

Newsletter

February 2023

February 1900: Quoting from the Editor's Comments in the book 'The War Reporter' by J.E.H. Grobler, relating to events in February 1900 (page 46) – *"Despite our constant awareness of the inexorable British military build-up, nobody anticipated the catastrophe that the Republican forces suffered on Majuba Day. The double British breakthrough means that our worst nightmares have been realised. The loss of more than 4 000 burghers in the Western Free State – one tenth of the total Republican force – in one day is a devastating setback, while the loss of the Tugela front, which had served as an incomparable safe natural fortress for four months against a growing mass of enemy soldiers, leaves us without protection in Natal.*

As regards the sense in going on with this war, we remind our readers that there is increasing pressure on the British government to put its South African affairs in order as quickly as possible. If the British cannot subdue us militarily in a short time, they will have to come to an agreement with us. The cost of the war will eventually become so high that they will have to negotiate. This is our salvation."

On 17 February, General Cronje made an unforgivable error of judgement by forming a laager on the banks of the Modder River.

Lieutenant-General French, in one day, with 1 500 mounted troops had covered 60 km, to cut off Cronje's advance – and was totally outnumbered by the Boers.

By 'digging in' Cronje allowed an eventual British force of 15 000 to surround him, and pound the laager into submission. Efforts were made to get him out of the 'mess', but for reasons only known to himself, he decided to stay put, eventually surrendering.

(This month's 'V.C. recipient of the month' describes more on the Paardeberg 'siege'.)

Picture: General Piet Cronje



February 1901: The Editor's Comments in the book 'The War Reporter' (page 110) – *"... there were no major battles during the month. Early in February Commandant-General Louis Botha was involved in a skirmish at Chrissiesmeer, but could not gain the upper hand. To date, huge British forces have failed in their attempts to drive the Boers against their blockhouse lines.*

Chief Commandant de Wet attempted once more to spread the battlefront to the Cape Colony. However, the weather was not in his favour and the burghers' horses were so weak that he was forced to return to the Orange Free State after suffering untold hardships.

The clearest indication up to now that the British are becoming desperate to end the war is Lord Kitchener's attempt right at the end of the month to convince Botha to lay down arms.

Botha made it clear to him that he will stop fighting only if our independence is guaranteed. On that condition our leaders are unanimous. The war will not end until the British abandon their obstinate demand that we lose our freedom."



Picture: Lord Kitchener

February 1902: The Editor's comments in the book 'The War Reporter' (page 138) – *"On the military front, there have been both positive and negative developments. On the positive side, the Republican forces are still active and are making life difficult for the enemy on a wide front. On the negative side, there are no indications that the Khakis are losing their own determination. Their huge drives remain a problem and their massive numbers are tapping our strength. What is needed to boost the confidence of our burghers is significant victory on the battlefield."*

For those who don't have a copy of Grobler's book, I can only say it is a must for all libraries. I make constant references to the book, and to 'The Times History of the War' to get a perspective from 'both sides of the fence'.

Other 'related' events from February:

- 23 February 1854 – 169 years ago, the Orange Free State officially gained independence from Britain with the signing of the Convention of Bloemfontein.
- 25 February 1954 – Isie K Smuts died in peace in her home on Doornkloof. Grandma Isie's Tea Garden was established in 1976 in honour of this remarkable woman so that we will remember her legacy.
- 27 February 1881 – an unexpected victory at the Place of Doves, when a commando of untrained farmers defeated a British force at the Battle of Amajuba. The odds were 400-500 against 2 000.



Picture: Majuba Hill

During the three February months of the South African War (1900, 1901 and 1902), ten V.C.s were awarded:

1900

Lt. F.N. Parsons	Essex Regiment	Paardeberg
Sgt. A. Atkinson	Yorkshire Regiment	Paardeberg
Pvt. A.E. Curtis	East Surrey Regiment	Natal
Lt. E.T. Inkson	Royal Army Medical Corp	Natal
Sgt. J. Firth	1 st Manchesters	Caesar's Camp
Pvt. J. Pitts	Duke of Wellingtons	Plewman's Farm (C.C.)
Cpt. C. Mansel-Jones	West Yorkshire Regt.	Terrace Hill (Natal)

1901

Sgt. W.B. Traynor	West Yorkshire Regt.	Lake Chrissie (Tvl)
Cpl. J.J. Clements	Rimmingtons Guides	Strijdenberg (C.C.)

1902

Sur-Capt. A. Martin-Leake	S.A. Constabulary	Vlakfontein (Standerton)
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The Victoria Cross is the highest and most prestigious award of the British honours system. It is awarded for valour 'in the presence of the enemy' to members of the British Armed Forces and may be awarded posthumously.

It was previously awarded by countries of the Commonwealth of Nations, most of which have established their own honours systems and no longer recommend British honours. It may be awarded to a person of any military rank in any service and to civilians under military command. No civilian has received the award since 1879.



Victoria Cross of the Month

Lieutenant F. N. Parsons – The Essex Regiment

Born on 23 March 1875, at Dover, he was educated at Dover College, Cambridge and Sandhurst. He joined the 1st Battalion Essex Regiment in February 1896 and was promoted to Lieutenant in March 1898. He accompanied his Regiment to South Africa.

After the Relief of Kimberley by General French's cavalry on 15 February 1900, Boer General Cronje was forced to abandon his position at Magersfontein. He intended moving along the Modder River to Bloemfontein, but was slowed down by his ox-wagons, which gave French the chance to block his way at Koedoesrand. The Boers then formed a laager near Paardeberg, on the Modder River, and repulsed all attacks the British made on them.

