I have read somewhere that Roberts believed that if Pretoria fell into British hands, Kruger would relocate to his farm in the Rustenburg area. On the morning of 3 June 1900, having regrouped, Roberts



ordered Lieutenant-General French and his force to move towards what is now Hartbeespoort Dam, to oppose the right flank of the Boers, and possibly cut off the retreat of President Kruger. At the same time, Roberts' main force advanced directly, from Johannesburg, on Pretoria.

The Times History records (Vol IV, page 156) – *"During the night (of 3 June) Gordon (Brigadier-General J.R.P. Gordon), under instructions from headquarters, reconnoitred as far as Six Mile Spruit, and ascertained that both sides of the spruit, from Zwartkop on the west to Irene Station were weakly held by the enemy."* The Times History carries on with British actions on 4 June, (Vol IV, page 157) – *"On the same day Gordon advanced on the right of the main column to Irene Station, but finding strong opposition there, retired towards the centre later in the day without having effected anything. Henry's (Colonel S.C. Henry) M.I., riding in advance of the infantry, drove some Boers from the bridge and drift over Six Mile Spruit, to the west of Irene, and occupied Zwartkop on the northern bank. But a further advance was at once checked by a heavy fire all along the Boer line."*

Lord Roberts thereupon directed the Seventh and Eleventh Divisions to deploy for the attack, while the artillery was hurried over the stream and ordered to shell the enemy's position.

By 12.30 p.m. seven batteries, besides the heavy guns were in action, and the fire of the Boer guns were speedily silenced. Crossing the spruit at 1 p.m., Lord Roberts took up a position at Zwartkop, from the top of which he could view and direct the movements of the whole force under his command."



Picture: Lord Roberts

In the book 'The War with Johnny Boer' by Max Chamberlain and Robin Droogleever, the following is recorded relating to Six Mile Spruit (page 223) – *"After about half an hour the Seventh Division came along and ahead of it came two 4.7 inch naval guns, firing lydite, and then a battery of tubby howitzers with an escort of Highlanders; then horse battery after horse battery and battalion after battalion, some of them deploying to the right and some to the left of the road; then more batteries of horse artillery, firing right and left."* Seems like a sledge hammer was being applied to crack a nut – but the engagement certainly deserves more than just a 'passing mention'.

Pretoria was occupied the following day without a shot being fired.



As I normally do, for events which I find interesting, I go through the 800 pages of Alexander Palmer's Boer War Casualty Roll. Below is what I have extracted for what happened on 4 June 1900:

| Casualty | No. |
|------------------------------|------------|
| Killed in Action | 2 |
| Dangerously Wounded | 1 |
| Severely Wounded | 4 |
| Wounded | 31 |
| Slightly Wounded | 11 |
| Missing in Action (Released) | 3 |
| Total | 52 |

For those who want to take a drive and view where all the above happened, drive along the old Johannesburg Road towards Pretoria. Just past the Zwartkop Country Club entrance on your right, you will cross the old steel bridge across the Hennops River, before getting to Wierda Road. Turn left into Wierda Road, and at the next set of lights, if one turns right, Six Mile Spruit will be on your right. If one carries on down Wierda Road for another kilometre, the hill, Zwartkop, is on the right. What a pity that there is no indication, such as a road-side sign, which indicates that a battle was fought there over 100 years ago.



The steel girder Bridge, which was built in 1891, was one of the first of its kind to be built in South Africa.

Although it crosses the Hennops River, it is known as either the Sesmylspruit Bridge, or the Wierda Road Bridge.

Picture: The Steel Girder Bridge

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