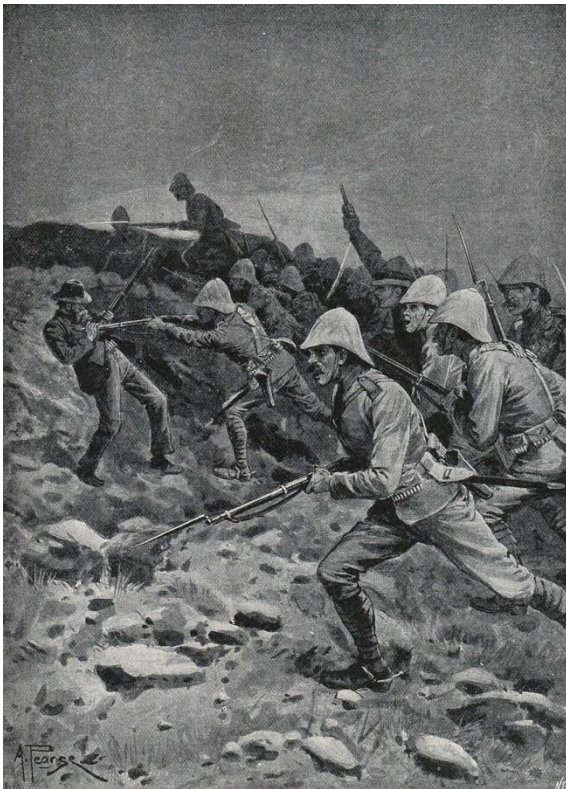


Newsletter

January 2021

January appears to be either a good month, or bad month, depending on how one looks at things, when it comes to bravery in wars gone by for British/Colonial soldiers. Why do I say this? Well, during the Anglo-Zulu War (1879) and the South African War (1899-1902) 22 V.C.s were awarded – three for bravery at Isandlwana, 11 for bravery at Rorke's Drift, and eight (see below) for actions during the South African War. I haven't done any research into past conflicts in other countries where His/Her Majesty's troops were active to get a comparative figure, but I think I might be wasting my time trying to beat this figure of 22 for one particular month.



After 'Black Week' in December 1899, it appears that a lot more thought and planning went into battles fought during January 1900.

Although General Buller was 'taking a lot of flack' in the U.K. press he seemed to have found a person to blame for mishaps – Lieutenant-General Charles Warren.

Warren was blamed for bungling the second attempted to relieve Ladysmith, which was a west flanking movement over the Tugela River, culminating in the Battle of Spioenkop.

Warren had operational command, and Buller blamed his failure on his lack of judgment, delays and indecision, despite his superior force.

Picture: British soldiers during the Battle of Spioenkop

For anyone interested in the Relief of Ladysmith, the book 'The Anglo-Boer War – The Road to Infamy' by Owen Coetzer is a must read. It deals comprehensively with the Commission of Enquiry into the relief of Ladysmith, and delves into the 'conflict' between Buller and Warren.

January 1900 'kicked off', on 6 January, with what was to be the final assault by the Boers on the town of Ladysmith at the Battle of Platrand to break the deadlock and attempt to force a surrender. The Battle of Spioenkop (see Battle of the Month – www.battletoursza.com) was fought on 24 January, but the lead up to this massacre on the famous mountain, had a number of skirmishes on route. The other sieges, Kimberley and Mafeking were developing into a 'wait and see' game. The British answer to the Boer Long Tom, the 'Long Cecil', designed by the American

George Labram and manufactured in the De Beers workshop in Kimberley, fired its first shot on 19 January 1900. Other than the battles in Natal, the Boers were active around Colesberg, in the Northern Cape. General de la Rey arrived in the area and took over command from an 'ineffective' General Schoeman (of Schoeman's Cross fame – Hartbeespoort Dam), sending him to Bloemfontein and an administrative function.

