

Mid Month Visit – October 2022

BattleToursZA took another step forward by launching their second One-Day tour in the Magaliesberg and surrounds. Tour Number One covers seven battles and two 'points' of relevance to the South African War (1899-1902). Tour Number Two covers five battles and two 'points' of relevance to the War. However, one of the battles, the Battle of Modderfontein, can almost be classed as two battles in that initially the Boers successfully attacked the British garrison, and two days later, with the Boers now in command of the post, the British tried unsuccessfully to re-capture their garrison. With the first tour being titled 'An Introduction to the Magaliesberg Battlefields', I was looking for a suitable title for Tour Two. The title I have selected has created much discussion.

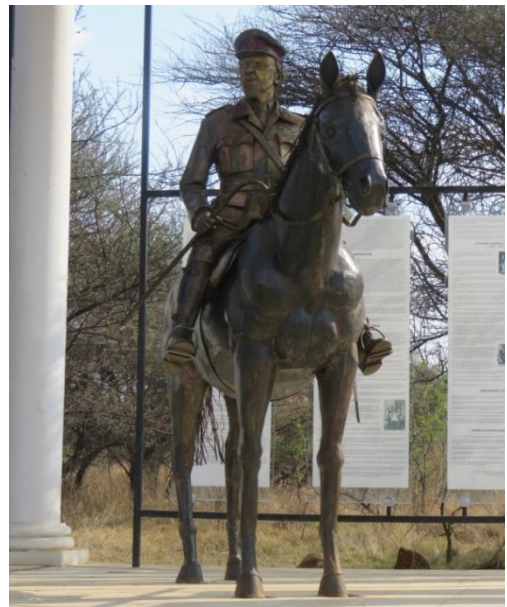
After the Battle of Diamond Hill the Boers held a 'Council of War' to decide on the way forward. Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Pretoria had been occupied by the British and many despondent Boers had laid down their 'arms' and returned to their farms. General de la Rey was tasked with returning to the Western Transvaal (now North West Province) and trying to convince disillusioned Boers to again take up arms. He agreed to go, as long as he could take Jan Smuts along with him. This request was agreed to, so Smuts, who at that stage was still the Transvaal Government's State Attorney, joined de la Rey as a 'military' man – with no experience.

Smuts was involved in battles at Scheerpoort, Buffelspoort and Nooitgedacht, playing a major role in commanding men who were from commandos under the overall command of General de la Rey.

Early in 1901 Smuts was given permission by de la Rey to move to the Gatsrand, and to try and get disillusioned Boers, from that area, and from Potchefstroom, to re-join the struggle. Smuts was therefore now in command of his own force.

His first engagement in this capacity was the Battle of Modderfontein.

Picture: A statue of Jan Smuts on horseback at Kedar Heritage Lodge



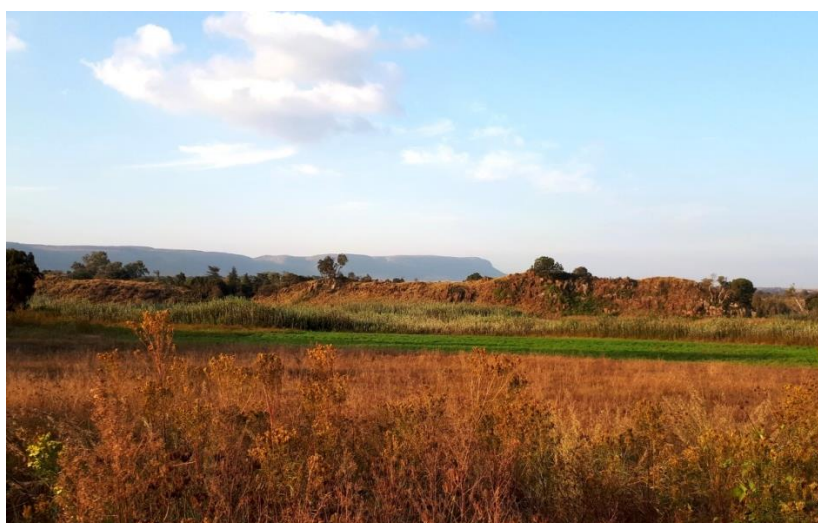
And so, the name of Tour Two, and borrowing a phrase from the sports community, is 'Jan Smuts – from rookie to seasoned pro'.

