

Newsletter

April 2024

April 1900: After failing to achieve anything positive out of two of the three sieges that marked the beginning of the war in October 1899, Boer General de Wet decided to embark on another siege – the Siege of Wepener or Jammerbergdrif, 110 km south-east of Bloemfontein, close to the Lesotho border. The failed sieges of Ladysmith and Mafeking had lasted 117 and 124 days respectively and didn't deter the Boers from laying siege to the garrison at Jamerbergdrif. The Boer force numbered 6 000 and de Wet had been informed that the British garrison's strength was 1 900 men with seven guns and that they were well entrenched. The Boers' first attack on the garrison was on 7 April, the second on 9 April and the third on the night of 10/11 April. De Wet's final attack was on 24 April, and with the British relief forces approaching from both Bloemfontein and De Aar, de Wet decided to abandon the siege and retreat. Another siege failure! British casualties were 33 killed, 133 wounded and 12 taken prisoner with estimated Boer casualties being 11 killed and 25 wounded.

The special delegation from both Republics, which had left South Africa in March to garner support from European countries for the Boer efforts, had arrived in Europe and in April 1900 commenced their tour with a visit to the Netherlands.

Also during the month of April 1900 was the explosion on 24 April at the Begbie Ammunition Factory in Johannesburg. At the outbreak of the war the Thomas Begbie Foundry was commandeered by the Transvaal Boers. They handed it over to the French arms manufacturer Creusot and its engineers to run. Also, at the time of the outbreak of the war, there was a dynamite factory in Italy that found itself having to shut down, and many Italians relocated to Johannesburg where the Modderfontein dynamite factory was looking for skilled workers. Highly skilled, these Italian immigrants found employment in many industries, including construction and farming. In some factories such as the Thomas Begbie Foundry three quarters of the 200 or so workforce was Italian.

The terrific explosion at Begbie's killed and maimed many Italians, which was one of the causes that drove many Italians to the side of the Boers. When the final count was done all 12 men who died were Italian and of the 56 injured, 36 were Italians, the others being 10 Austrians and the rest French, German and Dutch. There were no Uitlander casualties. Naturally there was a huge outcry from the immigrant population who believed it was the work of saboteurs.

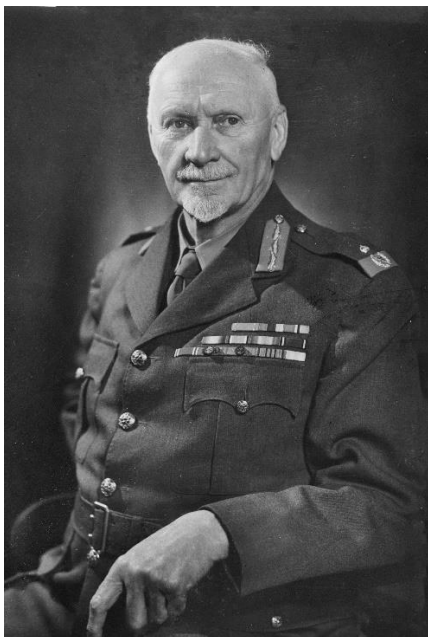


Picture: The aftermath of the explosion at Thomas Begbie & Son Foundry

April 1901: If one analyses the month of April in 1901, province by province, one finds that the Boers and their enemy were active in 'engagements' in the Western, Eastern, and Northern Transvaal, in the Cape Colony and in the Free State. The British were closing in on all the Boer Generals and in the Eastern Transvaal, General Ben Viljoen was close to being captured. On 20 April, after the destruction of one of the Long Tom Guns, Fanie Trichardt of the Staats Artillery met with Viljoen. To quote from Grobler's book 'The War Reporter' (page 114) – *"I asked Viljoen what his plans were. The General answered that they were merely fleeing, since there was no possibility to fight. He indicated that he did not know how to get through the British line that had virtually encircled his force. I knew that the enemy had occupied all the drifts, but there was one drift through the Olifants River, where I had to haul a gun through the river 17 years ago in the war against Nyabela (Mapoch was the first real leader of the Ndzundza Ndebele who settled near Dullstroom. Mapoch built the 'caves' or fortified settlements at what is now Roosenekal. When he died and his son was too young to succeed, Nyabela became regent. King Nyabela fought what is known as the Mapoch War against the Boers and was defeated and sentenced to life imprisonment.) Perhaps we could go through there. Viljoen agreed that we would have to make an attempt."*

Viljoen and his men managed to use this route to escape the British cordon, however they had to destroy many of their wagons which had become too cumbersome. The British 'sweep' of the area, as it became known, comprised over 10 000 men and 30 guns – a serious effort to capture a Boer General.