January 1901 saw the continuation of guerrilla activities by the Boers. The third effort to try and corner General de Wet commenced when de Wet re-entered the Cape Colony. Major-General French commenced with his drive in the eastern Transvaal to try and push the Boers, active in those districts, towards the border of Swaziland and eventual surrender. However, probably the most significant event in that month was the death of Queen Victoria on 22 January 1901. The month ended with the three day Siege/Battle of Modderfontein, south of Westonaria (midway between Johannesburg and Potchefstroom) where the British garrison suffered 30 casualties, with the rest of the men surrendering.

January 1902 was almost a 'status quo' of 1901 – guerrilla activities carried on with the British trying to hunt down and corner the Boer military leaders. Success came when General Ben Viljoen was ambushed and captured near Lydenburg. The advance guard of Brigadier-General Plumer's column were lured into an ambush at Onverwacht, 30 km south east of Ermelo and during the engagement 20 were killed, 47 wounded, and 65 captured, together with a gun. Major Vallentin was one of the casualties. Together with the execution of Gideon Scheepers, the court martial of Lieutenants Peter Joseph Handcock and Harry 'Breaker' Morant got under way during January. The Dutch government offered to mediate with the Boers, but this offer was turned down by the British government.



Picture: Lieutenant Peter Joseph Handcock



Picture: Lieutenant Harry 'Breaker' Morant

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

1900

Lt. J.P. Milbanke	10 th Hussars	Colesberg (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 Devonshire	Wagon Hill
Pvt. R. Scott	1 st Manchester	Caesar's Camp
Pvt. J. Pitts	1 st Manchester	Caesar's Camp

1901

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

An interesting comment from a reader of these newsletters was – “You seem to be very pro-Boer, you never give Boer casualty figures, only British.” My answer hopefully put this question to rest – “In very few accounts of battles during the South African War are figures given of Boer casualties.”

It is widely known and accepted that the Boers, where possible, removed their dead from the battlefields, to bury them as close to their homes as possible, or where they could be ‘remembered’, in ‘mass graves’. Also, the accuracy of Boer casualties leaves much to interpretation. As an example, at the Battle of Platrand, Boer casualties (killed in action) are recorded as being between 62 and 70, depending on your reference. However in the book Cassell’s History of the Boer War (page 403), the following is recorded – “At 7 o’clock that night the battle was over. 79 Dead Boers lay within our lines and twice as that number on the slopes.” So, when I can quote accurate numbers, I can assure you I will. My ‘absolute’ reference for British/Colonial casualties is ‘In Memoriam’ by Steve Watt.

Anniversary of the Death of General Ben Viljoen– 14 January 1914

Benjamin Johannes 'Ben' Viljoen died on 14 January 1914, on his farm in La Mesa, New Mexico. Being a free-mason, he is buried at the Masonic Cemetery in La Mesa.

Viljoen was captured on 25 January 1902 in Lydenburg, towards the end of the South African War (1899-1902).

He was sent to the Broadbottom Camp on St. Helena where he remained as a prisoner-of-war until May 1902.

Picture: Ben Viljoen's 'tombstone' in the Masonic Cemetery in La Mesa



Viljoen did not have any business interests and owned no property in South Africa, having joined the local militia at a relatively early age, and was therefore reluctant to return to South Africa.

He also refused to take up British citizenship having taken up arms to fight against this very principal. This greatly reduced his chances of resuming a public career. He was also disillusioned by derogatory rumours and felt that his contribution to the struggle was not being recognised.



Picture: General Ben Viljoen

In 1896 Viljoen had founded the Krugersdorp Volunteer Corp and had experienced combat with the Jameson Raiders. He was also a huge supporter of President Kruger in his stance against the 'Uitlanders' (Foreigners).

When the South African War commenced he first saw action at the Battle of Elandsplaagte and then at other subsequent battles around Ladysmith.

As the Boer front in Natal disintegrated, he joined up with other Boer commandos to stop the British march on Pretoria.

When Lieutenant-General Ian Hamilton crossed the Vaal River, together with General de la Rey, Viljoen and his Johannesburg Commando confronted the British.

