

Newsletter

December 2021

December 1899 was all about the sieges of Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking where the Boers believed that the tactics of sieges adopted in 1880/81, where after Majuba, the British signed a peace treaty, could be repeated.

In 1880/81 the Boers had besieged the British garrisons in the towns of Pretoria, Potchefstroom, Rustenburg, Marabastadt and Lydenburg. However, 20 years later, gold had been discovered, and there was now more at stake. Britain had thousands of men in the field and these forces were advancing on Ladysmith and Kimberley, engaging the Boers, but suffering huge losses along the way. The Battles of Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso were all fought during the week of 10 to 17 December, and because of Boer victories, this week was referred to as 'Black Week'. In total 2 780 British soldiers were killed, wounded and/or captured. Many questions were being asked in Parliament in London.

December 1899 also saw Winston Churchill escaping after only four weeks in captivity, from the Staats Model School in Pretoria.

December 1900 saw the sieges being a thing of the past, but now the war was into the start of the guerrilla phase. The Boer Generals had divided the Transvaal into regions and had assigned the Western Transvaal to General de la Rey, the Eastern Transvaal to General Ben Viljoen, and the South Eastern Transvaal to General Louis Botha.

On 3 December 1900 General de la Rey ambushed a British convoy on its way from the Rietfontein base to Rustenburg, and obtained much needed supplies and provisions.



Ten days later he attacked General Clements' base at Nooitgedacht (Battle of the Month – www.battletoursza.com) inflicting huge losses on the British forces with 80 killed and 186 wounded.

Picture: Battle of Nooitgedacht – Boers raiding Clements' camp

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.

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.

The same month saw two battles fought in the Eastern Free State. The first, the Battle of Tafel Kop, east of the town of Frankfort was fought on 20 December, with the British column, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Damant mistakenly taking a Boer commando for Yeomanry, until it was too late. The subsequent battle cost the British 33 killed and 45 wounded. The Boers captured the guns, but being unable to remove them, decided to destroy them.

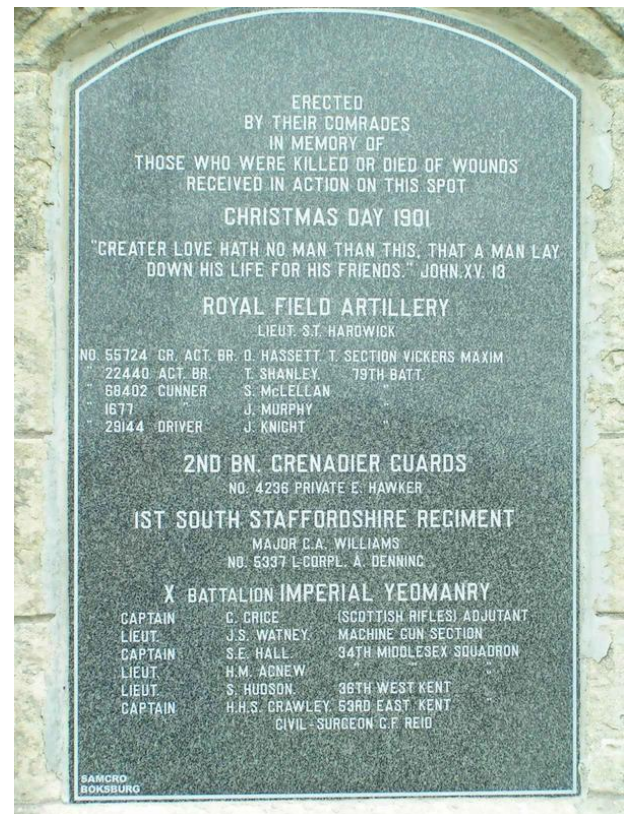
The second was the Battle of Tweefontein, where the Boers, despite their religious beliefs, uncharacteristically attacked a British camp on Christmas Day.

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. It has been recorded that many of the British were stripped of their clothing, as by that stage of the conflict, many Boers were dressed in rags and needed clothing.

Picture: Battle of Tweefontein Memorial Stone



Outside of the South African War (1899-1902), but with South African interest, the Battle of Blood River was fought on 16 December 1838, where in revenge to attacks on the trekking Boers, and the massacre of Piet Retief and his party by the Zulus, just over 450 Boers repelled an attack by many thousands of Zulu warriors. It is estimated that over 3 000 Zulu warriors were killed, with

the Ncome River becoming red with blood – hence the name of the battle. 16 December, since then has been recognised with 'Public Holiday' status, being named Dingaan's Day, the Day of the Covenant, and more recently Reconciliation Day.

I often make reference to the 1st Boer War which was fought in 1880/81, culminating in the signing of a Peace Treaty after the Battle of Majuba. On 20 December 1880, the first engagement of the war took place at Bronkhorstspuit, a town 50km east of Pretoria.

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)

Victoria Cross of the Month

Sergeant D.D. Farmer – 1st Battalion Cameron Highlanders



Donald Dickson Farmer was born on 28 May 1877 at Kelso, Roxburghshire, Scotland.

He joined the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders in March 1892 and served with the 1st Battalion in the Sudan Campaign, being present at the Battles of Atbara and Khartoum and the affair at Fashoda.

In South Africa he served with the Mounted Infantry Company.

Picture : Sergeant Donald Farmer – V.C.

Lord Kitchener sent General Clements to clear the Magaliesberg, between Pretoria and Rustenburg, of Boers. He camped on the farm Nooitgedacht, overlooked by the mountains and a Nek, which would be difficult to defend.

At 3.45 a.m. on 13 December 1900 they were attacked by combined commandos under Generals de la Rey, Beyers and Smuts.

