

Mid Month Visit – October 2021

30 September 2021 was the 120th Anniversary of the Battle of Moedwil, and I was very honoured to be invited to the wreath laying ceremonies at both the British Cemetery, and the Boer Cemetery. Both these cemeteries are now on private property and prior arrangements have to be made to visit them. One has to understand and appreciate that these, and other South African War (1899-1902) cemeteries, are on 'working' farms and there is a danger of visitors leaving gates open, enabling livestock to escape, and/or for veld fires through visitors who smoke.



Picture: The British Cemetery



Picture: The Boer Cemetery



On 29 September 1901, a British force, under Colonel Kekewich, took up a position on the farm Moedwil on the bank of the Selons River. The camp site unfortunately had been chosen more for convenience, than for tactical efficiency. Kekewich believed the area was safe as he had not had contact with the major forces accompanying Generals de la Rey and Kemp for some time.

However, General Kemp's scouts, under Commandant Boshoff, had been following the movement of the British convoy, and Kemp, together with de la Rey were planning their attack. General de la Rey's plan was for five of his commandos to position themselves in the river bed to the east of Kekewich's main camp, moving into position under the cover of darkness, and waiting for first light. Two commandos of about 40 burghers would position themselves to the north of the British camp, and a similar size commando would position themselves to the south of the camp, completing the flanking movement.

Early on the morning of 30 September de la Rey put his plans in motion. Kekewich had ordered that a patrol be sent out an hour before first light, and at about 4.40am a patrol of Imperial Yeomanry encountered the Boers in the river bed and shots were fired.

The British camp was now awake and the Boers commenced their attack from the river bed.

With all this chaos in the camp, it was almost impossible for the seven kilogram guns and the Pom-Pom to come into action.



Picture: A typical scene of soldiers with a Pom-Pom

There was also the fact that it was not yet light enough to pick out any target, and, being in the open, in the centre of the camp, the guns were easy targets for the Boer attackers. As had been predicted many of the British were silhouetted against the skyline, thanks to the rising sun, and were easy targets for the Boers.

At approximately 5.30am the Boers who were positioned to the south of the British camp, launched their attack. This took the British by surprise, as most of the British were trying to repulse the main attack from the river bed. At this point Major Watts from the Derbyshire Regiment collected a force of non-combatants and mounted an attack on the Boers in the south east. It wasn't long before regular soldiers joined in, and with bayonets fixed, they managed to drive the Boers into retreat.



Half an hour later (approximately 6am) the Boers, realising that they were up against extremely tough, brave opponents, heavily outnumbered, and running out of ammunition, began to withdraw.

It is difficult to get accurate casualty figures from the number of publications that have written accounts of this battle. British casualties range from 41 to 61 killed and from 131 to 158 wounded. On the Boer side records are fairly consistent that 11 were killed 33 wounded and 10 taken prisoner.

Together with these casualties, there are various references to the loss of horses and oxen which range from 350 to 500. Many were killed in the battle but a number stampeded out of the camp at the time the fighting commenced.

This battle, in a war which was labelled as 'the last of the gentleman's wars', was to leave a rather sour taste in the mouths of many commentators. The Boers had been accused of 'executing' a number of wounded soldiers at the Battle of Vlakfontein (29 May 1901), and Moedwil, being almost a 'replay' of that battle in that the same regiments were involved, the Boers accused the British of 'executing' a number of their wounded.

Piet Schuil, a Dutch volunteer, who was looking after the Boer horses whilst the Boers were preparing for battle, was accused of firing on two British soldiers, whilst flying a white flag on the end of his rifle. A British Military Court found him guilty and he was executed by firing squad on 2 October 1901.

Commandant Boshoff's body was also recovered with wounds which were recorded as being not consistent with battle injuries.



Picture: Commandant Boshoff's Grave

The Battle of Moedwil is part of the itinerary for the second Magaliesberg 1-day tour, which is being put together at the moment. I will keep everyone informed, but hope to have it ready for early December.

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

Allan Gordon