April 1902: The last major battle of the war, the Battle of Roodewal was fought on 11 April, and has been reported on in previous newsletters. The Boers suffered 42 killed, 50 wounded and 40 taken prisoner, whilst the British suffered 12 killed and 75 wounded.



Picture: General Jan Smuts

Jan Smuts and his force of just over 1 000 men which included Commandants van Deventer, Maritz and Bouwer were very active in the Northern Cape, making their way to Okiep. On 1 April they successfully attacked the mining town of Springfontein. On 3 April they captured the settlement at Nababeep and the following day the small mining settlement at Concordia. The same day, Smuts demanded the surrender of the nearby mining town of Okiep which was garrisoned by a British force of 900 men under the command of Colonel Shelton. Grobler records (page 142) – *"Sheldon reportedly had a force of 900 men in Okiep. Most of those were members of the citizen force and not well-trained soldiers, but they had a large arsenal of weapons, a field gun, a machine gun, and 15 blockhouses in a circle around the town to assist their defence."*

During the early weeks of April Smuts launched a number of unsuccessful attacks on the Town, and a further request to Shelton to surrender was rejected. Two weeks after the start of the siege Smuts was informed that a relief force had landed at Port Nolloth, a distance of over 100 km, through extremely dry and difficult terrain. Smuts sent van Deventer out to engage them and in the resulting conflict casualties were experienced on both sides.

On 23 April a British messenger arrived under a white flag bearing an official letter for Smuts to make his way to the Transvaal to meet with other Boer leaders who were gathering to discuss possible peace talks. Smuts handed over command to Maritz. On 4 May 1902 the relief column arrived and ended the siege. This was one of the last military actions by Boer forces, as the war ended at the end of May.

An interesting statistic that I came across in Pieter Cloete's book 'The Anglo-Boer War – A Chronology' records (page 324) –
"There are now 1 125 ex-burghers in the National Scouts and 385 in the Orange River Colony Volunteers, and a total of 9 963 ex-burghers have now taken up arms against their own people by joining enemy units."

The Farmers' Guard was also a unit composed of Boers who had decided to fight for the British and from others who joined the unit. Their reported strength was 600 and commanding officer was Major E M Morris. The Farmers' Guard was also known as the Burgher Police.

Picture: Queen South Africa medal to Corporal P.J. Scott, Regimental No. 6; 'C' Troop. He was also entitled to the clasp – South Africa 1902 (Author's collection)



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

Lieutenant W.H.S. Nickerson – Royal Army Medical Corps.



William Henry Snyder Nickerson was born at New Brunswick, Canada, on 27 March 1875, and was the son of a chaplain to H.M.'s Forces.

He was educated at Portsmouth, qualified as a doctor at Manchester University, and joined the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) in July 1898.

He was attached to the Mounted Infantry in South Africa and served with General Buller's field force which invaded the Transvaal from Natal.

Picture: Lieutenant William Nickerson V.C.

Citation:

At Wakkerstroom on the evening of 20th April 1900, during the advance of the infantry to support the mounted troops, Lieutenant Nickerson went in a most gallant manner, under heavy shell and rifle fire, to attend a wounded man, dressed his wounds, and remained with him until he had him conveyed to a place of safety.

(London Gazette 12 February 1901)

For his distinguished service Nickerson was promoted Captain in November 1900. He served in West Africa and Ireland and was promoted Major in July 1909. Nickerson served with the cavalry during the 1914 retreat in France, 1st and 2nd Ypres, Neuve Chapelle and from December 1915 in Salonika. Lieutenant-Colonel Nickerson was created a CMG in 1916. He married Nan Waller in 1918 and they had a son and a daughter.

He was promoted Major-General and from 1925-33 was honorary surgeon to the King and colonel commandant of the RAMC until 1945. During this time he served on an Atlantic convoy, the Port of London Emergency Service and the Home Guard. He died at Cour, Kintyre, Scotland on 10 April 1954, aged 79 years, and is buried in the family vault.

