

## Mid Month Visit – September 2021

Having completed three successful Magaliesberg 1-day Tours, the time is right to develop a second tour in the area to satisfy requests from interested enthusiasts. Andre, who works with me on the 1-day Tour, and I did a recce to work out timings and the viability of the second tour, and without giving too much away, it is going to be an exciting outing of six battles and a cemetery visit.

However, the highlight of the tour will be a visit to the site of the Siege of Elands River where not only will we be able to visit a museum, but we will also walk around the battlefield, see trenches which have recently been found, and enjoy a lunch break in very pleasant, historic surroundings.

The Siege of Elands River, also known as Brakfontein, after a farm on the river, which later became the town of Swartruggens, commenced on 4 August and ended on 16 August 1900.



*Picture: A model of the Siege of Elands River in the museum situated on private property*

Brakfontein was a transit post on the road between Mafeking and Pretoria, and wagon convoys rested and replenished supplies before resuming their journey. After the Relief of Mafeking, small garrisons were posted along this route and by August 1900 it was a busy route for needed supplies for the British. These outlying posts were of interest to the Boers, as they too needed supplies, and hence the British were constantly exposed to Boer attack.

On 3 August 1900, the camp was crowded as more than 100 loaded wagons had arrived and were resting up before commencing their trip to Rustenburg. The garrison was manned by 500 Australian, Rhodesian, Canadian and British soldiers under the command of Colonel Charles Hore.



That night, 3 August, 2 000 burghers under Boer General Koos de la Rey, including Commandant Steenkamp with the Rustenburg Commando and Commandant Potgieter with the Wolmaranstadt Commando, surrounded the camp. Boer artillery was placed on the surrounding hills.

At daybreak on 4 August the Boers opened a relentless artillery barrage that lasted throughout the day. Peet Coetzee in his book 'The Siege of Elands River' records (page 22) – *"The Boers opened a heavy shell and rifle fire on the camp from the east, north, Elands River bed on the west and from the spruit and rocks on the south. This continued throughout the day until 6 p.m. The shell fire on the cattle was most destructive as there was no possible spot to which they could be driven to obtain shelter. Colonel Hore reported that the shell fire on the Norris Mulkes and cattle was most destructive and I calculate that there were killed and missing 135 horses, 40 mules and 300 head of oxen."*



*Picture: British fortifications reconstructed on the original battlefield*

Peet's book gives a comprehensive account, day by day, of what happened during the siege. He has quotes from people who were in the camp, and I cannot do justice to his book in this short newsletter. Suffice to say that once one has been to the museum, and done a tour of the battlefield, purchasing the book is a must.

The Boer attack from day one was repeated for a number of days with horrendous results to the animals in the camp. Two kopjes which formed part of the camp, Zouch's Kopje and Butter's Kopje were fortified and when one visits the site, visits to both these landmarks can be included.

Colonel Hore was aware that a column under General Carrington had left Mafeking and was expected to arrive at Elands River before long. However, when Carrington arrived he realised he had underestimated the strength of the Boer force and ordered a hasty retreat. The Marico Commando pursued Carrington back to Zeerust. Baden-Powell, who was at Rustenburg, some 50 km away, also sent a force to relieve the siege, but inexplicitly called off the 'rescue' as he believed that Carrington had 'done the job'. General de la Rey offered Hore the opportunity to surrender, but Hore refused the offer.



Conditions at the garrison were horrendous. The Boers kept up their artillery attack for a number of days and continued with regular rifle fire. Fresh water was a problem as the Boers were positioned along the Elands River and Doornspruit, however Peet has been able to establish from where the British fetched water every night. What was also a problem was the stench of over 1 000 decomposing animal carcasses.

Vincent Curruthers, in his 'A short history of the Siege of Elands River Post' records – *"On 14 August, ten days after the start of the siege, Lord Roberts finally learned that the Elands River post was still holding out. He signalled his 'great distress that Hore should have been so long without help' and called on Generals Carrington, Baden-Powell, Methuen and Hamilton to try to assist before the garrison was forced to surrender. Carrington had fled too far from the scene to be useful; Baden-Powell and Hamilton had left Rustenburg; and Methuen was in hot pursuit of the elusive Christiaan de Wet. So, it was Lord Kitchener who eventually relieved the beleaguered Elands River camp on 16 August and congratulated the garrison for its valour.*

*Despite the horrors of the siege only five soldiers and four wagon drivers had been killed and are buried in the military cemetery. Fifty other men had been wounded, of whom 11 later died. Most of the casualties had occurred in the first two days before effective defences had been completed. The loss of animals was appalling. Of the 1 540 cattle, horses and mules at the depot on 3 August, only 214 were alive when the siege ended. A special monument near the museum commemorates the animals that suffered."*



*Picture: Memorial to the animals killed at the Siege of Elands River*

If Elands River was a little closer to Johannesburg, I am convinced it would be a very busy tourist attraction. This trip that we are putting together, which will also be a 1-day Tour, will help spread the word of this 'gem'.

**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) - for regular updates and news.

**Allan Gordon**