

Newsletter

August 2020

The beginning of August 1900 saw the second Battle of Silkaatsnek, just west of Pretoria and north-east of today's Hartbeespoort Dam. The Boers, following the first battle on 11 July, occupied the Nek, a strategic pass through the Magaliesberg Mountains. General Hamilton, left Pretoria on 1 August, with a force of 7 600 men, to advance on the Rustenburg district in order to escort Lieutenant-General Baden-Powell's force back to Pretoria. Hamilton travelled on the road to Rustenburg, preceded by Colonel Hickman, with a force of 1 500 mounted infantry. This road was on the southern side of the Magaliesberg which had the steep cliffs of the mountains on the right – known as the 'moot' side of the mountain. Another force, under the command of Brigadier-General Mahon, left at the same time but followed the flatter terrain on the northern side of the Magaliesberg. Communication between the two forces was poor and Hamilton, having received no communication, assumed that Mahon was experiencing difficulties. Hamilton decided to check what was happening, and the nearest way through the mountain range was at Silkaatsnek.

The British believed that the Nek was lightly held by the Boers and on the morning of 2 August a brigade of Hamilton's force, under the command of Lieutenant-General Cunningham, was ordered to attack the Nek. The Boers who were on the summit of the Magaliesberg had sight of both forces advancing towards the Nek and were aware of Cunningham's preparation to attack the position. Heavy artillery bombarded the Boer position, and whilst under the cover of fire, the British troops made steady progress. By early afternoon the Boers were in retreat, having suffered 12 killed and a number of their wagons and 17 men captured. British casualties were 40, inclusive of six killed.

The then Western Transvaal, now North West Province, saw most of the action in the early to middle parts of August 1900. On 4 August the Boers commenced with a siege on Elands River, a British garrison between Zeerust and Rustenburg, on the important supply route between Mafeking and Pretoria. The siege was to last until 16 August when the relief force, commanded by General Kitchener arrived. The garrison defended by just over 500 troops from Australia and Rhodesia were the target of over 2 000 Boers, mainly for needed supplies.



During the siege and the number of attacks by the Boers, 12 soldiers were killed and 36 wounded. However, over 1 500 horses, mules and oxen were killed. Today the site commemorates these animals with a memorial recently unveiled.

Picture: Memorial at Elands River

In the Eastern Transvaal, now Mpumalanga, Roberts' force was again advancing on the Boers who were steadily retreating along the railway line to Nelspruit / Delagoa Bay. General Buller was making progress from Natal and the meeting of the two forces was not far off. The Boers were planning a stand, similar to that at Diamond Hill in order to halt the British progress. The British progress towards this Boer final stand was as follows:

- On 12 August, Buller entered Ermelo unopposed.
- On 15 August Buller's Natal Field Force made contact with Roberts' force at Twyfelaar, west of Carolina. Major-General French's Cavalry Division was on the nearby farm Strathrea, and together with Buller's force they waited for supplies and orders. Together with French's troops they numbered about 13 000. Major-General Pole-Carew had another 7 500 troops within call on the Bronkhorstspuit / Middelburg line.
- On 21 August Buller's force left Twyfelaar and made their way to van Wyk's Vlei, a farm about 20 km north of Twyfelaar. When his force approached the farm, Buller sent Major-General Dundonald's mounted brigade ahead to clear the ridge of possible Boers. However, the Boers occupying the ridge opened fire on the British and after a brief engagement the British retired for the night. The following day Buller advanced north eastward towards van Wyk's Vlei, covered on his left flank by French's cavalry.
- On 23 August French and Buller advanced towards Geluk farm. Whilst working their way through rough ground beneath the southern end of the Geluk ridge they were fired upon by a party of Boers, killing an officer and wounding another officer and two men. During the night Buller fortified the Geluk ridge.
- On 24 August Lord Roberts left Pretoria for Belfast and arrived at noon the following day where he met with Buller, French and Pole-Carew to give his orders for the imminent attack on the Boers. Buller suggested moving north towards Waaikraal and Dalmanutha from where the attack should be launched. Roberts agreed to this and decided to employ the cavalry on the opposite flank. After a number of skirmishes with the Boers on 25 and 26 August Buller informed Roberts of his intention to assault Bergendal the following day.