Anniversary of the birth of Lieutenant-Colonel R.G. Scott - 22 April 1857

Robert George Scott V.C. DSO was born in Whittlesey, near Peterborough Cambridgeshire, England, on 22 April 1857, the son of Royal Naval Fleet Surgeon Robert Charles Scott and Mary Elizabeth Scott. He was educated at Epsom College (Granville House), entering in 1870 and proved an enthusiastic member of the College corps.

On travelling to South Africa, in 1876 he joined the Cape Mounted Rifles, serving with them until 1880. He served with the unit in the 1877 Frontier War and the 1879-80 Basuto Gun War. It was in the Basuto War, when as a 21-year-old sergeant, he was awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry.



Picture: Lieutenant-Colonel Robert George Scott V.C. DSO

"On 8th April 1879 during an attack on Morosi's Mountain, South Africa, Sergeant Scott volunteered to throw time-fuse shells as hand grenades over a wall of stone barricades from behind which the enemy were bringing heavy fire to bear on the Colonial troops. Sergeant Scott made his men take cover in case the shells burst prematurely before making two attempts to throw shells over it. At the second attempt the shell exploded almost in his hands blowing his right hand to pieces and wounding him severely in the leg."

(London Gazette 1 October 1880)

Scott recovered from his wounds and was presented with his V.C. by Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle on 17 December 1880. He then returned to South Africa where on 8 April 1884 in Kimberley, he married Constance Mary, daughter of the late Lieutenant-Colonel Daniell, and they went on to have four children.

Employed by De Beers Consolidated Mines, he volunteered to serve during the Siege of Kimberley 1899-1900 and was promoted to Major, being second in command of the Kimberley Light Horse. He was mentioned in despatches, received the Queen's South Africa Medal with three clasps, the King's South Africa Medal with two clasps, and was also awarded the DSO (London Gazette 27 September 1901).

Major Robert Scott V.C. and Captain G. Harris, together with Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Scott-Turner, had visited all the redoubts around Kimberley in search of volunteers for the Kimberley Light Horse. There were so many that it was easy to select only the best sort of recruit. By 19 October 1899, the 400-strong unit was in existence as a mobile and efficient mounted unit and, on 24 October, it received its baptism of fire in the Battle of Dronfield. The Kimberley Light Horse had been born and christened. The unit was to see further action at both battles of Carter's Ridge in

November and in numerous skirmishes throughout the defence of Kimberley, as well as the abortive chase for the Boer Long Tom on 16 February 1900.

Shortly after the Siege had been lifted, Scott formed a unit originally named Scott's Guards, primarily to guard the trains travelling through the Kimberley region. There was certain unhappiness with the name chosen – this mostly from the more famous Scots Guards – and the unit was renamed Scott's Railway Guards. The unit was about 500 men strong, many of them employed by the De Beers Company, and Scott served until the end of the war. He also commanded the Cape Railway Sharpshooters. For these services he was awarded the DSO.

The Great War of 1914-1918 again saw Major Scott V.C. DSO rally to the cause. The public of Kimberley, with the mobilization of the Kimberley Regiment, were keen to get involved and the Kimberley Defence Rifle Association was formed after a meeting on 27 August 1914 in the town hall. Made up into four squadrons, the Veldkornet for B Squadron was Major Scott. Within a month the Association had been formed into the Kimberley Central Commando with Colonel Robert G. Scott V.C. DSO the Commandant, and E.C. Lardner-Burke the Adjutant.

This forerunner of the Kimberley Commando was involved in the 'Civil' Rebellion of 1914-15 – sometimes referred to as the Maritz Rebellion. The unit were part of the defence of Upington on 24 January 1915, an action where they suffered casualties. The surrender of German SWA later in 1915 saw the Commando being disbanded and most, including Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Scott, returned to their jobs in Kimberley and region. He later commanded the Veteran Regiment.



Picture: Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Scott V.C. DSO's grave

The De Beers Company had stopped mining and Scott retired to Wynberg in the Cape Province.

He died on 3 October 1918, aged 61 and was buried in Plumstead Cemetery, Wynberg. He is also named on his two son's graves in Kensington Cemetery in London.

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) - for regular articles, updates, etc.

Allan Gordon