

Newsletter

December 2022

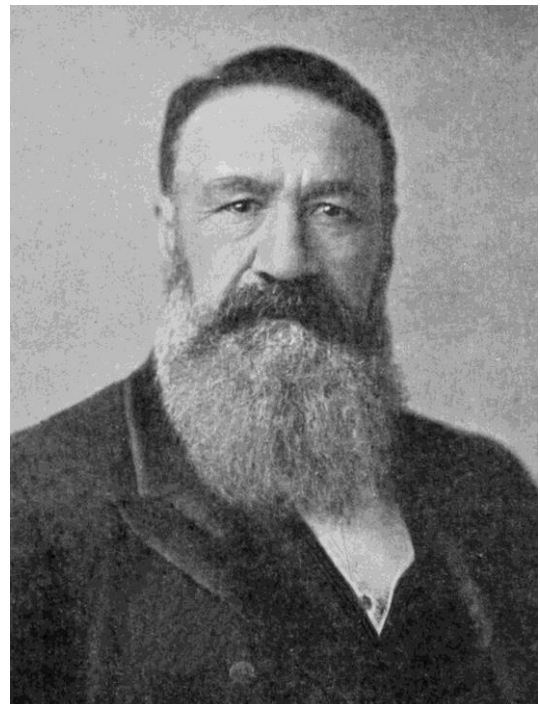
I have a book 'The War Reporter – The Anglo-Boer War through the eyes of the Burghers', by J.E.H. Grobler, which is a translation of articles featured in the Afrikaans Newspaper, Beeld, at the time of the centennial of the Anglo-Boer War (South African War 1899-1902). So as not to repeat too much of what I have already written in past newsletters, I am going to report on some of the headlines of what was recorded from these weekly 'publications'.

December 1899 started off with the headline 'Joubert Seriously Injured'.

Commandant-General Piet Joubert had fallen off his horse and it was initially thought that the injury was not serious.

However his deteriorating condition necessitated him leaving the field of battle.

He appointed General Schalk Burger as the acting Commandant-General and Commander over the Siege of Ladysmith, and General Louis Botha as Commander of the Republican forces on the Tugela River front.



Picture: Commandant-General Piet Joubert

'From the Editor' in the last publication for December 1899 records – *"The end of the year is usually a time for reflection. Twelve weeks ago many of us believed that peace would have been restored by now. Those expectations have been dashed. We can but hope that the war will be a nightmare of the past a year from now."* Wishful thinking – it was to last almost two and a half years thereafter.

In **December 1900** 'From the Editor' recorded – *"December 1900 was the first month in a long time to see events developing more or less positively for the Boer Republics, with some notable successes against the British Forces. The confidence of the Boers is higher than any time since February. In addition, the Boer forces have captured enough war supplies to continue with the struggle for an almost unlimited period. In the Transvaal, one only has to think of Buffelspoort and Nooitgedacht to agree with that sentiment, but the war was not only being fought in the Transvaal."*

'From the Editor' carried on – *"A very important development that will make the waging of war impossible for Britain in the long run is the successful invasion of the Cape Colony by a number of Free State commandos. The British authorities will now have to send a huge number of military units to the Cape. This will be a huge advantage to the Republics, since those units will be taken out of the Republics and thus deplete the British strength."*

Without being too controversial, did the British have any alternatives to the 'concentration camps' and the 'scorched earth' policies to counter what was recorded by 'From the Editor'?

In **December 1901** 'From the Editor' recorded – *"The war is now entering its fourth calendar year, and prospects seem much better now for the Republican forces than at any time since the fall of Bloemfontein in March 1900.*

The war has spread over the whole country and the enemy finds it increasingly difficult to fill the gaps.

Our commanders regularly overrun Khaki units, as the now legendary General de Wet recently accomplished again on Christmas Day in the Orange Free State – (Battle of Groenkop).



Picture: General Christiaan de Wet

We do not claim that we can beat the British army on the battlefield. Their forces are simply too formidable. Our hope remains that some crisis or other, erupting elsewhere in the world, will relieve the pressure on the Republics by forcing Britain to send soldiers there on a large scale. We believe that our hope is their fear. That is why they are continuing to use brutal methods, such as targeting our women and children, and destroying our country, in an attempt to break the fighting spirit of our burghers as quickly as possible."

It is interesting to note that the same publication, 'From the Editor', recorded the following late in 1899 – *"News from the fronts underlines one very disturbing phenomenon. Many burghers are becoming tired of the war. They find the sitting and waiting in the laagers, the never-ending sentry duty and the absence of action extremely boring."*

As I have recorded a number of times in past newsletters, had the Boers not adopted the siege mentality, but sent two Long Toms to each of the harbours of Durban and Cape Town to prevent re-enforcements from landing, the result of the South African War (1899-1902) could have been very, very different. Hindsight really is a useful science.

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

Surgeon-Captain T.J. Crean – 1st Imperial Light Horse

(In my October 2022 Newsletter, the Victoria Cross feature was Captain R. Johnston, who was a good friend of Crean, and who also toured South Africa with the 1896 British Isles Rugby Team, and stayed in the country after the tour.)

Thomas Joseph Crean was the son of a barrister, and was born in Dublin, Ireland, on 19 April 1873. He qualified as a doctor in Dublin, and played rugby nine times for Ireland. In 1896 he came to South Africa as a member of the British Isles rugby team. After the tour he remained behind with his friend, Robert Johnston, a fellow Irishman.



At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902) they joined the Imperial Light Horse, he as a trooper and Johnston as a Captain.

Johnston won the V.C. at Elandslaagte and Crean said to him "Well, if a b-f like you can win the V.C., anyone can!"

Crean served through the defence of Ladysmith and in March 1900 was appointed captain. He gave up squadron command in June 1901 and became a Surgeon-Captain.

