

Newsletter

December 2020

December 1899 was all about relieving the towns of Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking. Lieutenant-General Methuen, who had been injured in the battle of Modder River, resumed command of the force making their way to Kimberley. The Boers made a further attack on the station at Enslin to try and disrupt the British supply route. The Battle of Magersfontein turned into a huge victory for the Boers. General de la Rey had deviated from his battle plan of occupying high ground and had dug trenches to await the attack from the British. The British bombed the mountains at Magersfontein, thinking that the Boers were there, before commencing with their attack. The Highland Brigade led the attack and were 'decimated'. The British suffered close on 300 killed and 700 wounded in the battle that lasted the whole day.

On the Natal front, the British neutralised the Long Tom on Gun Hill on the eastern perimeter of Ladysmith in a surprise attack. This was followed by another surprise attack on the Boer artillery position on Vaalkop, later to be called Surprise Hill. The battle of Colenso, on 15 December, turned into a complete disaster for the British. Ten guns were captured by the Boers after they had moved too far in advance of the supporting infantry. The British casualties were 144 killed and 754 wounded. Seven V.C.'s were awarded for gallantry in trying to save the guns.



On 10 December, General Gatacre was defeated at the battle of Stormberg, a railway junction close to the town of Molteno in the Eastern Cape.

The attack was ill planned and because of this it lasted for little more than an hour.

British casualties were 25 killed and 103 wounded.

Gatacre, after the retreat, realised that he had left over 600 of his men behind, to be taken prisoner by the Boers.

Soon after this defeat Gatacre returned to England.

Picture: General Gatacre

The defeats at Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso were labelled as 'Black Week' in the UK press.

Activity at the Siege of Mafeking was sporadic. However on Boxing Day 1899 Colonel Baden Powell launched an attack on a Boer position 3 km north of the city – Game Tree Fort. The British lost 25 killed and 24 wounded. Two V.C.'s were awarded for gallantry.

December 1900 saw the sieges being a thing of the past, but now we were into the guerrilla phase of the war. General de la Rey ambushed a British convoy of 260 wagons, making off with 120, and much needed supplies, before re-enforcements arrived. This ambush, with the resulting supplies, helped the Boers to successfully plan the attack on Nooitgedacht on 13 December where they inflicted 80 killed and 186 wounded on the British. The Boers made off with 70 wagons.



On 29 December, General Viljoen launched a surprise attack on the British position at Helvetia, close to Waterval Boven.

Three of the British fortifications surrendered without much resistance, however the force on Kings Kopje held out for four hours before surrendering.

British losses were 11 killed 31 wounded, and 251 taken prisoner. The 4.7 inch Naval Gun, the Lady Roberts was also captured by the Boers.

For those with an interest in this aspect and area of the war, this is a good battle to study, along with its aftermath.

Picture: General Viljoen

December 1901 saw the formation of the National Scouts Corp, made up of burghers who had surrendered and were convinced that they were helping save their country from the devastation of the scorched earth and concentration camp policies introduced by Kitchener. They also believed that they could accelerate the end of the war. General de Wet's brother was one of their officers. Boer General de Wet engaged a British force at Tygerkloof near Harrismith on 18 December, and two days later Boer General Wessels attacked a British force at Tafelkop, 25 km east of Frankfort. In this action the Boers captured the guns but destroyed them, before retreating, when British re-enforcements arrived. British casualties were 33 killed and 45 wounded.

A battle which has fascinated me for some time is the battle of Tweefontein – also known as Groenkop and/or Christmas Kop. The Boers were unhappy about fighting on Sundays or Religious Holidays due to their strict religious beliefs. (This battle, although not as high profile as some of the 'siege' battles, is the 'Battle of the Month' on our website – www.battletoursza.com).

Tweefontein was a farm west of Harrismith, and General de Wet, after having reconnoitred the British camp on the mountain (Groenkop), planned the battle for 25 December 1901. It was a surprise attack on the British, from the western steep slope which the British thought improbable. The Boers climbed the slopes in socks so as not to make a noise. The battle lasted just over an

hour, in the early hours of the morning, and the British lost 55 killed, 86 wounded and 200 prisoners. De Wet made off with 20 wagons, with much needed supplies and ammunition, and 500 horses and mules. The prisoners were set free in neighbouring Basutoland the following day.

Towards the end of the year, General Smuts who was operating in the Northern Cape, had built up a force of 3 000 men and he decided to reorganise his force into commandos with regional responsibilities.

During the three December months of the South African War (1899, 1900 and 1901), 15 V.C.'s were awarded:

1899

Capt. E.B.B. Towse	Gordon Highlanders	Magersfontein
Cpl. J.D.F. Shaul	Highland Light Infantry	Magersfontein
Lt. H.E.M. Douglas	Royal Army Medical Corp	Magersfontein
Capt. H.N. Schofield	Royal Field Artillery	Colenso
Capt. W.N. Congreve	Rifle Brigade	Colenso
Capt. H.L. Reed	Royal Field Artillery	Colenso
Lt. F.S. Roberts	Kings Royal Rifle Corp	Colenso
Maj. W. Babbie	Royal Army Medical Corp	Colenso
Cpl. G.E. Nurse	Royal Field Artillery	Colenso
Pvt. G. Ravenhill	Royal Scots Fusiliers	Colenso
Sgt. H.R. Martineau	Protectorate Regiment	Mafeking
Tpr. H.E. Ramsden	Protectorate Regiment	Mafeking

1900

Sgt. D.D. Farmer	Cameron Highlanders	Nooitgedacht
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1901

Sur.Capt. T.J. Crean	Imperial Light Horse	Tygerskloof (Free State)
Shoe.Smith. A.E. Ind	Royal Horse Artillery	Tafelkop (Free State)

Anniversary of the birth of General Sir Redvers Buller – 7 December 1839

Redvers Henry Buller was born on December 7, 1839 at the family estate of Downes, in Devon in the UK. After completing his schooling at Eaton, he purchased a commission as an officer in the 60th Rifles in 1858.

