

## Newsletter

April 2022

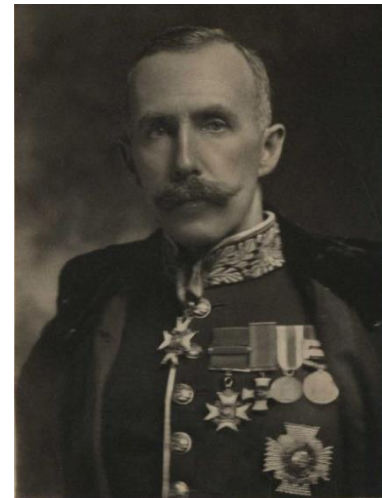
**April 1900:** Boer activity in the Orange Free State had become more 'hit and run' than planned battles, in order to delay the British progress to the Transvaal. The only major engagement was the Siege of Wepener or the Battle of Jammersberg Drift, which lasted for 16 days, with the British suffering 32 fatal casualties and 135 men wounded.

The Battle of Reddersburg was fought on 3 & 4 April 1900 (Battle of the Month – [www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)).

This battle saw the recalling of General Gatacre to England after his failure to help McWhinnie's column who had to surrender to Boer General de Wet.

On top of Gatacre's debacle at Stormberg, this was the last straw for Roberts.

*Picture: General Gatacre*



Other skirmishes / engagements in 1900 were Tweefontein, or Boshof as it is sometimes known, Israel's Poort and Toba Mountain which were around the town of Thaba N'chu when Lieutenant General Hamilton was moving with his column, the right flank of the British force, in his advance towards the Transvaal.

On 17 April Lieutenant-Colonel Mahon received instructions to form a 'flying column' to help with the Relief of Mafeking. Part of this column would be made up of one hundred infantry from General Barton's 6<sup>th</sup> Fusilier Brigade, comprising 25 men each from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales – so that those in the U.K. could say – "*we relieved Mafeking*".

On 30 April at the Battle of Houtnek/Toba Mountain, Captain Ernest Towse, of the Gordon Highlanders, earned his second citation for the Victoria Cross. He is our V.C. 'Hero' of the month.

**April 1901:** the month for minor skirmishes following de Wet's non acceptance of Kitchener's Peace proposal.

On 6 April Scheepers, our personality of the month, captured 75 British soldiers at Zeekoiegat near Cradock in the Eastern Cape.

On 9 April General Plumer occupied Pietersburg, and there were minor skirmishes in the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) at Pulmietfontein, on 16 April near Dullstroom, on 17 April at Vygehoek, near Lydenburg, and on 19 April at Klipspruit near Middleburg.

On 14 April, a column under Lieutenant-General Babbington surprised Smuts' commando, took a number of prisoners and re-captured their 12-pounder gun captured by the Boers at the Battle of Silkaatsnek. General Smuts was not in camp and Commandant Wolmarans had to take the blame for the surprise attack.

**April 1902:** By now the War was nearing an end. The Orange Free State and ZAR governments, together with the two Republics' most influential military leaders were meeting to discuss the possibility of peace.

On 1 April the British, together with a number of National Scouts as guides, surprised a number of commandos on the farm Enkeldebosch near Delmas. In a fierce engagement the British suffered 20 fatalities and 61 men wounded. At Hartenbosch, near Bultfontein in the Free State, 300 Boers surprised a column of British soldiers out on patrol, taking a number of prisoners, and wounding 17 men.

And then, on 11 April, the last set piece battle of the war took place on the farm Rooiwal (more commonly referred to in British publications as Roodewal), where the British had 12 killed and 71 wounded in the battle.



