

Newsletter

August 2021

In my August 2020 newsletter I went into detail about the Second Battle of Silkaatsnek, the Siege at Elands River, the build up to the Battle of Bergendal, and then the battle itself, which turned out to be the last 'set-piece' battle of the war – but there were a lot of other 'interactions' happening in South Africa during the two months of August (1900 and 1901) of the South African War (1899-1902).

Before I get into these events, I do a lot of research into British soldiers who were wounded in action and taken Prisoner of War in order to substantiate casualty figures for battles that I am busy compiling booklets for. Unfortunately I only have a hard copy of Alexander Palmer's book 'The Boer War Casualty Roll 1899-1902' and I page through all 46 000 entries to get my stats. I recently came across the following entry – "*McGuinness M. 4084, Private – died – Lydenburg – 21/12/01 – Alcoholic Poisoning – 1st Royal Irish Regiment.*" I spent some time looking at this entry and wondered – was he part of the Guinness family? – After all, he was with an Irish regiment. Was he starting his Christmas celebrations early? Or had he just had enough – of both the war and what he had imbibed – the latter is certainly a given? I wonder if any of the readers has his Queen South Africa Medal for service in the War?

August 1900 – on 7 August – General Buller's force, moving up from Natal, was attacked by the Boers outside the small town of Amersfoort, 50 km south of Ermelo. They were en-route to join up with Lord Roberts' force who were in pursuit of the Boers after the Battle of Diamond Hill.



On the same day in the Western Transvaal (now Northwest Province), near the town of Parys, General de Wet's Boers engaged a column under the command of Lieutenant-General Methuen and after a brief engagement, the Boers withdrew. British casualties were three killed and 17 wounded.

Also on 7 August, in the Free State, on a farm 15 km south of Vredefort, Sergeant Tom Lawrence of the 17th Lancers, whilst on a routine patrol, earned his Victoria Cross for extreme bravery when rescuing a dismounted fellow soldier who had been shot and wounded by Boers, and keeping the Boers at bay until help arrived.

Picture: Sergeant Tom Lawrence VC

On 14 August Strathcona's Horse arrived in the town of Carolina, driving the Boers off and destroying their supply wagons. Two days later, the most westerly pass through the Magaliesberg, Magato's Nek was taken by Methuen.

There were four major passes through the Magaliesberg Mountains (Magato's Nek, Olifants Nek, Commando Nek and Silkaats Nek) which were strategic to both the Boers and the British, and readers of these newsletters will be familiar with references to them.

On 17 August a minor skirmish took place at Kameeldrift, 20 km north-east of Pretoria when Boer commandos tried to occupy some low koppies, which were occupied by the British during the Battle of Diamond Hill, but were driven off by the British.

On 21 August Sergeant Harry Hampton and Corporal James Huntley Knight both earned their Victoria Crosses for bravery when the Boers ambushed the regiment near van Wyk's Vlei, 20 km north-west of Carolina in the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga).

These two Victoria Crosses formed part of a total of three awarded to the Liverpool Regiment in three days.



Picture: Sergeant Harry Hampton, Corporal James Huntley Knight & Private William Heaton – Liverpool Regiment

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. Private William Heaton of the Liverpool Regiment became the third soldier of the Regiment to earn his Victoria Cross, for extreme bravery during this action.

On 25 August, on the farm Kalkfontein, 5 km south of Zeerust, Lieutenant-Colonel Little's cavalry brigade, who had just left Zeerust for Pretoria, were attacked by the Boers. Little was injured in this skirmish.

On the last day of August 1900, the Battle of Quaggafontein (Battle of the Month – www.battletoursza.com) was fought. British casualties during the battle were 11 killed and 21 wounded.

A few other interesting stories from August 1900:

On 10 August, Lieutenant Hans Cordua, a German Officer of the Staats Artillery was arrested for plotting to kidnap Lord Roberts and kill the Officers with him. Cordua had taken the oath of neutrality and remained in Pretoria after the town had fallen to the British. When Cordua was arrested he was dressed in British khaki and had in his possession a map of the layout of Roberts' premises. He was court martialled and charged with wearing a British uniform under false pretences, breaking the oath of neutrality, and master minding the kidnapping of a British Officer. He was condemned to face a firing squad and was shot dead on 24 August 1900.

On 30 August the British forces occupied Waterval Onder and released about 2 000 British prisoners of war who had been held at the nearby camp of Nooitgedacht. Ben Viljoen in his book 'My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War' records (page 118) – *"The Boer position at and near Nooitgedacht was unique. Here was a great camp in which 2 000 English prisoners-of-war were confined, but in the confusion the majority of their Boer guards had fled to Nelspruit. I found only 15 burghers armed with Martini-Henry rifles left to look after 2 000 prisoners. Save for 'Tommy' being such a helpless individual when he has nobody to give him orders and to think for him, those 2 000 men might have become a great source of danger to us had they had the sense to disarm their fifteen custodians and to destroy the railway, they would have been able not only to have deprived my commando of provisions and ammunition, but also to have captured a 'Long Tom'."* This all took place two days after the Battle of Bergendal – the Boers were in full retreat.

August 1901 saw Jan Smuts and his invading burghers in skirmishes in the Northern Cape. At Hoopstad, on 1 August, Smuts had six of his men killed.