While Beyers attacked over the mountain from the north-west, Smuts came from the north-east and de la Rey from the south-west. The latter initially attacked the Mounted Infantry camp, in which Sergeant Farmer slept. The commander, Brigadier-General Norton Legge, ran from his tent and was killed. The Boers also suffered casualties and withdrew in order to coordinate the assault better.

Beyers attacked the British on the mountain and by 7 a.m. had overrun their positions. The main attack on the Nooitgedacht camp then commenced.

Citation:

During the attack on General Clements camp at Nooitgedacht, on 13 December 1900, Lieutenant Sandilands, Cameron Highlanders, with fifteen men, went to the assistance of a picquet (picket) which was heavily engaged, most of the men having been killed or wounded. The enemy, who were hidden by trees, opened fire on the party at a range of about 20 yards, killing two and wounding five, including Lieutenant Sandilands. Sergeant Farmer at once went to the officer, who was perfectly helpless, and carried him away under a very heavy and close fire to a place of comparative safety, after which he returned to the firing line, and was eventually taken prisoner.

(London Gazette April 12, 1901)



According to Lionel Wulfohn in his book 'Rustenburg at War' – *"Sergeant Donald Farmer of the 1st Battalion Cameron Highlanders was awarded the VC for his gallantry in assisting a wounded Officer to a field ambulance, and then returning to the front line distributing bandoliers of cartridges, which he had taken from the dead and wounded, to those who could still handle a rifle."*

Lieutenant Sandilands had been shot through the liver and both shoulders. Sergeant Farmer was the first Cameron Highlander to win the V.C. He was presented with his V.C. by the Duke of York on 14 August 1901 in Pietermaritzburg. In 1903 he married Helen Bonnar and they had a son and three daughters.

Donald Farmer became a Colour-Sergeant in February 1905 and was later commissioned, eventually retiring as a Lieutenant-Colonel. He achieved his wish of attending the V.C. and G.C. (George Cross) Reunion in June 1956, before his sight failed him completely. He died in Liverpool, Lancashire, on 23 December 1965, aged 88.

Acknowledgement – Ian Uys

Anniversary of the death of Boer General Christiaan Frederick Beyers – 8 December 1914



Christiaan Beyers was born in the Cape Colony on 23 September 1869 and was educated at Victoria College in Stellenbosch, where he was a contemporary of General Jan Smuts, who was born a year later than Beyers.

After completing his schooling he went on to qualify as an attorney and then relocated to the Transvaal where he set up a practice.

In 1891 he represented the Transvaal rugby team in a match against the first British team to tour South Africa.

Picture : General Christiaan Frederick Beyers

When the South African War (1899-1902) broke out he fought as a Burgher in the early battles in Natal. Through his actions in the field at the Battles of Diamond Hill and Belfast, he was quickly promoted to assistant Field-Cornet and then Assistant-General. Having been promoted to the rank of General he was very prominent in the Battle of Nooitgedacht on 13 December 1900 where he led the attack on the British troops on the summit of the Magaliesberg.

When General de la Rey's forces were split from those of General Beyers during the latter part of the guerrilla phase of the war, he was active in the Waterberg and Zoutpansberg districts. In May 1902 he was elected chairman of the Boer delegates at the Vereeniging Conference.

In last month's newsletter I made reference to the 1914 Rebellion in South Africa, after the declaration of war between Germany and Great Britain. Unfortunately, Christiaan Beyers, the physically imposing, brave Boer General, is most remembered for the part he played in this unfortunate episode in the history of his homeland.

Beyers was a staunch Afrikaner and he joined Louis Botha's party, Het Volk ('The People') after the end of war, and in 1907, after responsible government had been granted to the Transvaal, he was elected speaker of the Transvaal Parliament.

In 1910 the Union of South Africa was formed, and two years later, on the formation of the Union Defence Force, Beyers was made the Commandant General. In that capacity Beyers visited Europe and during a visit to Germany had meetings with Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Beyer was opposed to President Botha's and Jan Smuts' reconciliatory approaches to Great Britain and when World War I broke out, he set himself in almost open opposition to this policy of the Botha government. South Africa, due to what had happened after the South African War (1899-1902), and the granting of 'independence', was obliged to support Great Britain. However there

were many scars that had not been healed amongst the more staunch Boers, many of whom saw this as an opportunity to break away from British control and influence. When the South African expeditionary force was being mobilized for the invasion of German South-West Africa, at the request of Great Britain, Beyers resigned his post as Commandant General.

General Beyers had been in General de la Rey's car when de la Rey was accidentally shot and killed. What effect this had on Beyers is unknown, however, a few weeks later Beyers took to the field as a leader of the Boer Rebels against the government.

Government forces under the command of Louis Botha, his former Boer freedom fighter, chased Beyers and his followers for a number of days before Beyers was wounded and then, on 8 December 1914, he drowned in the Vaal River whilst trying to evade capture.



Picture : The Vaal River where Christiaan Beyers drowned

His body was recovered two days later, and with his death the rebellion was brought to an end.

Gert van den Bergh in his book '24 Battles and Battlefields of the North-West Province' (page 107) records – *"Strongly opposed to Botha's intention to occupy German South-West Africa he resigned as Commandant-General. Beyers only slowly and reluctantly drifted into open rebellion. The group of dissidents which gathered on his farm, Damhoek, in the Magaliesbergs in 1914, was confronted by government forces at Commissiedrift and dispersed. Such confrontations were repeated several times. He was drowned at the Vaal River in December while trying to escape from a pursuing force and was buried near Makwasie at Oeronskraal, later named Beyerspruit after him."*

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

Allan Gordon