

## Newsletter

April 2023

As I have done for the past few months, I am going to quote selected headlines from the book 'The War Reporter – The Anglo-Boer War through the eyes of the Burghers', by J.E.H. Grobler. Again, this is a book that anyone who has an interest in the South African War (1899-1902) needs to have in their Library.

**April 1900** – from the Editor's Comments (page 62) – *"The past fortnight has been a relatively calm period on the war front, with no major battles taking place. Lord Roberts' main force is still in Bloemfontein. The Transvaal forces are divided between units on the Natal front, the Northern Free State and the burghers besieging Mafeking. On that there is nothing to report.*

*The Free State forces under Chief Commandant Christiaan de Wet have been active in the area Southeast of Bloemfontein. De Wet himself made an attempt to force the British Column at Jammersbergdrif to surrender but failed. From our present perspective it is clear that his attempt was a senseless waste of time and of manpower. It would have been of much greater advantage to the Boer cause if de Wet had demolished the wagon bridge across the Orange River at Norvalspont, since Roberts would have found it more difficult to provide his huge army with supplies. Indeed the Boers have inflicted little damage on the British in recent times."*

The Battle of Jammersburgdrif was in fact the Siege of Wepener which lasted for 16 days, with the British suffering 32 fatal casualties and 135 men wounded.

During the month of April, with Bloemfontein having been occupied by the British, the Free State capital was moved to Kroonstad.



*Picture: A Kaffrarian Rifles Officer at the Siege of Wepener*

249 British Troops died of Enteric Fever in Bloemfontein during the month of April 1900. A total of 12 331 British soldiers died of disease during the war, mostly from Enteric Fever/Typhoid Fever. This compares with 7 773 soldiers who were killed in action – including died from wounds received. At the height of the epidemic during the war, as many as 25 British soldiers were dying each day.

**April 1901** – from the Editor's Comments (page 113) – *"On the battlefield the situation has not changed at all during the past month. Neither side is decisively gaining the upper hand. Within the Republics themselves the Republican forces are finding it increasingly difficult. Their hopes are at present focussed on the commandos who are active in the Cape. Tens of thousands of British*

*troops have been transferred to the Colony. This has two major advantages: the British can no longer give their full attention to the war within the Republics alone, and for the British tax-payer the cost of the war is escalating daily. From Europe, where President Kruger and the Republican Deputation are still attempting to recruit foreign support for our freedom struggle, we have heard that the pro Boer movement is gaining significant support, even in Britain itself."*

**April 1902** – talks of the possibility of peace began on 9 April in Klerksdorp.

I have visited the Klerksdorp Museum numerous times, and one of the exhibits is the table and chairs which the delegates used at the meetings.

Those present were, from the Transvaal – acting President Schalk Burger, F.W. Reitz, Louis Botha and Koos de la Rey, and from the Free State – President Steyn, de Wet, J. Brebner and J.B.M. Hertzog.



Picture: Klerksdorp Museum

The Editor's Comments in 'The War Reporter' (page 141), describes the mood – *"The end of the war is in sight. A final agreement between Boer and Brit will probably be reached within weeks rather than months. In this regard there are of course extremely negative factors as well as major positive factors that have to be weighed against one another. On the positive side there are three outstanding issues:*

- *an early peace will bring an end to further destruction and loss of life,*
- *the British do not demand the unconditional surrender of the Republics, which means that the Boers can negotiate for as advantageous an agreement as is possible under these circumstances,*
- *the British accept that the Republican deputies at the peace negotiations will only consist of representatives of the burghers who are still fighting. This means that the joiners and other handsuppers who took the side of the British are summarily stabbed in the back by their new masters, in the same way that these handsuppers and joiners themselves stabbed their own people in the back. They will have no further say in the determination of the future of South Africa. This means that the Bitter-enders did not fight for nothing at all, since the harvest of all their sacrifices is that they alone on the Boer side will have a say in the future of their people.*

*On the negative side, one dark blot threatens to smother us. That is that the price that the Republics will have to pay for an early peace will be the loss of their independence. No other peace condition can make up for this one. It will be the task of the representatives of the Bitter-enders at Vereeniging to determine if they are prepared to pay so high a price for an early peace."*

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 12 April, 16 members of the 8<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Contingent were killed when their train collided with a goods train at Machavie, near Potchefstroom.

They had only been in South Africa for a few weeks when the accident occurred.

*Picture: Soldiers of the 8<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Contingent killed at Machavie*

Another 'unnecessary' incident took place on 20 April – 200 men of the Imperial Yeomanry, who had escorted a convoy to a British camp near Ficksburg, on their way back to base, came across a Boer Laager, and decided to 'pay it a visit'. The resulting skirmish ended with the Yeomanry losing two officers and four men killed, with three officers and 12 men wounded.

The latter two incidents taking place so near to peace being signed.

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

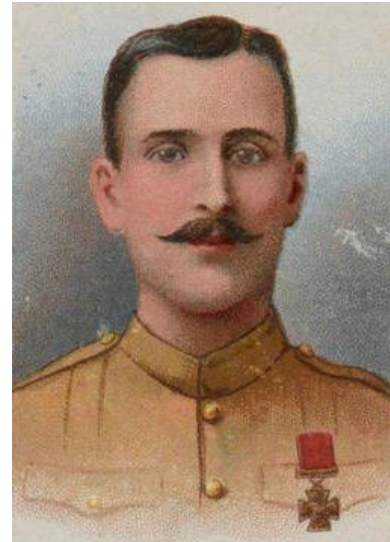
### Corporal H.C. Beet – 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Derbyshire Regiment

Harry Churchill Beet was born near Bingham, Notts, on 1 April 1873.

