

Mid-Month Visit – September 2023

In October I have a couple coming across from the U.K., part of a bigger touring group, who, before the tour starts, want to travel to Kroonstad to view the memorial to a family member who died of disease in the town. So as to have all my 'ducks in a row' I did a 'recce', just to make sure that I wasn't travelling 'blind'.

The cemetery in Kroonstad, where those who were buried, having lost their lives during the South African War (1899-1902), is a disgrace and I will be apologising, on our trip to Kroonstad, for what these overseas guests will experience. There are no metal crosses, probably exchanged for money as 'scrap metal', and most of the memorials have been vandalised. An effort has been made to replace the crosses with marble tablets, but without being able to verify this statement, I believe only half the job was completed. I hear that the 'powers that be' are trying to replace gold exports with tourism as our largest form of fiscal income. Well, with the state of the Boer War cemeteries, our roads, our electricity load shedding, and water cuts – we have a long way to go for future Boer War Tours. Thank goodness there are people around who are passionate about this event in our past, and we can add value in these adverse conditions, and attract tourists.

To travel, from their hotel in Johannesburg to Kroonstad, will take just over two hours – a round trip of four hours. So, to make the day interesting and worthwhile, I started exploring what happened along the railway line between Kroonstad and Germiston and found a number of Boer raids on stations along the line, which we can visit. The sites we are going to visit will make the day, and the trip to Kroonstad worthwhile – as mentioned in last month's newsletter.

During the month of June 1900, General de Wet was trying to make life for the British force as difficult as possible. Johannesburg and Pretoria had just surrendered, and supplies were needed by Roberts for his pursuit of the Boers, who were retreating eastwards.

On 7 June he attacked three stations along the line near the town of Koppies (65 km/40 miles) north east of Kroonstad. The stations were Vredefort Road, Rhenoster River and Roodewal. The station at Roodewal was a main supply depot and postal station, and at the time of the attack fortifications were supplemented with bags of flour, bully-beef containers, bales of clothing and postal bags.



Picture: General Christiaan de Wet



Professor Fransjohan Pretorius in his book 'The making of the Legend' records the following (page 13) – *"A fierce exchange of fire ensued. Fortunately for de Wet, the defenders had no artillery. His Krupp, removed to a safe distance under a hail of bullets, soon shot the station's corrugated iron buildings to pieces. When Froneman joined the fray with two more field guns after heavily defeating the 4th Derbyshires at Rhenoster River, the British were forced to put up the white flag, fearing their vast ammunition supplies would be hit."*



After the surrender, de Wet on inspecting the camp, observed the fortifications which had kept the British casualties down to a minimum. The richness of the 'prize' was beyond the Boer powers to exploit, for they lacked the transport to carry it away. The post-bags were opened and looted by both the Boers and the British.

Picture: The Roodewal Station

The memoirs of de Wet describe the 'negotiations' around the mail at the time of surrender (page 133) – *"We accordingly ceased firing, and I rode out towards the station. Before I had reached it, I was met by two of the officers. They told me that they were willing to surrender, on condition that they were allowed to retain their private property and the mail bags, for it appeared that there were two English mails under their charge."*

I replied that so far as their private belongings were concerned, they were welcome to keep them, as I never allowed the personal property of my prisoners to be tampered with in my presence. But I told them that the letters were a different matter, and that I could not allow them to reach their destination – unless they were directed to a bonfire!"

After the post had been looted, with the Boers overloading their horses, the rest was left to be burnt. Back to de Wet's book (page 135) – *"When the sun set, the burghers were again on the march. But what a curious spectacle they presented. Each man had loaded his horse so heavily with goods that there was no room for himself on the saddle; he had therefore to walk and lead his horse by the bridle."*

Sergeant A. Chapman of the Army Post Office Corps, who was captured by the Boers, wrote in a letter home soon after his release – *"After that the destruction took place. Huge columns of flame and smoke arising, followed by terrific explosions as the large 280lb shells went off. This continued until far into the night and was resumed the following day."*

Casualties were heavy. The British lost 24 men killed in action with 18 later dying of wounds received. Over 100 men were injured and just under 600 taken prisoner. The prisoners were taken



to a Boer camp, away from the railway line. They were set free soon thereafter as the Boers had no way of looking after prisoners – they were a guerrilla force, continually on the move.

Following this success, de Wet attacked three stations closer to Kroonstad, on 22 June, with limited success. This attack was centred around the station at Heuningspruit.

So, there will be enough to cover on our trip to Kroonstad. This 'recce' has created a further opportunity – a 1-Day tour to Kroonstad, but I am going to have to do a bit more 'legwork' to put a tour together with substance. Anyway, I am sure our overseas guests will go away, having achieved what they wanted to achieve – paying their respects to a family member who died in the service of his country.

The memorial that we will be visiting in the Kroonstad Cemetery is that of Lieutenant George Lockwood Dorman – the family that founded the company Dorman Long, well known to many of our readers.



Picture: The remains of Lieutenant George Lockwood Dorman's original tombstone

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

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