

Mid-Month Visit – October 2023

On a recent visit to Bergendal, I was asked a very interesting question – “*so this wasn’t really a great battle?*” This got me analysing the battle that took place on 27 August 1900 in more detail.



Picture: The Cemetery at Bergendal containing Rifle Brigade graves

The monument itself is a monument to the Boers who paid the ultimate sacrifice at the battle, in the vicinity of Belfast, and in the district of the old Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga). At the site of the battle there is a memorial to the men of the Rifle Brigade who lost their lives in the battle, and about 300 metres from the impressive Bergendal monument, there is a cemetery in which 14 soldiers of the Rifle Brigade are buried.

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I have been through the book by Alexander Palmer, ‘The Boer War Casualty Roll (1899-1902)’ and get to the following figures for 27 August 1900:

- Killed in Action = 12
- Died of Wounds = 11
- Wounded = 85

The majority of the above were from the Rifle Brigade who led the attack, however, the following regiments had casualties:

- 1st Devonshire – 1 x slightly wounded
- 1st KRRC – 1 x severely wounded
- 1st Liverpool – 1 x slightly wounded
- 1st Manchester – 7 x slightly wounded, 3 x severely wounded
- 2nd Royal Warwickshire – 2 x wounded, and
- 1st Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers – 1 x slightly wounded, 2 x severely wounded, and 5 who died from wounds received.

The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, with the Devonshires on their right flank, were right behind the Rifle Brigade in support, but the other regiments were well to the rear of the main attack and were probably the target of the Pretoria and Carolina Commandos. With so few casualties amongst the



regiments (other than the Rifle Brigade) which made up Buller's force, the question needs to be asked whether the Boers were up to a fight, or whether they had already realised that the battle was a lost cause and were already involved in their retreat.

Buller's force had started their march on Belfast at the beginning of August and were planning on meeting up with Roberts at the end of the month. Roberts had the luxury of a railway line, whereas Buller was making his way, through unfriendly territory, having to carry all needed supplies with him. He was harassed by the Boers all the way with the week before the Battle of Bergendal being the most severe on his force. On 21 and 22 August 1900 at van Wyk's Vlei casualties were:

- Killed in Action = 10
- Died of Wounds = 1
- Wounded = 27

At Geluk on 23 August 1900, things got a lot worse, with the following figures being recorded:

- Killed in Action = 16
- Died of Wounds = 6
- Wounded = 30

Over the next three days casualties were:

- Killed in Action = 10
- Died of Wounds = 8
- Wounded = 48



Picture: The Cemetery at Diamond Hill

Without getting into some sort of 'analysis paralysis', let's compare Diamond Hill (two days), the build up to Bergendal, and the Battle of Bergendal, with Bergendal and Diamond Hill being acknowledged as the last two set pieces of the war.



Casualties were:

Battle	Diamond Hill	Build up to Bergendal	Bergendal
Killed in Action	15	36	12
Died of Wounds	3	15	11
Wounded	159	105	85
Total Casualties	177	156	108

On the morning of 27 August (the Battle of Bergendal) the British bombarded the Boer position with what has been recorded as the heaviest bombardment of the war. 'The Times History of the War' records (page 452 Vol. IV) – *"Shortly before 11 a.m. the bombardment began. The fire of Buller's thirty-eight guns was directed chiefly on Bergendal Farm. The shelling continued for three hours without intermission, no such severe and concentrated fire having been witnessed during the war since the days of Vaal Krantz and Pieter's Hill."*

'The Times History of the War' records the following about the Boers (page 453 Vol. IV) – *"Moreover the Boer guns, though numerically weaker, failed to do as much as they might to silence those of the English. In fact, one or two shots from the Long Toms and a few more from some of the Krupp guns in the Krugersdorp and Germiston positions were all the signs of life given by the Boer gunners. Consequently these seventy-four police (the ZARP's) were left to their fate, almost unsupported, in the face of the whole of Buller's artillery and an infantry brigade."*



Picture: The Battle of Bergendal Memorial to the Boers

So, was Bergendal a battle?

I have often asked the question – what is the definition of a battle? Is it the number of troops facing one another? ... Or is it the number of casualties? ... Or is it the number of guns? The definition from the Oxford Dictionary states – "a sustained fight between large organized armed forces". The Cambridge Dictionary definition states – "a fight between armed forces".

Next time you pass the memorial, stop and take in the structure to the Boers who paid the ultimate price, and decide for yourself – was this a 'serious battle'?

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

Allan Gordon