

Mid-Month Visit – November 2024

Having recently acquired a map of Waterval Onder relating to 'British Outposts' in the town, as well as the main camp, an exploratory trip was always on the cards. And so, the three of us set out – Colin, Willi and the author – otherwise known as the 'Boer War History Enthusiasts and Research Group'.

Our first stop was the Battle of Leliefontein, or Witkloof as it is also referred to, as it is a battle that I have never included in my Mpumalanga tours – it would obviously make the tour longer, and the memorial is on a farm, with the access locked. The farmer has granted permission going forward for us to climb over the gate and walk up to the memorial. For those of us who are active and agile, once over the gate, there is a good distance to cover before one gets to the memorial. A new itinerary, including this battle, is 'in the thought process'.

Picture: Memorial to Fourie and Prinsloo



Major-General Smith-Dorrien, who was based at Belfast, was charged with preventing Boers in the area from attacking the Pretoria/Delagoa Bay Railway Line. On the evening of 1 November 1900, he left Belfast to attack an identified Boer laager on the road to Carolina. His force was divided into two columns. Smith-Dorrien himself led the left with the right column commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Spens. Spens' column marched via Bergendal southward – they started out at 7.15 p.m. and marched through the night, in uncharacteristic weather conditions for that time of year – a blizzard of mingled snow and rain, in which horses lay down and perished. Both columns reached Vanwyksvlei at about 7 a.m. on 2 November with the troops suffering greatly from exhaustion. Because of the column's condition, and the still bad weather, Smith-Dorrien felt compelled to abandon the final attack on the Boer position.

Having re-grouped, and the weather having cleared, on 6 November Smith-Dorrien made a second attempt in the same direction. Over the next two and a half days Smith-Dorrien was confronted with stern resistance from the Boers. After the first day's battle, where Smith-Dorrien had gained the upper hand, the Boers retreated, returning on the second day with re-enforcements.

At the beginning of the third day Smith-Dorrien perceived the threat to his flank and line of retreat and ordered that the heavy guns and baggage withdraw. The Boers sensed a moment of weakness and attacked, some 200 of them charging up to within 70 yards, firing wildly from the saddle. The heavy guns were only saved by the devotion of Lieutenant Cockburn and his troop of Canadians.



For two hours the Boers kept up a running fight on Smith-Dorrien's rear-guard. At 1.30 p.m. they again made a desperate effort to snatch the guns, galloping in as near as 200 yards. Once more disaster was averted by a fine stand by another party of Canadians under Lieutenant Turner.

In this Boer attack, Sergeant Holland, with his Colt gun, who was covering the retreat of the Field guns, was almost surrounded, but heroically managed to stave off the attack. The Boers, whose attack had been foiled still followed the column, but they kept 2 000 yards away and didn't seriously menace the retreating column. By 4 p.m. they had given up the pursuit.

The result of this battle was the awarding of three Victoria Crosses – to Lieutenants Cockburn and Turner, and Sergeant Holland for gallantry in saving the guns. What was significant was the fact that Smith-Dorrien recognized the bravery of the Boers in the charge to try and capture the guns and proposed a memorial be erected in memory of the two leaders of the charges – General Fourie and Commandant Prinsloo of the Carolina Commando. Funds were raised overseas, and this is the memorial referred to earlier in this document.

It was then on to Waterval Onder to try and find evidence of the British positions indicated on the map dated 1901. We initially found traces of the old Airlie Railway Station and the original railway line before making our way up a mountain road in an attempt to locate a British picket position. There was great excitement when we believed we had found the position, only to be told by a farmer on the land, that *"those stones belonged to Egyptians who once occupied the area"*. On asking around, in the area, everyone was as surprised as we were to hear that there were Egyptians this far south, so more research is needed. We have the name of a local historian, who these days is hardly ever in the area having retired, and we are hoping to make contact soon to re-visit our map and Waterval Onder.



The 'farmer' who believes in the Egyptian story is a farm manager that does not originate from the area, however, on our way out, he directed us to the Goal Ruins, the goal was used at the time of the Boer War.

Picture: the 'Goal Ruins'

Leliefontein / Witkloof was a great experience, with Waterval Onder being a 'must revisit'. However, our stay at The Wayside Lodge, being the first for Colin and Willi, was again a winner!

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

Allan Gordon