With the start of the guerrilla campaign he formed a powerful guerrilla commando consisting of men from Johannesburg, Krugersdorp, Boksburg and the North and East Transvaal commandos.

He attained the rank of Assistant Commandant-General in November 1900.



Viljoen is best remembered for his surprise attack on the British garrison at Helvetia in the Eastern Transvaal on 29 December 1900 where he captured 235 men and the 4.7-inch Naval Gun, the Lady Roberts.

Not long after this success he was ambushed and captured near Lydenburg.

Picture: The ruins of the Trading Post at Helvetia

Late in 1902 the 'World Trade Fair' was scheduled for St. Louis in the United States and part of the spectacle was a re-enactment of scenes from the Boer War – with actual Boer fighters. A contingent of disillusioned Boers were offered an opportunity to appear, and the likes of Piet Cronje, Ben Viljoen and others made use of this opportunity, as it proved to be one of the few good employment opportunities for 'war-weary' burghers not wanting to become British citizens.

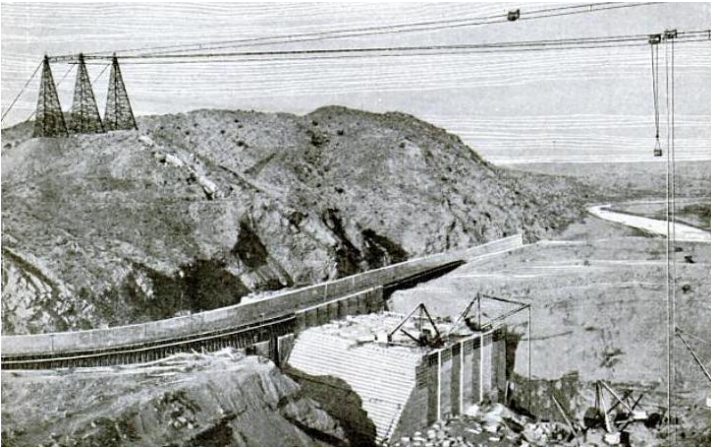
From the time he'd arrived in New York in December 1902, Ben Viljoen's plan had been to buy land in Texas or New Mexico. The St. Louis fair was only a money-making diversion.

Ben Viljoen was one of the South African refugee officers who formed a farm colony in Mexico with the assistance of Theodore Roosevelt. He was instrumental in organising Boer colonies in La Mesa in the New Mexico Territory, a fertile valley, west of El Paso.

He became involved in civic affairs and in 1909 he was granted U.S. citizenship. Viljoen became friends with both United States President Theodore Roosevelt and New Mexico Governor George Curry. Not forgetting his military up-bringing he was commissioned as a Major in the territorial National Guard's First Regiment of Infantry.

In 1911, he travelled through the U.S. with Curry as part of a delegation promoting statehood for New Mexico. In April and May 1911, he fought with the Mexican Revolutionary Francisco Madero at the 1st Battle of Ciudad Juarez, the battle for independence.

In addition to military and administrative functions, Viljoen was also influential in agriculture. Through knowledge gained during his rural South African up-bringing he introduced new crops and farming practices to the Mesilla Valley.



Picture: The Elephant Butte Dam during construction

Viljoen was influential in the creation of the Elephant Butte Dam which was, and still is, used mainly for agriculture, hydroelectricity and flood control.

The construction of the dam reduces the flow of the Rio Grande to a small stream for most of the year, with water released only during the summer irrigation season, or during times of exceptionally heavy snow melt.

For a short while, he was U.S. Consul in Germany, and also acted as military advisor to Francisco Madero, during the Mexican Revolution, until Madero's assassination in 1913.

Whilst a Prisoner of War on St. Helena, Viljoen wrote his autobiography, 'My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War', which is a realistic account of the war from a Boer perspective. I have just bought a book, which unfortunately is currently only in Afrikaans – 'Kansvatter – Die Rustelose Lewe van Ben Viljoen' by Carel van der Merwe. I believe it is a very interesting read, and a true representation of the man.

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