With the guerrilla war in full swing, skirmishes were taking place almost on a daily basis. Part of Steinaecker's Horse, a colonial unit, were surrounded at Mpisane Fort, a British fort in the far Northern Transvaal, and forced to surrender when their commander, Captain Francis was killed.

On 23 August the Bushveldt Carbineers executed eight prisoners and then murdered a German Missionary, the Reverend Heese, as he was suspected of being a witness to the executions.

Breaker Morant who was serving with the Bushveldt Carbineers, was arrested and court-martialled for war crimes – one of the first such prosecutions in British military history. He was found guilty and sentenced to death.

Morant was acquitted of the Heese murder but his sentence for murdering Floris Visser, a wounded prisoner of war, and eight victims at Elim Hospital were implemented by a firing squad from the Cameron Highlanders.



Picture: Lieutenant Harry Breaker Morant

On 31 August Commandant-General Botha was forced to strip Commandant Tobias Smuts of his rank who was then to serve the rest of the war as an ordinary burgher. Commandant Smuts was a very distant relative of Jan Smuts and had overstepped the mark by burning the town of Bremersdorp. The Executive Council of the Zuid Afrikaanse Republic ordered Botha to investigate the conduct of Smuts, and his authority to destroy the town as they regarded Smuts' conduct as contrary to the practices of civilised warfare. Botha was in sync with their sentiments and demoted Smuts. It is ironic that Botha had sent Smuts across the border into Swaziland to deal with

Steinaecker's Horse, who were 'doing as they pleased' and had arrested the Swazi Prince Dlamini, and were holding him captive.

For those readers who are interested in the South African War (1899-1902), and who are interested in the Colonial Regiments which were established to perform tasks that were a 'little out of the ordinary', then a read of the books Steinaecker's Horseman, and The Bushveldt Carbineers and the Pietersburg Light Horse, both by William (Bill) Woolmore are highly recommended.

During the two August months of the South African War (1900 & 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	Bergendal

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 an individual that I am sure not too many of the readers will have heard of:

Anniversary of the birth of Lieutenant Hugh Stewart McCorquodale – August 1875

As I have mentioned before, I have a huge interest in the Battle of Spioen Kop. Not only is my birthday on 24 January, the anniversary of the battle, but I have been a Liverpool supporter all my life, and I am sure that most readers know that there is a stand at Anfield, called 'The Kop' – named after the famous battle. I also have a number of medals in my collection to men who were at the battle, and men who might have been at the battle.

Deneys Reitz, who was a Boer fighter at the battle, in his book 'Commando' says – *"There cannot have been many battlefields where there was such an Accumulation of horrors within so small a compass."*

In doing some research on Officers killed in the South African War (1899-1902), I came across the following story and waited for this month to be able to quote from Mildred Dooner's book 'The Last Post', on Lieutenant McCorquodale. This is what is recorded on page 253, and verified in the book 'Churchill Wanted Dead or Alive', by Churchill's granddaughter, Celia Sandys on page 165.

"Lieutenant Hugh Stewart McCorquodale, Thornycroft's Mounted Infantry, was killed in action at Spioen Kop on 24 January 1900.

He was born in August 1875 and educated at Harrow, where he was in the school football team. From Harrow he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, and took his degree in 1897. He was fond of all sports, shooting, hunting and fishing. He had intended joining his brothers in business, but when the war broke out went to South Africa and joined Thornycroft's Mounted Infantry on 23 January 1900.



Picture: Lieutenant Hugh Stewart McCorquodale

In the battle the next day he and his men were exposed to a terrific flank fire. Mr. Winston Churchill states that the night before Spioen Kop, when crossing the pontoon bridge over the Tugela, he heard his name called, recognised the face of a boy he had known at Harrow; the boy was Lieutenant McCorquodale, who said he had just arrived and hoped 'to get a job'.

Next day Mr. Churchill heard that some-one who could not be identified had been found leaning forward on his rifle, dead. A pair of field glasses, broken by a bullet, bore the name McCorquodale.

Joined in the evening, killed at dawn, gallant fellow, he had soon got his job; the great sacrifice had been required of the Queen's latest recruit. Lieutenant McCorquodale is buried on the field of battle where he fell."



Picture: Mass Grave on top of Spioen Kop



Picture: Memorial cross in Wales

Dooner's book goes on to make reference to Lieutenant Hill-Trevor (page 174), which states – *"At the time of his death he held a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Shropshire Yeomanry. At Spioen Kop his section of Thornycroft's Mounted Infantry was exposed to a terrific flank fire, and he and all his men and Lieutenant McCorquodale were killed."*

At dawn on 25 January the Boers did not reclaim their positions, and unknown to Thornycroft, the battle was as good as won. But Thornycroft's nerve was shattered. He had spent 16 hours on the kop doing the job of a Brigadier-General in total absence of instructions from Warren. As night fell on 24 January he ordered an unauthorised withdrawal from Spioen Kop after reporting that the soldiers had no water and ammunition was running short. His reasons for withdrawing were that without artillery support to counter the heavy Boer artillery fire, there was no possibility of defending the position and the extreme difficulty of digging trenches on the summit of Spioen Kop left the British soldiers completely exposed.

The British suffered 243 fatalities during the battle and approximately 1 250 were either wounded or captured.

Again, I wonder if any of the readers has Lieutenant Hugh Stewart McCorquodale's Queen South Africa Medal for service in the war in their collection?

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

Allan Gordon