Tour Two starts with a stop at Barton's Folly, which one cannot physically access, but the stop gives a good view of the blockhouse. A discussion about the naming of the blockhouse and a brief



overview of the over 10 000 blockhouses erected during the war followed. The next stop was to hear the explanation and view the area where the Battle of Hekpoort took place in mid-December 1900. It was here that the Boer plan, to try and draw the British force into an ambush, backfired, due to the arrival of a British force under General French from Krugersdorp. Had the Boers not retreated, their escape route would have been blocked by French.

We then progressed to Maanhaarrand, the position to which the Boers had retreated. It was an ideal, natural defensive position, and in the book 'Jan Smuts Memoirs of the Boer War' there is a great description (page 115) – *"a sharp low ridge, affording just sufficient protection to the horses, which extends right across the valley on the farm Zandfontein. It was an ideal position for defence."*



Picture: Maanhaarrand with Nooitgedacht in the background

We then stopped for breakfast, and a new breakfast stop needs to be identified. Stopping off at a holiday resort, when timing is very important, is not ideal. Service, to be polite, was slow.

After breakfast we made our way to the site of the Battle of Middelfontein where General de la Rey and his commandos kept the British 'busy' for three days before help arrived from Ventersdorp. General Cunningham's column had been sent from Rustenburg to try and make sure that General de la Rey didn't enter the Moot.

From Middelfontein we travelled to Derby where the Battle of Vlakfontein was fought on 29 May 1901. Vlakfontein was the name of the farm on which the battle took place. After the war, when a small settlement was established, it was named Derby, after the brave actions of the Derbyshire Regiment during the battle.

Next stop was Syferfontein, a battle where the Imperial Light Horse (ILH) didn't display the same kind of acumen they displayed at the Battle of Elandsplaagte, a battle fought just after the outbreak of hostilities, 20 km outside Ladysmith. At Syferfontein no scouting was done by the ILH and in trying to take a low hill, they were mown down by the Boers who had reached the summit first.



The British had 25 men killed or who died of wounds received, and over 50 injured. More than 40 horses were killed or had to be euthanized.

We then made our way to the town of Magaliesburg and lunched at the local Wimpy. Certainly a different menu, but at least the service was 'more slick'.



Picture: One of the 'discussion stops' along the route

And then it was off to our final stop – the Battle of Modderfontein. This battle is not in the Magaliesberg, it is close to Westonaria, in the Gatsrand. However, as I mentioned at the beginning of this newsletter, Jan Smuts was involved, as was General Cunningham. Cunningham had had a hard time at Middelfontein and was making his way to Krugersdorp to refit his column. He was messaged to go directly to help the garrison at Modderfontein, but didn't get the message. Once in Krugersdorp, he was redirected to Modderfontein, but after challenging Smuts for the whole of the day on 2 February, so as to avoid further losses, he returned to Krugersdorp.

It would have been great to enjoy a beer and a chat at the end of the tour, but the only 'watering hole' in the area – the Waterpan Golf Club, only opens if there are golfers on the course. This particular afternoon there were no golfers, so after thanks and 'good-byes' we all made our way home.

So, we now cover 12 battles and four 'points' of relevance to the South African War (1899-1902). We have had well over 100 people accompany us on these tours, and 95% of them have had little or no idea of what happened in the Magaliesberg during the war. And, not to let the grass grow under of feet, we have identified battles for Tour Three.

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

Allan Gordon