

Mid-Month Visit – May 2023

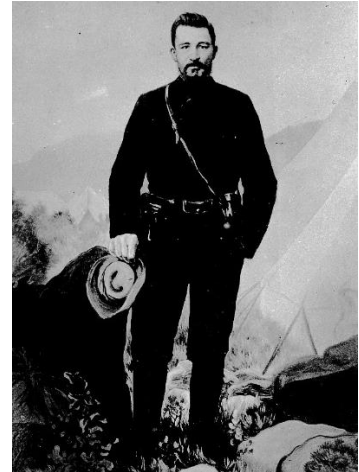
How many people have travelled the road from Pretoria to Mpumalanga (the old Eastern Transvaal), probably on their way to the Kruger Park, and haven't even taken note of the turn-off to Balmoral? Over the past 10 years, what has taken focus off the turn-off to Balmoral, is the impressive Kusile power station on the right-hand side of the road – a colossal 'space age' type structure, which is now part of the ESKOM debacle – load shedding. However, to those interested in the history of the South African War (1899-1902), a visit to Balmoral is a must.

After the Battle of Diamond Hill, on their retreat to the east to re-group, the Boers halted at Balmoral. J.E.H. Grobler in his book 'The War Reporter' records (page 79) – *"After the major battle at Donkerhoek last week, the Transvaal forces retreated to Balmoral, a small village on the railway line east of Bronkhorstspuit. The Long Tom gun mounted on the railway truck covered the Boer Rear-guard. A number of well-placed shots were sufficient for this loyal armament to terminate any British attempt to pursue."* In the same report, Grobler continues – *"The Transvaal officers held a war council meeting here in Balmoral last Thursday and confirmed the acceptance of a totally new military tactic. 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 obstruct their communication routes."*

As a result of the above, Boer General, Ben Viljoen, planned a number of attacks on railway stations on the Pretoria-Delagoa Bay railway line.

Being steam driven, trains had to stop frequently for water and coal, and Balmoral had a number of established coal mines in operation in close proximity. General Ben Viljoen planned an attack on Balmoral for the early hours of 19 November 1900 and had burghers from a number of commandos at his disposal – Pretoria, Johannesburg, Middelburg and others.

Picture: General Ben Viljoen



Part of his force was Roland Schikkerling who recorded his war experiences in a book, *Commando Courageous*. At the time, Balmoral Station was the responsibility of the East Kent Regiment (the Buff's) who had men from the 15th Company (Southern Division) Royal Garrison Artillery and the Mounted Infantry in support. In the main camp there was one gun pit in which a 6-inch howitzer was placed. The total strength of the Garrison, at the time of the attack, was 700 men.

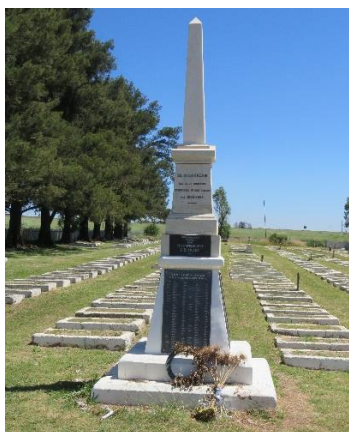
On the eastern approach to Balmoral is a hill – South West Hill, on which pickets of the Buff's were posted. Brigadier-General Barker's official report records – *"... defences consisted of 4 stone breast works facing the 4 points of the compass, and in each of these a sentry was posted."* The Boers



under cover of darkness and in heavy mist, managed to penetrate these posts and attacked the picket, of 50 men. On being identified, the Boers opened a barrage of heavy fire on the Buff's, many of whom fled down the hill to the safety of the main camp near the station. The attack commenced earlier than planned at 3.30 a.m. Ben Viljoen in his book 'My reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War' records (page 156) – "... we occupied the fort with little trouble, taking a captain and 32 men prisoners." The Boers had two guns with them, and Viljoen carries on – "Our 15-pounder, one of the guns we had captured from the English, fired six shells on the enemy at the station, when it burst, while the pom-pom, after having sent some bombs through the station buildings, also jammed."

Viljoen ends his account of the battle – "at eight o'clock we were forced to fall back, for although we had destroyed the railway and telegraphic communications in several places, the latter were repaired in the afternoon and the enemy's reinforcements poured in." British casualties were six killed, two died of wounds received, and 11 injured. Those captured were released as by this stage of the war, the Boers weren't taking prisoners.

The story of this battle really comes to light when one follows Schikkerling's account of his experience. He was one of 20 Boers who followed the Buff's down the hill and became separated from the main commando. Having been fired on by the British from both a nearby hill, and the station, he managed to find a horse and escape. A remarkable account which is well articulated in his book – Commando Courageous.



The Cemetery at Balmoral contains the remains of the women and children who died in the Concentration Camp in the town.

According to the War Museum in Bloemfontein, the total deaths for the Balmoral Camp were 427. Of this total 339 were children and 88 were of persons older than 15.

Picture: The Cemetery at Balmoral

So, take the turn-off to Balmoral and turn left. Immediately on your left is a sand road. Follow that road for a couple of hundred metres until you get to the Cemetery on your left. Immediately in front of you is your 'pit stop' – Sergeant Peppers Restaurant where one can enjoy food and refreshments. Well worth a stop on your next trip on the N4 travelling east from Pretoria.

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

Allan Gordon