

Bronkhorstspuit – Mid Month Visit

Our visit to Bronkhorstspuit was to find the sites of the South African War (1899-1902) Battle of Rhenosterkop and the 1st Anglo-Boer War (1880-1881) Battle of Bronkhorstspuit.

Battle of Rhenosterkop

Rhenosterkop is about 30 km north of Bronkhorstspuit, and if you don't know anything about the battle, the settlement on your left would certainly attract your attention away from where the action took place.

The Battle of Rhenosterkop, which was fought on 29 November 1900, interested me as there are very conflicting reports on the strengths of the troops who faced one another.

- The size of the British force ranges from 4 000 to 5 000 in strength and the British publication 'After Pretoria – The Guerrilla War', which was a supplement to 'With the Flag to Pretoria' claiming the Boer strength at 4 000.
- Ben Viljoen in his 'Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War' claims that he had 500 men. Boer commandos were active in the old eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) due to the Pretoria-Delagoa Bay railway line and the availability of British supply convoys. These convoys, regularly attacked by the Boers, became their source of supplies.

On 19 November the Boers launched a surprise attack on the British garrison at Balmoral, about 25 km east of Bronkhorstspuit, on the railway line. Major-General Paget, who was in Pretoria at the time, was ordered with his force to find the Boers. Contact was made with the Boers late on 28 November, and Paget set up camp 4 km from Rhenosterkop. Viljoen, in his memoirs, claims that Lieutenant-Colonel Lyttleton, with his force, were to the Boers east, but some way off, so there was a major presence of British troops in the vicinity.

At daybreak on 29 November the British commenced with a short artillery attack on the Boer position, followed by a frontal attack. It is appropriate to quote from Viljoen's book once more – "I rode about with my Officers in front of our positions, thus being able to overlook the whole ground, just at daybreak. It gave me a turn when I suddenly saw the gigantic army of Khakis right in front of us, slowly approaching, in grand formation, regiment on regiment, deploying systematically, in proper fighting order, and my anxiety was mingled with admiration at the splendid discipline of the adversary. This, then, was the first act in the bloody drama which would be played for the next fifteen hours. The enemy came straight up and on us, and had obviously been carefully reconnoitring our position." Viljoen goes on to say that the Boers, due to their superior rifle fire and well-chosen positions in the mountains, fought off three frontal attacks. He also says that had Paget made a flanking attack on the Boer right, they could have cut off the Boers only retreat.



Rhenosterkop in the distance – as it looks today

Again it is appropriate to quote Viljoen – “General Paget seemed resolved to take our positions, whatever the sacrifice of human lives might be. If he had succeeded at last, he might find half a score of wounded burghers and if his cavalry hurried up, perhaps a number of burghers with horses in bad condition, but nothing more. Whereas, if he had made a flanking movement, he might have attained his end in capturing the whole commando, perhaps without losing a man.”

A further quote from Viljoen’s book, which makes research so rewarding goes – “If I remember rightly, it was during this charge that a brave officer, who had one of his legs smashed, leant on a gun or on his sword, and kept on giving his orders, cheering the soldiers and telling them to charge on. While in this position, a second bullet struck him, and he fell mortally wounded. We afterwards heard it was a certain Colonel Lloyd of the West Riding Regiment. A few months after, on passing over this same battle-field, we laid a wreath of flowers on his grave, with a card, bearing the inscription: *In honour of a brave enemy.*” Colonel Lloyd and all the other British/Colonial casualties were later interred at the Diamond Hill Cemetery.

That night the Boers, with ammunition getting scarce, and no food, decided to withdraw to their supply wagons which were 18 km to the north. Viljoen described the scene as “Again night spread a dark veil over one of the most bloody dramas of the war.” The Boers lost two men killed and 22 wounded whilst British/Colonial losses were reported as being either 15 or 19 who were killed in action or died of wounds received during the battle, and between 71 and 91 who were wounded in the battle. The British/Colonials killed in this battle are interred at the Diamond Hill Cemetery.



Battle of Bronkhorstspuit

On our way back home we visited the site of the Battle of Bronkhorstspuit, fought during the 1st Anglo-Boer War (1880-1881) on 20 December 1880.

