

Newsletter

April 2020

April 1900, after the fall of Bloemfontein, saw the Boer Commandos under Generals de Wet and de la Rey conducting a form of guerrilla tactics in the Orange Free State. The battles of Reddersburg / Mostert's Hoek and the Siege of Wepener (Battle of Jammersburg Drift) are perfect examples of these actions. The month also saw the Battle of Boshoff where 'The French General' was killed. Two Victoria Crosses were awarded at a minor skirmish on a farm, Wakkerstroom, in the district of Dewetsdorp. Roberts was continuing his march on the ZA Republic (Transvaal), having annexed the Orange Free State. Johannesburg and Pretoria were next in his sights.



On the Natal front there seemed to be more 'report writing' taking place with Buller, Warren, Thornycroft and Coke all submitting reports on the Battle of Spioen Kop.

To quote from the book – Buller's Campaign by Julian Symons – "The publication of the Spioen Kop dispatches in April 1900, was mishandled by Landsdowne (Secretary of State for War). There was a division of opinion in the Cabinet about the wisdom of publishing any dispatches at all, since any sort of publication must reveal the disharmony prevailing among the Generals in Natal."

Landsdowne eventually published an edited version of the dispatches which annoyed both the Prime Minister and the Queen.

Picture: General Buller

The book further states (quote) "Warren was astonished and deeply indignant at the comments made by a man [Buller] with whom he had thought himself on friendly terms in relation to a battle which he thought he had managed rather well." Warren was recalled to Britain in August 1900 and never again commanded troops in the field.

April 1901 saw many minor skirmishes in the Orange Free State, the old Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo) and the old Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga), with the most significant engagement being in the old Western Transvaal (now North West) on the farm Goedvoorzicht, in the Coligny / Klerksdorp District where a column of British Mounted Infantry surprised a Boer Laager and captured a number of prisoners, together with guns, ammunition, wagons and cattle.

April 1901 also saw the destruction of the last two Long Tom Guns by the Boers. The Boers were finding it difficult to replenish dwindling ammunition supplies for their most effective weapon, and together with the need at times, of up to 32 oxen to pull the gun, it became necessary to destroy their Long Toms rather than let them get into the hands of the British. The last two guns were destroyed by the Boers in the Haenertsburg area on 16 and 29 April 1901. *(Source Wikipedia)*



A replica of a Long Tom Gun at Long Tom Pass near Sabie

April 1902, and 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. Meanwhile, on the farm Rooiwal (more commonly referred to in British publications as Roodewal), the last set piece battle of the war was fought on 11 April. This battle is featured as the 'Battle of the Month' on the website (www.battletoursza.com), but in short, with General de la Rey being at the peace talks, General Kemp led an attack against a far superior force, under estimating a weakness in the British defence position – which the British had 'corrected' overnight. When Kemp realised his 'mistake' it was too late to change plans and the resulting cavalry charge by the Boers ended disastrously.

During one of the three 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

Anniversary of the death of George de Villebois-Mareuil, a Boer General - 5 April 1900

To those who find interest in the following story, the book, 'The French Colonel – Villebois-Mareuil and the Boers 1899-1900' by Roy Macnab, is a must read. Much of what I have included below is thanks to his book. It is ironic that in August 1899, Jan Smuts who was State Attorney of the ZAR (Transvaal) had suggested that, with war clouds looming, the Boers needed a high ranking military person, with experience in large battles, as an adviser. In 1896, Villebois-Mareuil (V-M) had requested the French to put him on military reserve having become disillusioned with French 'military life'. He had entered military life in 1865 and was to become the youngest Colonel in the French military. The match was perfect.

V-M arrived in South Africa via Lourenco Marques (Maputo), not without incident as ports were being blockaded. In Pretoria he met with 'the powers that be' including President Kruger, before proceeding to the Natal front.



His first experience was immediate – he arrived the day preceding the night attack on Lombard's Kop by British forces, where the Long Tom was destroyed.

His next involvement was when he inspected the Boer defensive line at Colenso, and was suitably impressed. However V-M was not very enthralled with Commandant Joubert's hesitancy of attacking Ladysmith, an opinion also held by many Boer leaders. In their defence, some of the Boer leaders didn't want to stretch their defensive forces and those involved with the siege too thinly.

Picture: General George de Villebois-Mareuil

V-M was a popular figure amongst the Boers. He had an interpreter, so could 'communicate'. He had produced a general report for Commandant Joubert, and on his recommendation for the attack on Platrand. The attack was a disaster for the Boers and V-M was not complimentary about the lack of planning, maps and preparation.

V-M was then asked to join Cronje in the Northern Cape – a move he looked forward to as he believed Joubert was more of a politician than a soldier. On arriving in the Northern Cape he found the situation much the same as that which he had just left – a siege and a defensive line, with no ambition to attack the besieged town which after months of being cut off, was 'ripe for the taking'.

He helped with the positioning of the Long Tom which successfully bombed the Grand Hotel in Kimberley. Having attended a number of 'Councils of War' with various Boer Leaders, and having plan after plan put on hold, V-M joined Cronje's convoy on the retreat.

When Cronje decided to make a stand at Paardeberg, V-M, with some of his men departed for Bloemfontein. He again had meetings with various Boer leaders regarding strategies, but to no avail. He left Bloemfontein before it was abandoned without a shot being fired.

The turning point in V-M's life was at a meeting at Kroonstad on 17 March 1900 where 30 senior Boer officers and both Presidents asked him to form the International Legion and become its General. He accepted and soon arrangements were put in place to get all 'foreigners', fighting on the side of the Boers, to Kroonstad, together with supplies and armaments. New foreign volunteers were also arriving in the country and more were being recruited to join the Legion. V-M was now where he wanted to be. He could strategise and make his own plans.

On the night of 24 March 1900 V-M led a column of men out of Kroonstadt to assess the area to find the best route for Lord Roberts's next offensive. He was however in the hands of a guide who seemed to be leading the column nowhere. By 28 March they had reached Hopetown where they exchanged horses and replenished depleted supplies. They departed Hopetown on 1 April and by 3 April had reached a farm Leeuwkop about a three hour ride north of Boshof. His plan was to take Boshof and then move south of Kimberley to blow up the railway line. Information however arrived that Lord Methuen's force had arrived in Hopetown and instead of it being a few hundred men it was 7 000. V-M refused to believe this.



At 9 am on 5 April V-M and his men arrived on the farm Tweefontein, about 8 km from Boshof, and after the night's long ride they decided to rest up. By 10.30 am Lord Methuen was aware of V-M's presence having been informed by 'locals'. V-M became aware of Methuen's force approaching his men at around 1.30 pm. The British attack started at 2 pm and V-M and his men, being totally outnumbered prayed for either rain or nightfall to make their escape. Neither came quickly enough – V-M was struck by a bullet to the heart, which Methuen later reported as being a splinter of a shell fired by a British gun.

V-M's body was taken to Boshof where he was given a full military burial by the British, with V-M's captured men in attendance. An engraved marble stone was placed above the grave which was paid for by Methuen out of his own pocket. His body was exhumed and reburied in the Heroes Acre in Magersfontein in 1971.

Picture: General George de Villebois-Mareuil's tombstone

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) - our blog has regular posts on Anniversaries / Battles / Activities / Births & Deaths / etc.