During the Anglo-Ashanti Campaign of 1873-74 at the battle of Ordashu he was one of the 160 men wounded. At the end of this campaign he was promoted to Major. In 1879 he was awarded the Victoria Cross in the Anglo-Zulu War for rescuing a number of comrades while under fire. The citation for this award reads:

For his gallant conduct at the retreat at Inhlobana, on the 28th March, 1879, in having assisted, whilst hotly pursued by Zulus, in rescuing Captain C. D'Arcy, of the Frontier Light Horse, who was retiring on foot, and carrying him on his horse until he overtook the rear guard. Also for having on the same date and under the same circumstances, conveyed Lieutenant C. Everitt, of the Frontier Light Horse, whose horse had been killed under him, to a place of safety. Later on, Colonel Buller, in the same manner, saved a trooper of the Frontier Light Horse, whose horse was completely exhausted, and who otherwise would have been killed by the Zulus, who were within 80 yards of him. (Reference – Wikipedia)



During this conflict he caught the eye of his superiors and after further service and promotions following involvement in Egypt, Sudan and Ireland, he was promoted to General in 1896.

In 1898 he was appointed as head of troops stationed at Aldershot. This appointment seemed to indicate that his successful military career was winding down, so it came as a surprise to not only Buller himself, who was now 60 years old, when he was appointed head of the army being sent by Britain to South Africa at the outbreak of the South African War in 1899.

He was to command a force of over 50 000 men – the largest Britain had ever sent abroad at that stage.

Picture: General Sir Redvers Buller

Buller commanded the forces in the battles to relieve Ladysmith and much has been written about his tactics and the lack of success in many of these battles. The Boers' method of fighting was completely different to the methods used by the enemy in the wars in which Britain had been involved throughout the 19th Century and it took time for the British to adapt.

To relieve Ladysmith Buller tried to cross the Tugela River at Colenso with 21 000 men, but the Boers were well dug-in and well concealed. Not only did they drive the British back, but they inflicted heavy casualties. To add to Buller's humiliation, he was forced to abandon ten artillery pieces which had strayed too far forwards – something for which he would never be forgiven by many.



In an attempt to rescue the guns, a young officer, Lieutenant Frederick Roberts was mortally wounded.

He was the only son of Field Marshal Lord Roberts who was in command of the force trying to relieve Kimberley.

There was no 'love lost' between Buller and Roberts, and this tragedy aggravated this relationship.

At the end of this disaster, Buller sent a poorly worded telegram to General White in Ladysmith admitting that the relief of Ladysmith could be beyond him.

This telegram, once made public, would lead to the end of Buller's military career.

Picture: the grave of Lieutenant Frederick Roberts at Chieveley Military Cemetery

Due to concerns about his performance and negative reports from the field Buller was replaced in January 1900 as overall commander in South Africa by Lord Roberts. After the relief of Ladysmith, Buller was successful in defeating the Boers at battles in the Biggarsberg, at Laing's Nek and in the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) around Belfast. His last major involvement was a victory at the Battle of Bergendal in the war's last set-piece action before he was recalled to the UK at the end of October 1900.

Buller returned home to a hero's welcome, his early setbacks largely forgotten – or so it seemed. The public in the UK were starting to ask questions about the war in South Africa. The continuing guerrilla activities by the Boers were becoming a concern to the Government in power and the Minister for War, St. John Brodrick and Lord Roberts sought a scapegoat. The opportunity to find a scapegoat arose when Buller publically answered a critical newspaper article in The Times, by journalist Leo Amery, in a speech in October 1901 at a lunch given by the Queen's Westminster Volunteers. Brodrick and Roberts saw their opportunity and, summonsed Buller to a meeting on 17 October. At the meeting Brodrick demanded Buller's resignation on the grounds of breaching military protocol and discipline. Buller refused to resign and requested a court martial and an



audience with the King. Both requests were refused and he was dismissed on half pay on 22 October 1901.

To quote from Owen Coetzer's book, 'The Anglo-Boer War – The Road to Infamy 1899-1902' (which is a must read for anyone interested in the South African War) – *"And so", says his official biographer, Colonel C.H. Melville, "nothing was said of the good work he had done during the first weeks of his command in South Africa, nothing of his splendid administrative work, nothing of his skilful manoeuvres in the summer and autumn of 1900."*

Later he laments: "It is worth remembering that Sir Redvers had every right to feel a deeply injured man. Not for any dereliction of duty, but for one error of judgement he had been publically degraded, and all his good work in the previous 40 years ignored." (page 278)

Just to end with a quote from the Introduction of Owen Coetzer's book – *"But, if I am able to take the reader into the heart, and the unemotional official mind, of this war which has often erroneously been dubbed 'the last of the gentlemen's wars', I have accomplished what I set out to do. And that is to bring out in bold gory detail how Tommy went to war – ill-equipped, ignorant of local conditions, scared stiff of South African lightning, but ready to fight the Boer."* (page 2)

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

Allan Gordon