Beet joined the Derbyshire Regiment (Sherwood Foresters) in February 1892.

Two years later he sailed to India and fought on the Indian Punjab Frontier from 1897-8.

The following year he came to South Africa and served with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mounted Infantry Company.



*Picture: Corporal Beet V.C.*

#### Citation:

At Wakkerstroom on the 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1900, No. 2 Mounted Infantry Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Derbyshire Regiment, with two squadrons of Imperial Yeomanry, had to retire from near a farm, under a ridge held by Boers, Corporal Burnett, Imperial Yeomanry, was left on the ground wounded, and Corporal Beet, on seeing him, remained behind and placed him under cover, bound up his wounds, and by firing prevented the Boers from coming down to the farm till dark, when Dr. Wilson, Imperial Yeomanry, came to the wounded man's assistance. The retirement was carried out under a very heavy fire, and Corporal Beet was exposed to fire the whole afternoon.

*(London Gazette – 12 February 1901)*

Beet was promoted Sergeant by Lord Kitchener for his services. He was wounded near Virginia on 9 December 1901. Early in 1916 he was commissioned in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Reserve Canadian Infantry Battalion.

He died at Rupert, Vancouver, Canada on 10 January 1946, aged 72 years.



Beet's medals were purchased by his Regiment for 2 800 British Pounds, and they are displayed at Nottingham Castle.

*Picture: Corporal Beet V.C.'s medals*

### **Anniversary of the birth of Brigadier-General J.H. Yule – 26 April 1847**

James Herbert Yule was born in Scotland on 26 April 1847, and after completing his schooling, entered the Army in 1865. He was commissioned in the North Devonshire Regiment early in December 1865 and was deployed to Afghanistan for service the Second Anglo-Afghan War. He also saw service in Burma and in India, where he was present during the Tirah campaign in 1897. At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902) he briefly acted as General Officer Commanding the 4<sup>th</sup> Division in Northern Natal.

Although Sir George White, the newly appointed commander of forces in Natal, wanted all available troops to man the garrison in Ladysmith, Major-General Penn-Symons, who had been in South Africa for some time, believed that the garrisons at Glencoe and Dundee should be manned in order to secure coal supplies to Natal, and the Natal force was split and Penn-Symons occupied Dundee.

Yule, who was in South Africa, with his new command was given orders to defend Glencoe.

At the Battle of Talana on 20 October 1899, the first set piece battle of the war, Penn-Symons was seriously wounded, and Yule took over command of the division and managed to drive the Boers from the hill at Talana. Yule immediately called for reinforcements from Ladysmith, which were denied by White, as he himself was waiting for the troops on their way from India, and Ladysmith was being threatened by Boers from the Transvaal and the Free State.



*Picture: Brigadier-General Yule*

Yule's orders were to bring his force to Ladysmith, a distance of 70 km (43 miles). Yule was reluctant to do this as he would have to leave behind the wounded as well as three months' supplies. However, the retreat commenced after sunset on 22 October 1899.

To quote from the Times History, (page 201) – *"Just outside Dundee a convoy of thirty-three wagons containing the supplies for the march were skilfully dovetailed into the column. Within two hours the whole column, four miles long, was clear of the town."*

Support for the march was going to be needed with the Boers being ever present. Yule was in regular contact with White, and White eventually sent a force to escort the weary column into Ladysmith. This force encountered the Boers on the outskirts of Ladysmith which resulted in the Battle of Rietfontein on 24 October 1899.

After a three-day march, in very trying conditions, Yule and his 4 000 men marched into Ladysmith.

Ruari Chisholm, in his book 'Ladysmith' records the following (pages 50 and 51) – *"Yule's unswerving commitment to an excessively arduous task has never been fully recognised. The extraction of an army of over 4 000 exhausted men from impending disaster, followed by a 60-mile forced march over difficult terrain and in hostile weather, with the ever increasing risk of pursuit and ambush, was a major achievement of leadership. It was a feat out of character with the times – neither spectacular, successfully bellicose or in any sense glorious. But, in conducting the operation in the way he did, Yule accepted an additional and special kind of personal challenge, from which many of his contemporaries would have shrunk. For the sake of military expediency, he shrewdly calculated that deception would be a vital contributory factor to success. Not only did he deliberately abandon the populace of Dundee to the enemy, but he left behind the wounded, including his dying general, Penn-Symons, to fall into their hands. By making these decisions, Yule transgressed some features of the accepted code of honour of a Victorian officer and gentleman. There were those who never forgave him for that.*

*Nevertheless, on practical grounds, Yule's logic could not be faulted. The retreat cost him his health, but it saved his army – not a single man of which fell to enemy action. Within days, his troops were to become an indispensable component of White's Ladysmith garrison, making up about a quarter of the total force. Some would argue that Ladysmith could not have held out without them."*

He sailed for home as soon as Ladysmith was relieved, the march from Talana and the siege having taken a toll on his health.



He was to live another 20 years, passing away on 7 May 1920, at the age of 73.

He is buried in the St. Andrew's Churchyard in Gullane, East Lothian, Scotland.

*Picture: St. Andrew's Churchyard*

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

**Allan Gordon**