*Picture: The aftermath of the Battle of Rooiwal*

Other worldly events that happened in the month of April:

- The Battle of Culloden on 16 April 1746, where 'Bonny Prince Charlie' and his Jacobite army was decisively defeated by a British government force, on Drum Mossie Moor near Inverness in the Scottish Highlands. It is reported to be the last pitched battle fought on British soil.
- Jean-Baptiste Sipido, a fifteen year old Belgium attempted to assassinate the then Prince of Wales on 4 April 1900, accusing the Prince of causing the slaughter of thousands during the South African War (1899-1902).
- .... and with no apologies, being a Liverpool supporter, and a collector of Spioenkop QSA's (Boer War Medals) – the Hillsborough Disaster on 15 April 1989 where 97 men, women and children lost their lives, through wanting to watch a game of football.

During one of the April months of the South African War (1900), three V.C.'s were awarded:

**1900**

Lieut. W.H.S. Nickerson	Royal Army Medical Corp	Wakkerstroom
Cpl. H.C. Beet	1 Batt. Derbyshire Regt.	Wakkerstroom
Capt. E.B. Towse	1 Batt. Gordon Highlanders	Thaba/Tobo Mountain

## Victoria Cross of the Month

### Captain E.B.B. Towse – Gordon Highlanders

Captain Ernest Beachcroft Beckwith Towse was born on 23 April 1864 and was educated at Wellington College.

He joined the Gordon Highlanders in January 1886. In 1892 he married Gertrude Christie. Towse accompanied the Gordon's to India where in 1895 he served with the Chitral Relief Force at Malakand, on the North-West Frontier and in 1897-8 at Tirah.

In South Africa the western campaign under Lord Methuen had seen his army advance, despite fighting at Belmont, Graspan and Modder River. After reorganising, he decided on a night advance and dawn attack on the Boer positions at Magersfontein. He was unaware that the Boers had entrenched themselves at the foot of the hill, so he sent his troops into a veritable slaughterhouse.

*Picture: Captain Towse V.C.*



The Highland Brigade walked into a storm of fire at 4 a.m. and lost General Wauchope. After 11 a.m. Lord Methuen ordered forward six companies of the Gordon's under Colonel Downman to support the line directly opposite the Magersfontein Kop and Boer trenches. Their attack died away 400 yards from the Boer trenches.

Colonel Downman saw the British right flank retiring at about 2 p.m. so assumed incorrectly that a general retreat had been ordered. He ordered a retirement, thereby causing the Highlanders heavy losses as they stood up and walked back in the open veld.

According to the Times History, "*Downman fell mortally wounded the moment he rose to retire. Captain E.B. Towse, of the Gordon's, with conspicuous gallantry, stayed by his wounded Colonel's side till Sergeant Nelson and Lance Corporal Hodgson came and helped to carry him back under the heavy fire.*"

Citation:

On the 11<sup>th</sup> December 1899, at the action at Magersfontein. Captain Towse was brought to notice by his commanding officer for his gallantry and devotion in assisting the late Colonel Downman, when mortally wounded, in the retirement, and endeavouring, when close up to the front of the firing-line, to carry Colonel Downman on his back; but finding this not possible, Captain Towse supported him till joined by Colour-Sergeant Nelson and Lance-Corporal Hodgson. On the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1900, Captain Towse, with 12 men, took up a position on the top of Mount Thaba, far away from support. A force of about 150 Boers attempted to seize the same

plateau, neither party appearing to see the other until they were but one hundred yards apart. Some of the Boers then got within forty yards of Captain Towse and his party, and called on him to surrender. He at once caused his men to open fire, and remained firing himself until severely wounded (both eyes shattered), thus succeeding in driving off the Boers. The gallantry of this officer in vigorously attacking the enemy (for he not only fired, but charged forward) saved the situation, notwithstanding the numeric superiority of the Boers.

*(London Gazette – 6 July 1900)*

According to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *"it was in this action, during the fighting on the hill, that Captain Towse of the Gordon's, though shot through both eyes and totally blind, encouraged his men to charge through a group of the enemy who had gathered around them."*

Captain Towse was decorated by Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle in July 1900 and appointed Sergeant-at-Arms. The appointment was confirmed by King Edward in 1902. He became an expert typist and during WW1 he went to the front to type letters for wounded soldiers as Honorary Captain for Base Hospital. In 1921 he accompanied Field Marshall Earl Haig to South Africa to form an Empire League of ex-servicemen.