Picture: Memorial to the Battle of Bergendal

- At dawn on 27 August the artillery were instructed to shell the north of Bergendal and the northern slopes of the ridge, thus attacking in reverse any of the enemy who might attempt to reinforce Bergendal and the ridge behind it. The infantry were planned to attack the farm from the south. Orders were carried out successfully. At 11 am, following the initial bombardment, bombardment of the Bergendal Kopje began from a distance of under 4 000 yards. It was the most intense bombardment of the war – 19 shells falling every minute and from Belfast a third 4.7-inch gun shelled the back of the position at Bergendal. 74 ZARPS (South African Police Corp) bore the brunt of the attack by 38 British guns. Rifle Brigade moved to within 800 yards of the Kopjes when the surviving ZARPS' opened fire.
- Meanwhile the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers had come under attack sooner than the Rifle Brigade. Their approach involved climbing a rocky spur which took some 40 minutes to negotiate, stopping often to fire back on the enemy. Finally the Rifle Brigade closed the one flank and the Inniskilling Fusiliers the other. Once the Boer position at Bergendal had been taken, the Boers retreated. This was the end of the last set-piece battle of the war. Guerrilla type warfare commenced for the next 21 months until peace was finally declared.
- Casualties were 12 ZARPS killed, 28 wounded or captured. British casualties were three officers and 20 men killed, five officers and 96 men wounded and 12 missing. Private Durrant of the 2nd Rifle Brigade was awarded Victoria Cross.
- After the battle General Botha retreated north east towards Lydenburg with about 2 000 men whilst Commandants Fourie and Smuts headed south of the railway line to defend the mountainous approaches to Barberton. President Kruger, with his ministers, who had been stationed at Waterval Onder, left by train for Nelspruit. General Viljoen was left with the Krugersdorp and Johannesburg commandos to defend the railway line.
- After a few days in Belfast, French was sent south then east to take Barberton. Pole-Carew was sent down the route of the railway line, whilst Buller proceeded north east to follow Botha. As the Boers retreated, 1 800 British prisoners were released from Nooitgedacht – today known as Airlie.

During the two August months of the South African War (1900 and 1901), seven V.C's were awarded:

1900

Pvt. W. House	Royal Berkshire Regiment	Silkaatsnek
Sgt. B.T.T. Lawrence	17 th Lancers	Essenbosch Farm
Sgt. H. Hampton	Liverpool Regiment	van Wyk's Vlei (near Bergendal)
Cpl. H J. Knight	Liverpool Regiment	van Wyk's Vlei (near Bergendal)
Pvt. W.E. Heaton	Liverpool Regiment	Leeukloof Farm (near Bergendal)
Pvt. A.E. Durrant	The Rifle Brigade	Bergendaal

1901

S.Maj. A. Young	Cape Police	Ruiter's Kraal
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Traditionally these newsletters have ended with the acknowledgement to a personality from the Boer War whose birth or death anniversary happened during the month of the newsletter. This month I acknowledge two individuals.

Anniversary of the death of Major-General Sir Horace Lockwood Smith-Dorrien – 12 August 1930

Major-General Smith-Dorrien was one of the few survivors of the massacre of Isandlwana on 22 January 1879. Of the 782 ordinary British troops present at the Battle, 55 survived. Of the 57 Officers present, only five survived. In addition, 133 European Colonial troops and 343 African soldiers lost their lives.



In the book *Isandlwana*, by Adrian Greaves, Smith-Dorrien in his evidence after the battle states "I was riding a broken kneed old crock which did not belong to me."

An extract from his obituary states "Smith-Dorrien, who had been a fine long-distance runner at school, succeeded in evading on foot the savages in pursuit of him."

I think, if the latter were the truth, that 3 000 metre time (the distance from the camp to the Buffalo River) would still be standing today.

Through actions in trying to save the lives of fellow soldiers he was recommended for the Victoria Cross which was not awarded.

Picture: Major-General Sir Smith-Dorrien

Smith-Dorrien was born on 26 May 1858 and was educated at Harrow. On 26 February 1876 he entered the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902) he made his way to South Africa and on 2 February 1900, Lord Roberts put him in command of the 19th Brigade. This brigade took part in the Great Flank March, the campaign that combined the relief of Kimberley with the capture of Bloemfontein and Pretoria. Smith-Dorrien's brigade was present at the battle of Paardeberg (18-27 February 1900), where Boer General Cronje and over 4 000 Boers surrendered. He then took part in the advance on Pretoria, via Bloemfontein.