The Essex Regiment were involved in an action at Kitchener's Kopje, south-east of Cronje's laager, on 18 February 1900.



According to 'The Times History' – "*meanwhile the 81st Battery was in serious danger. Receiving an order to retire, it had begun limbering up when it immediately came under a tremendous rifle and pom-pom fire, which killed most of the horses.*

An attempt to rush the battery was frustrated by a party of the Essex under Lieutenant Parsons, who displayed exceptional gallantry and promptitude on this occasion, and by a number of odds and ends of other units which Captain Maurice hurriedly collected."

Picture: Lieutenant Parsons V.C.

Citation:

On the morning of 18th February 1900, at Paardeberg, on the south bank of the Modder River, Private Ferguson, 1st Battalion Essex Regiment, was wounded and fell in a place devoid of cover. While trying to crawl under cover, he was again wounded, in the stomach. Lieutenant Parsons at once went to his assistance, dressed his wound, under heavy fire, went down twice (still under heavy fire) to the bank of the river to get water for Private Ferguson, and subsequently carried him to a place of safety. This officer was recommended for the Victoria Cross by Lieutenant-General Kelly-Kenny on the 3rd March last. Lieutenant Parsons was killed on the 10th March, in the engagement at Driefontein, on which occasion he again displayed conspicuous gallantry.

(London Gazette – 20 November 1900)

Francis Parsons is buried on the farm Bosrand in the Jacobsdal district.

A memorial tablet was erected at Driefontein (west of Bloemfontein and south of Abraham's Kraal) to him, seven other officers, one warrant officer, and 189 NCO's and men of the Essex Regiment who died in the war.

It was unveiled by General Sir Evelyn Wood in 1903.



Picture: Lieutenant Parsons V.C.'s grave

His medals were presented to the Regimental Museum at Warley, Essex, by his family in 1962. His name is also commemorated on the St. Mary's Church War Memorial at Dover.

Very interestingly, he only had two medals – the Victoria Cross and the Queen South Africa medal.

Anniversary of the birth of Major-General R.A.P. Clements – 9 February 1855

Ralph Arthur Penrhyn Clements was born on 9 February 1855 and was educated at Rossall.

For service in the South African War (1899-1902), roughly one hundred 'ex-pupils'/old boys enrolled with various regiments, nearly half of them winning distinctions or mentions in despatches. Seventeen old boys died in active service, all of whom are now commemorated in the stalls of the school chapel. Rossall was widely considered to be in top 30 public schools in the U.K. by the end of Queen Victoria's reign. He joined the 24th Regiment in December 1874 and served in the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879 and was present at the battle of Ulundi.



Picture: Major-General Clements

In December 1880 he joined the South Wales Borderers and achieved the rank of Major in 1886. He was severely wounded in the Burma campaign in the mid 1880's.

At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902) Clements took command of the 12th Brigade of the 6th Division and succeeded Major-General French on the Colesburg front when the latter was redeployed to help with the Relief of Kimberley. After the battle at Pink Hill, on the Hobkirk farm, in the Colesburg district, Clements was forced to re-group at Arundel, a railway siding, also in the Colesburg district.

Clements occupied Colesberg on 28 February 1900 after the Boers had moved out to try and help Cronje at Paardeberg.

Clements was part of the British force involved in the actions in the Brandwater Basin where Boer General Prinsloo and about 4 000 Boers were forced to surrender. There are varying accounts of the total number of men who were captured, but, according to 'The Times History' (Vol IV, page 342) – *"4 314 men had surrendered by 9 August as a result of all the combined operations. Three guns were captured, as well as 2 800 head of cattle, 4 000 sheep, and between 5 000 and 6 000 good horses, while two million rounds of ammunition were destroyed."* Clements was involved in the action at Slabbert's Nek which was followed by the British occupation of Fouriesburg.

After the success at the Brandwater Basin, Clements' column moved into the Magaliesberg and operated in the Hekpoort Valley. His main activity was the burning of farms as the valley was known as the 'bread-basket' for the Boer guerrilla forces active in the Western Transvaal. Early in December 1900 Clements selected a position for his camp on the farm Nooitgedacht, probably because of the water supply and the height of the Magaliesberg cliffs on the farm, which allowed him heliograph communications with both Rustenburg and Pretoria. On 13 December his force was attacked by a Boer force under the command of Generals de la Rey, Beyers, Kemp and Smuts. The pickets on the top of the mountain were easily over-run, and had it not been that the Boers were

more interested in looting the British camp once it had been vacated, Clements and the remainder of his force would probably have been captured. Clements was allowed to re-group, on a hill named Yeomanry Hill, and plan an orderly retreat back to the British camp at Rietfontein West. General Smuts was supposed to attack Yeomanry Hill as part of the initial attack, but got 'lost' and was unable to take the position.

Following Nooitgedacht Clements and his force spent time in the Hekpoort Valley, before moving closer to Pretoria, and then on to the Heidelberg, Standerton District. In September 1901 Clements was part of the British force which was formed to counter the Boers attempt to invade Natal. Once the peace treaty had been signed, Clements remained in Cape Town, in a 'staff' position, returning back to the U.K. in December 1902.



Picture: The Nooitgedacht Battlefield

In 1904 Clements was sent to India as a Major General in the British Indian Army. In 1907 he was appointed Commander of the 4th Division in Quetta – a town near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and regarded as the trade and communication centre between the two countries.

He died on 2 April 1909 at Quetta from complications resulting from an appendicitis operation and is buried in the New Cemetery in the town.

Clements' photo was used on the cover of the Beatles Album – Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

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

Allan Gordon