Picture: Surgeon-Captain Thomas Crean V.C.

After the abortive third drive to capture de Wet, General Dartnell's column returned to Harrismith from Bethlehem, O.F.S. They were ambushed by de Wet at 11 a.m. on 18 December 1901 at Tygerskloofspruit, 19 miles from Bethlehem. The Boers were repulsed, but heavy firing continued and Crean went to the aid of the wounded.

Citation:

During the action with de Wet at Tygerskloof on 18th December 1901, this officer continued to attend to the wounded in the firing line, under a heavy fire and only 150 yards range, after he had himself been wounded, and only desisted when he was hit a second time, and, as it was first thought, mortally wounded.

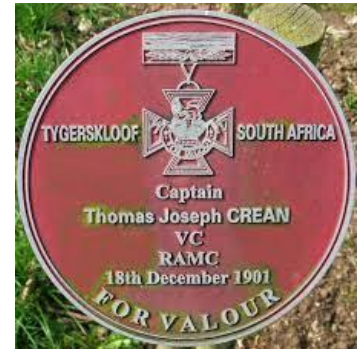
(London Gazette – 11 February 1902)

The fighting continued until 2 p.m. when Dartnell was relieved. That night Dartnell wrote a recommendation or a V.C. for Crean. Despite his protests Crean was invalided out of the army. The King presented him with the V.C. at St. James Palace in March 1902. The following year he was awarded the Arnott Memorial Gold Medal as the bravest Irish medical graduate of the war.

In 1905 Crean married Victoria Heredia, of Malaga, and had a son and a daughter.

In 1915 he served with the 1st Cavalry Brigade, was twice mentioned in despatches and created a companion of the DSO (London Gazette 3 June 1915).

Picture: DSO awarded to Surgeon-Captain Thomas Crean V.C.



In 1916 he commanded the 44th Field Ambulance in France. Major Crean was discharged as medically unfit in October 1918. His Practice, which had been worth 3 000 British Pounds a year was broken and by 1922 he was bankrupt. In 1920 he went to money lenders, who charged him 675 British Pounds interest.

The breakdown in his health was the real cause of his financial difficulties.

Crean served as the medical officer in charge at Ascot, then at various hospitals in Dublin.

He died in London on 25 March 1925, aged 51, and is buried in the St. Mary's Roman Catholic Cemetery, Kensal Green, London.

Picture: Surgeon-Captain Thomas Crean V.C.'s grave



Anniversary of the birth of Lieutenant-General W.F. Gatacre – 3 December 1843

William Forbes Gatacre was born at the family owned castle (Herbertshire Castle), near Stirling, on 3 December 1843. After completing his schooling at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, he enrolled with the 77th Foot in 1862. Two years later he purchased the rank of Lieutenant. In 1870 he purchased the rank of Captain, just before the purchasing of commissions was abolished in the English Army. Between 1870 and 1873 he was at Staff College before spending four years at Sandhurst as an instructor.



Picture: Lieutenant-General Gatacre

He was in India when he was promoted to Major and in 1882 was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and was appointed to command a battalion.

Between the years 1888 and 1897 he saw action in Hazara (Pakistan), in Burma, in India, and commanded the Third Brigade of the Chitral Relief Force.

In mid-1897 he returned to England to command a brigade at the Aldershot Command.

After the death of General Gordon at Khartoum in 1895, Britain decided to re-conquer the Sudan, and Gatacre was selected to serve under General Kitchener in this campaign.

He commanded the British Brigade at the Battle of Atbara, but excelled himself and enhanced his reputation at the Battle of Omdurman where he commanded a division of two British Brigades.

A comment after the victory of the British force was that it was a demonstration of the superiority of a highly disciplined army equipped with modern rifles, machine guns, and artillery over a force twice its size armed with older weapons. Ironically, the same could be said about the South African War (1899-1902), until other tactics swayed the result. However, the Boers were not a highly disciplined army.

At the Battle of Omdurman were Winston Churchill, Captain Douglas Haig, Lieutenant-Colonel R.G. Broadwood and Lieutenant-Colonel Hector MacDonald – familiar names of the South African War (1899-1902). MacDonald became a household name in Britain after the Battle of Omdurman.

At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902), Gatacre commanded the Third Division, with the rank of Lieutenant-General. His mission was to secure the area known as the Cape Midlands, immediately south of the Orange Free State, in preparation for an advance to Bloemfontein.

In summary, with no time for reconnaissance, and rushed preparations, his force got lost trying to locate a Boer stronghold near Stormberg, and at first light the Boers took advantage of the disorganised British force. The commanding officer of the Northumberland Fusiliers took it on himself to order a retreat, and most of Gatacre's force began to fall back in disorder. Gatacre gave the order to retreat to Molteno, the railway station from where the attack had been launched. In his rush to get back to Molteno, Gatacre left half his force behind. The engagement had lasted for a couple of hours. The loss to the British was 130 killed or wounded and 685 taken prisoner. Two 15-pounder guns were also taken by the Boers.

Gatacre's reputation, high after Omdurman, sank after Stormberg.

He stayed on in South Africa until the beginning of April 1900, but after an incident at Reddersburg, where indecisive actions attributed to him led to a British force having to surrender, he was summoned to Bloemfontein by Lord Roberts and sent back to England.

The Times History, Vol IV, page 54 records – *"But his two misfortunes at Stormberg and at Reddersburg were not calculated to inspire trust in the men he led, or the self-confidence essential to a commander."*

He retired in 1904 and in 1906 he was part of a trading expedition through Sudan.

He died of a fever he had contracted in Ethiopia whilst on the expedition.



Picture: Memorial to William Forbes Gatacre – All Saints Church, Claverley, Shropshire

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

Allan Gordon