He was present at the battle of Sanna's Post (31 March 1900), and was responsible for the orderly retreat when the British convoy was ambushed. He took part in the Battle of Leliefontein on 7 November 1900 where three soldiers of the Royal Canadian Dragoons were awarded Victoria Crosses for their actions in saving the guns.

On 6 February 1901 Smith-Dorrien's camp was attacked during the night by a Boer force commanded by General Botha. The British managed to reorganise themselves from the surprise attack and the Boers retreated at 4.30 am. Smith-Dorrien's mounted brigade were prevented from pursuing the Boers, their horses having stampeded during the attack. During this attack Sergeant W.B. Traynor of the West Yorkshire Regiment was awarded a Victoria Cross for bravery.

Smith-Dorrien was mentioned three times in despatches in the London Gazette for action during the war, and Ian Hamilton wrote highly of his performance and his grasp of the men's morale under his command. He served with distinction during WW1. However his WW1 command was marred by continual conflict with Field Marshall John French. This conflict has resulted in many papers and opinions.

Smith-Dorrien died on 12 August 1930 following injuries sustained in a car accident. He was 72 years old.

Anniversary of the death of General Louis Botha – 27 August 1919



Boer General Louis Botha died on 27 August 1919.

He was a South African politician who was the first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa.

A Boer War hero during the South African War (1899-1902) where the Boers fought against the British Empire, he eventually fought to have South Africa become a British Dominion.

Botha grew up in the Orange Free State but his family later moved to Natal. He purchased a farm in the Vryheid district and married the daughter of an Irish immigrant.

In 1888 Botha became politically active in the Transvaal and held a number of posts before he was elected to the Volksraad (parliament) in 1897.

Picture: General Louis Botha



Rising tensions between Great Britain and the Boers, increased by the failed Jameson Raid, led to the outbreak of the South African War in 1899. Botha rose rapidly in the Boer army to command the southern force besieging Ladysmith. While leading an ambush, he captured an armoured train where Winston Churchill was among the prisoners. When Piet Joubert, the Commandant General of the Transvaal forces, died in March 1900 due to injuries received, Botha was named to succeed him. At the Battle of Spioen Kop, Botha was one of three future Prime Ministers to be on the summit of the mountain, Winston Churchill and Mahatma Ghandi being the others.

Despite his talents as a general, he could not hold back the overwhelming numbers of British reinforcements introduced to the conflict. After the surrender of a large Boer army at Paardeberg, the fall of Pretoria and the defeat at Belfast, Botha organized a guerrilla campaign, but Britain eventually forced him to negotiate. On 31 May 1902 he was one of the signatories at the Peace of Vereeniging.

After the war, Botha returned to politics and in 1904 helped form a new party in the Transvaal, Het Volk ('The People'). When Het Volk won the Transvaal elections of February 1907, Botha became prime minister. Botha and his colleague Jan Smuts, showing political realism, downplayed the fostering of Afrikaner (Boer) interests and stressed conciliation with Britain. The National Convention of 1910 chose Botha as the first prime minister of the Union of South Africa which amalgamated the British colonies (the Cape and Natal) and the former Boer republics (Orange Free State and the Transvaal) into one political entity.

Botha's policy of white conciliation provoked opposition from extremist Afrikaner groups led by J.B.M. Hertzog, who formed the National Party in early 1914. Botha's support for Britain after the start of World War I in 1914 led to further splits among Afrikaners and provoked the rebellion led by former Boer Generals C. de Wet and C.F. Beyers. One point of contention was the use of South African troops to attack German interests in Africa, including the mobilization against German troops in German South West Africa – now Namibia. The German defeat there in 1915 at the hands of a campaign that was personally led by Botha further exacerbated the situation. South African troops were also sent to German East Africa (now Burundi, Rwanda, mainland Tanzania, and part of Mozambique), Egypt, and the Western Front in France. Before his death in 1919, Botha participated in the Paris Peace Conference and advocated leniency for the former enemies.
(Acknowledgement – Wikipedia)

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

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