

Ladysmith – Mid Month Visit – November 2020

A time-share week-end visit to Champagne Sports created an opportunity to visit battle-sites in the Ladysmith area, as well as an opportunity for me to pay a first visit to the Intombi Cemetery and the Spearman's Cemetery.

During our three days there we visited Elandslaagte, Nicholson's Nek, Platrand and Willow Grange – but more about those visits later. Suffice to say, Platrand, which incorporates Wagon Hill and Caesar's Camp is not a 'whistle-stop' visit as I have done in the past. This battle-site deserves at least a half day visit to appreciate the significance of the engagement.

But back to Intombi. At the outbreak of the siege of Ladysmith an agreement between Sir George White, commander of the British forces in the town and General Joubert who commanded the Boers, led to the establishment of a neutral field hospital about 5 km from the town of Ladysmith. Initially the hospital consisted of 100 beds and there were about 200 medical personnel in attendance. In addition many civilians were accommodated in a camp which was separated from the hospital by the railway line.

On 11 November 1899 the first two cases of enteric fever were received at the hospital. Due to the ever-increasing numbers of sick and wounded at Intombi, the number of beds increased from 300 to 1 900 in less than three months.



Intombi Cemetery – as it is today



The constant expansion of the hospital without compensating increases in staff created problems and many recuperating patients had to perform 'nursing' duties. The rate at which the patients died in hospital demanded the services of 44 grave diggers for burials.

When the siege of Ladysmith ended on 28 February 1900, there had been over 10 000 admissions at Intombi. Of the 583 soldiers who died, 382 deaths resulted from enteric fever and 109 from dysentery. The remainder of the deaths resulted from other illnesses and wounds received in the course of action. All the dead, together with five civilians who succumbed to diseases, are buried in the cemetery nearby.

The Intombi Cemetery is not well signposted at all but is well worth a visit. There are no signs of the hospital that once existed on the site – probably a tented camp hospital.

On the other hand, the Spearman's Cemetery, on the Ladysmith – Winterton Road cannot be missed. However, once on the private farm road the cemetery, due to the unkempt condition in which we found it, is not that obvious.

General Buller, for the attack on Spioen Kop, had established his headquarters on Mount Alice which gave him a good vantage point of the mountain and the battle. On the southern slopes of Mount Alice, on a farm owned by the Spearman's, he established a hospital. The cemetery on Spearman's Farm is a result of this hospital which was 'No. 4 Stationary Field Hospital at Spearman's Farm – January–February 1900'.





The marble slab at the gate to the cemetery goes on to state – “Here lie many of the brave British Soldiers who died of wounds received in the actions at Spioen Kop and Vaal Krans most of whom spent their last hours in the nearby hospital. Sir Frederick Treves who was consulting Surgeon has related much of what happened here in his Tale of a Field Hospital.”



Spearman's Cemetery – sadly, very unkempt

There are 48 graves in the cemetery and we spent time photographing all the crosses so that I could cross reference and research the casualties. To start off with, I don't have regimental records/rolls, so I rely on two publications for my research – In Memoriam by Steve Watt and The Boer War Casualty Roll (1899-1902) by Alexander M Palmer.

Of the 48 crosses, there are six that I can't verify (from the references above), with the following details engraved on the crosses:

- Pte. S. Mangnall (3228) – 2nd Scottish Rifles
- Sergt. T. Levock (4956) – 2nd Royal Lancashire
- Pte. F. W. Hallings (1439) – Kings Royal Rifle Corp
- Pte. W. Gee (5686) – 2nd Royal Lancashire
- Pte. E. Percy (5127) – 2nd Devonshire
- Pte. A. Haultram (4768) – Lancashire Fusiliers



To give an example of what goes into this 'research', the cross below is as it appears in the Spearman's Cemetery – quite straight forward, Pte. W. Garp 3476, died on 29/01/00. Steve Watt's book gives the entry as Gabb, with all other details the same. Palmer's reference gives the name as W. G. Gable. The job of research is never ending, but most rewarding. Someone has this medal and it would be very interesting to find out what is transcribed on the rim. Both references agree he was with the 1st Gloucestershire Regiment and that he died of wounds received.



War Grave in Spearman's Cemetery to Pte W Garp

Sir Frederick Treves who was consulting Surgeon during the brief life of the hospital and published a book of his experiences in the region - Tale of a Field Hospital, has a number of interesting stories to tell. One of these is about a soldier, with the surname Goodman, of the Kings Royal Rifle Corp who was wounded at the battle of Spioen Kop, on Twin Peaks, and to quote from his book – *"He was in a lamentable plight when he arrived. He had been lying on the hill all night. He had not had his clothes off for six days. Rations had been scanty, and he had been sleeping in the open since he left the camp. He had been struck in the face by a fragment of shell, which had carried away his right eye, the right upper jaw, the corresponding part of the cheek and mouth, and had left a hideous cavity, at the bottom of which his tongue was exposed.*

The rest of his face was streaked with blood, which was now dried and black--so black that it looked as if tar had been poured on his head and had streamed down his cheek and neck. Eight hours had been occupied on the journey to the hospital, and eight hours is considered to be long even for a railway journey in a Pullman car.



He was unable to speak, and as soon as he was settled in a tent he made signs that he wanted to write. A little memorandum book and a pencil were handed to him, and it was supposed that his inquiry would be as to whether he would die--what chance he had? Could he have something to drink? Could anything be done for his pain? After going through the form of wetting his pencil at what had once been a mouth, he simply wrote: "Did we win?" No one had the heart to tell him the truth."

Spearman's was our last port of call but Ladysmith really has a lot to offer, and as stated already, Platrand is worth another visit. There is so much to see and take in which is off the beaten / commercial track.

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) - our blog has regular posts on Anniversaries / Battles / Activities / Births & Deaths / etc.

Allan Gordon