

Newsletter

January 2020

January 2020 has come and gone.

One hundred and twenty years ago (1900) the South African War had been 'on the go' for three months. The Boers had resumed their tactic of besieging strategic towns – a tactic that had worked in the First Boer War of 1880-1881. There has been much debate over the years which will probably continue for as long as the War is celebrated and remembered, as to what might have happened had the Boers not stopped to lay siege to Ladysmith, but carried on eastwards and taken Durban. The British troop reinforcements from the East who landed in Durban, would then probably have had to travel to Cape Town to join the war effort.



January (1900) also saw the return of Winston Churchill to the front – eventually making his way to Spioen Kop where he, Louis Botha and Mahatma Ghandi, three eventual world leaders spent time together, in three different roles. The Battle of Spioen Kop was fought on 24 January 1900 – ironically Churchill died on 24 January 1965.

Picture : Remains of those killed in the Churchill Armoured Train attack.

During two of the three January months of the South African War (1900 & 1901), eight V.C's were awarded:

1900

Lt. J. P. Milbanke	10 th Hussars	Colesburg (Cape)
Lt. R. J. Digbey-Jones	Royal Engineers	Wagon Hill
Tpr. H. Albrechts	Imperial Light Horse	Wagon Hill
Lt. J. E. I. Masterson	1 st Devonshires	Wagon Hill
Pvt. R. Scott	1 st Manchesters	Caesars Camp
Pvt. J. Pitts	1 st Manchesters	Caesars Camp

1901

Pvt. J. Barry	1 st Royal Irish	Monument Hill
Farr. Sgt. W. J. Hardham	4 th New Zealand Cont.	Naauwpoort

A Boer War Execution on 18 January 1902

Kommandant Gideon Scheepers was born on 4 April 1878 and was 23 years old at the time of his execution.

At the age of 16 he joined the Staats Artillerie and was trained as a signaller. When war broke out he was sent to Kimberley. He was with General Cronje, as one of his signallers when Cronje was captured at Paardeberg, but he evaded this fate as he was out laying a cable when the surrender came. After the surrender Scheepers joined up with General de Wet.

At the time of the Battle of Sannaspos (the Bloemfontein Waterworks) de Wet promoted Scheepers to Captain. At the end of that year (1900) Scheepers moved to Kommandant Pieter Kritzinger's Kommando and together they operated predominantly in the Eastern Cape. By the end of 1901, although Kritzinger was the Kommandant and Scheepers only a captain, they had their own Kommando's and operated separately, however, with the same objective – to keep the British busy.

In June 1901 General French was given the task of coordinating troop activity in the Cape Colony. He had a number of columns under his command – resources which could be better occupied elsewhere. In mid-1901 Kritzinger informed Scheepers that he had been promoted to Kommandant.

Kommandant Scheepers expanded his activities further south, raiding both locals and the British for whatever he and his men needed. He burnt buildings and was ruthless on those who he thought were 'spies'. The British strategy was to identify a Kommando and 'chase' them until they either joined other Boers in the Free State or until they were captured.

In September 1901 it was Scheeper's Kommando's turn to be chased. By the time he was captured he was in need of food and barefoot – he could hardly ride his horse. Scheepers evaded the 10th Hussars who were chasing his Kommando and on several occasions there were skirmishes with the British troops coming off worst. Scheepers was a sick man, rumour was that he had typhoid fever.

On the afternoon of 11 October 1901, Scheepers was taken Prisoner by Captain Shearman of the 10th Hussars – Scheepers was sick and lying in bed when he was arrested.

Scheepers was taken to Graaf Reinet and faced the following charges, brought against him by General French – seven charges of murder, one of attempted murder, two barbarous acts contrary to the customs of war, three acts of disgraceful conduct of a cruel kind, one of destroying railways, one of train wrecking, and 15 acts of arson.

Scheepers' defence was that all charges brought against him were conducted in a state of war, and that he was acting on orders from a superior officer.

His trial began on 17 December 1901 and he was sentenced to death on 17 January 1902. That afternoon there was still indecision as to whether he would be hanged or shot. A decision was made – firing squad.



Picture : Scheepers being sentenced to death

At 3pm on 18 January the Coldstream Guards who were the firing party, took up their position 10m from Scheepers.

Although a number of memorials have been erected to his memory, his final resting place was never found.

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

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