

Mid Month Visit – November 2021

24 October 2021 was the 120th Anniversary of the Battle of Kleinfontein, sometimes referred to as the Battle of Driefontein, close to the current-day town of Groot Marico. Surprisingly I cannot find mention of this battle in the Gazetteer of the Second Anglo-Boer War, and if I have missed something, I am very happy to be corrected. Again, as I had been for the anniversary of the Battle of Moedwil, I was very privileged to be at the wreath laying ceremonies at both the British and the Boer cemeteries. The Memorial to the Boers who were killed in the battle, is very close to the main road to Groot Marico, but if you are not aware of it, or very observant, it is very easy to miss. This was our first stop, and a wreath was laid at the monument.



Picture: Memorial to the Boers killed at the Battle of Kleinfontein

We then made our way to the British cemetery, very close to the Boer monument, which again is on private property. This cemetery does not 'house' any of the British soldiers killed at the Battle of Kleinfontein – they are all interred in Zeerust. This British Cemetery is where bodies of soldiers killed, and buried in the District, were all brought together and re-interred in a central cemetery by a local group of concerned women, who formed a Guild to address the issue of scattered British Graves. A wreath was laid to commemorate those who had paid the ultimate sacrifice.

This battle is very similar to the Battle of Buffelspoort, where the Boers, also under the command of General de la Rey, ambushed a British convoy, of over 100 wagons. Early on the morning of 24 October 1901 Lieutenant-Colonel Stanley Brenton von Donop left the farm Wonderfontein, about 35km east of Zeerust, with a convoy bound for the latter town.

Peet Coetzee, the historian who runs the museum at Elands River, organised the day, and produced a wonderful booklet on the battle, in which he quotes from von Donop's diary – "*We had*



just reached some raised ground above Wilgeboom Spruit at about 7a.m. and I was about to turn north when I saw 20 to 40 Boers waiting further west along the road on some ridges that they always hold, so I put a few shells over them. This apparently was their signal for the start of their plan of attack."

The main Boer force commanded by General Kemp mounted their attack from the south – the left flank of the convoy, which had the same result as at Buffelspoort, with the oxen stampeding, creating chaos within the convoy. The Yeomanry, who were along the length of the convoy sought shelter in the close-by wooded area once the Boers had reached the wagons. The convoy had started off with guns in the front and rear of the convoy and once the attack had started von Donop became concerned as he was aware that the rear guns had not come into action.

Whilst some of the Boers were trying to 'drive off' with some of the wagons, a party of Boers made their way to the rear of the convoy, where General de la Rey was supposed to be. Here they came upon two guns of the 4th Battery, Royal Field Artillery and a company of the 1st Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers. A fierce engagement resulted and most of the men manning the guns were either wounded or killed and the Northumberland Fusiliers lost almost half their force, killed or wounded.



Picture: British Cemetery

Again with acknowledgement to Peet Coetzee – *"We again made a collection of every man who had a horse and a rifle, and off we galloped for the guns, and got there just in time as there were only four or five men unwounded, and the Boers were opening on to anyone going up to the guns."* Peet goes on from von Donop's diary – *"Lieutenant Hobbs, from the Royal Engineers, fearing something had happened as the guns were not firing, galloped back by himself under*



heavy fire, got up to the guns and could see nothing but dead or wounded, but at last found two unwounded Gunners, and the three together got one of the guns into action and fired two rounds."

At about 9a.m. the Boers realised that the British had regrouped and were about to mount an attack, so Kemp called it a day. Lionel Wulfsohn in his book 'Rustenburg at War' has the following to say (page 225) – *"Both J.F. Naude and Evert Snyman put the blame for the somewhat high Boer losses, on the tardiness of General de la Rey in attacking the British rear guard. This sounds a most peculiar accusation, because of all the people, General de la Rey was the last Boer leader to be dilatory in an ambush attack."*

However, in the book 'De la Rey – Lion of the West' by Johannes Meintjies (page 200), there is a possible explanation as to why de la Rey might have been distracted – *"After being gone about three weeks, de la Rey returned from Zwartuggens after the defeat of Colonel von Donop at Kleinfontein on the very day they had been married twenty-five years. Instead of a happy celebration, there was a terrible battle in which many dear friends were wounded or killed."* Meintjies goes on – *"One of the children said that her father had that morning put on a tailcoat for his twenty-fifth anniversary and that the fight came so suddenly that he had no time to change. He charged into battle with his tailcoat flying, and when it was over it was discovered that the two buttons at the back had been neatly shot off in the fighting."*

At the end of the battle, just after 9a.m. von Donop recorded the following (again with acknowledgements to Peet Coetzee) – *"Then came the work of looking after the wounded. The whole place was littered with dead and wounded, men, horses, and mules. We cleared the combatant men away as soon as possible to allow the wagons and ambulances to come up for the wounded. By 3p.m. we had them all in camp at Wilgeboom Spruit."*

British casualties were 31 killed, six who later died of wounds received and 48 wounded. In addition, 12 wagons were captured. The Boers lost 17 killed, four who later died of wounds received and 31 wounded.

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