To give some history, the Great Trek of the early 1830's was a result of mainly the Dutch settlers in the Cape wanting to break away from British rule. After the recognition of the Free State Republic, the Sand River Convention which was signed in January 1852, gave the Dutch the Transvaal, which they called the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek ('South African Republic'). All seemed well, despite the British wanting to form a federation of the different Colonies and Republics in Southern Africa. With no success in talks of a federation, and the war clouds looming with the Zulus in Natal, the British authorities in Natal gave Theophilus Shepstone the authority to annexe the Transvaal, which was announced in Pretoria on 11 April 1877. ZAR/Transvaal government officials, amongst whom was Paul Kruger, later to become President, made a number of trips to the U.K. to negotiate the reversal of the annexation.

During the time of these visits by Boer Officials to the U.K. British forces were involved in the Anglo-Zulu War in Natal, and having defeated the Zulus, the British once again focused on the ZAR/Transvaal, introducing a new constitution which gave the Boers a limited degree of self-governance. Kruger with other senior Boers, refused to be part of this arrangement. On 15 December 1879, 6 000 burghers, many of them bearing the Republic's 'vierkleur' flag, voted to pursue a restored, independent republic. Boer delegates were imprisoned on charges of high treason when they took their demands to British officials. This prompted many burghers to consider rising up there and then – Kruger persuaded them not to, saying this was premature. On 8 December 1880, 10 000 Boers congregated and approved a proclamation announcing the restoration of the South African Republic. The Boers set up a provisional government with the capital at Heidelberg, and sent a copy of the proclamation to the British along with a written demand that they surrender the government offices in Pretoria. The British refused and mobilised the British garrison in Pretoria.

Having received the ultimatum the garrison at Lydenburg were ordered to proceed to Pretoria to add re-enforcements. Lieutenant-Colonel Anstruther of the 94th Regiment, together with his force of 250 men left Lydenburg with a train of over 30 wagons. On 17 December, Anstruther was informed that there were Boer commandos advancing to meet with him before he reached Pretoria. On the morning of 20 December British scouts spotted Boers in the hills close by Bronkhorstspuit, the site he had chosen to encamp for the night. Anstruther was not expecting any problems and the band was playing, announcing their approach. Certainly, soldiers were ill prepared for an engagement with most of their rifles and ammunition being on the accompanying wagons. A Boer, under a white flag, approached the British with a note stating that the Boers had declared their independence and that the British needed to halt.

Anstruther rejected the note from the Boers saying that his orders were to proceed to Pretoria, and ordered that the wagons and men close order. This was viewed as an act of aggression by the Boers who opened fire on the British troops from a range of less than 200 yards. Joseph Lehmann



describes the engagement, in his book 'The First Boer War' as follows – “The Boers seemed to be circling around them, for the firing came at them from all sides. Seeing that all the officers were down and that the men were falling fast, the heavily wounded colonel (Anstruther) ordered the survivors of the luckless 94th to throw their white hats into the air and to waive handkerchiefs as a sign of surrender. In a matter of fifteen minutes the battle was over.” Later on in the chapter Lehmann records “All the survivors testified to the kindness and great humanity displayed by Frans Joubert’s men and by the staunch Republican residents in the vicinity.”



British Memorial to the 94th Regiment



Boer Memorial



Again from Lehmann's book – "At the close of the action, fifty seven of the British were dead and over a hundred wounded. Some twenty more died within a few days. All the officers were either killed or wounded. The Boer losses were two dead and five wounded." A quote (recorded in Lehmann's book) from the then British Transvaal Administrator, Owen Lanyon states – "I fear our men shot infamously as many of the soldiers rifles inspected after the battle were sighted at 500 yards."

For those interested in the First Boer War, this book is really worth a read.

It is worth noting that by the end of 1880 the 'Transvaalers' had all six British garrison outposts, including that in Pretoria, under siege. Within two months the Battle of Majuba had ended the war. Were the sieges instrumental in the final victory? Did the Boers believe that the Sieges of Kimberley, Mafeking and Ladysmith would again result in a Boer Victory 20 years later?

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

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