Towse was knighted for his services to humanity. He lived at Goring-on-Thames in Berkshire and died there on 21 June 1948 aged 84. It is said that Queen Victoria shed tears when pinning the decoration on Towse's chest – an act she performed at her insistence.



*Picture: Captain Towse's grave*

Acknowledgement – Ian Uys

### **Anniversary of the birth of Gideon Scheepers - 4 April 1878**

Gideon Scheepers was born on 4 April 1878 in Middelburg in the old Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) and having completed his schooling at the age of sixteen, joined the prestigious Staatsartillerie (State Artillery), the Republic's only organised army unit, as a trainee Heliographer. Scheepers was excellent at coding and decoding and in May 1898 was seconded to the Orange Free State Artillery to establish communication links between the two Boer Republics. When the South African War (1899-1902) broke out Scheepers was in Bloemfontein and he and the heliograph section moved to the outskirts of Kimberley.

Scheepers made an immediate impression on General de Wet who appointed him as one of his scouts, and then promoted him to Captain in charge of his own reconnaissance unit.

In December 1900 Scheepers joined Commandant Kritzinger's commando that was selected by de Wet to invade the Cape to recruit Boers in the Cape who were sympathetic to the Boers cause. These sympathisers were known as the Cape Rebels. Once Martial Law was declared, these Cape Rebels, if captured, could be tried for treason and by the end of the war 44 Cape colonists had been executed, and hundreds of others, whose death sentences were commuted to penal servitude for life, were shipped to POW camps on Bermuda and St Helena.



*Picture: Gideon Scheepers*

After two months together Scheepers and Kritzinger parted ways with the latter returning to the Orange Free State. Scheepers then formed his own commando. The commando sabotaged British rail and telegraph lines and created havoc in the small towns in the Eastern Cape where they looted shops, and burnt houses, shops and public buildings that they thought sympathised with the British. Scheepers was a wanted man and many of the British units and local Town Guards were tasked with capturing him and his men. They had a number of close encounters, with one of them being with the Inniskilling Fusiliers, of which Lieutenant Oates of the South Pole expedition fame, was involved. It is speculated that the injury received by Oates in this encounter hindered him in the Antarctic, to the extent that, to not be a further burden to the expedition, on his birthday, he walked out into the snow, never to be seen again.

On 10 October 1901, when Scheepers and his men were close to the Prince Albert Road railway station, he was too ill to stay with his commando and had to be left behind. It is recorded that he had acute appendicitis. The British, with the help of a local doctor, arrested him two days later on the farm where he was bed ridden and he was given the necessary medical treatment. He was initially moved to Matjiesfontein, but a few days later he was moved to Beaufort West, before being moved to the Noupoot Military Hospital.

By December 1901 he had recovered sufficiently to be taken to the prison in Graaff-Reinet. The local newspaper, the Graaf-Reinet Advertiser reported – *"Commandant Scheepers, the man of a hundred battles and 45 counts of murder, arson and looting, arrived here this afternoon."*

Scheepers was now a prisoner of war. His trial began on 18 December and his sentence was announced on 17 January 1902.

Of the 30 charges, Scheepers was found guilty of 29 and sentenced to death with his execution planned for the following day.



*Picture: A memorial to Gideon Scheepers*

Wikipedia records - *"Scheepers faced 16 charges in a court martial: 7 of murder, 1 of attempted murder, 1 that he placed a prisoner in the enemy's line of fire, 1 of maltreatment of a POW, 3 of assault, 2 of malicious injury to property and 1 of arson (15 incidents). 54 witnesses were called to testify for the prosecution. Scheepers was convicted on all counts except one of the murder charges. He was sentenced to death. On 18 January 1902 he was executed by firing squad, while tied to a chair. He was reburied during the night in an unknown grave, and to this day his place of burial is unknown."*

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

**Allan Gordon**