

Newsletter

January 2023

As I did last month, I am going to quote select headlines from the 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). This is a book that anyone who has an interest in the South African War (1899-1902) needs to have in their Library.

January 1900: The first 'Editor's Report' recorded (page 29) – *"This week our attention will be focussed on events on the Natal front, and the failure of the Republican attempt to capture Platrand, the British-held key to Ladysmith. The Free State burghers led by Commandant C.J. de Villiers distinguished themselves in battle, but there appears to have been a lack of co-ordination between them and their comrades from Transvaal."*

Grobler carries on – *"With the arrival of Lord Roberts, a new element has entered the war. Nobody can tell what the new British commander-in-chief's campaign plans are. Time will tell if he will, like Buller, attempt to break the Boer resistance on the Natal front, or concentrate on the wide expanses of the Free State southern and western borders. So far the British commanders in South Africa have not revealed themselves as creative strategists."*

Picture: Lord Roberts



The last 'Editor's Report' for January 1900 records (page 33) – *"An excellent week for the Republican forces. Our burghers halted the British offensive on the Natal front at both Tabanyama Hill and Spioenkop, inflicting heavy losses on the Khakis especially at Spioenkop. It will take at least a month before the British authorities can form a serious threat on our force on the Natal front again."*

January 1901: The Editor of Beeld recorded the following (page 105) – *"on the military front the British were uncharacteristically silent for most of the month."*

The Boers however were very active. At the beginning of the month General Botha, met with General Viljoen and other senior Commandants and planned an attack on a number of railway stations on the Belfast to Delagoa Bay line. The targets were the stations at Pan, Wonderfontein, Belfast, Dalmanutha and Machadadorp, as well as the garrison at Belfast. These surprise attacks were very successful.

Also, with the blessing of General de la Rey, Jan Smuts travelled to the Gatsrand to form his own commando of Boers from that area, including Potchefstroom, who had lost enthusiasm with the war.



Picture: General
Jan Smuts

At the end of the month, Smuts successfully attacked the British garrison at Modderfontein (between Johannesburg and Potchefstroom), taking all survivors of the attack, prisoner. Two days later he defended the garrison against a British force sent to re-take the garrison. An interesting 'first' engagement for Smuts (as a commando leader), which covered four days, and resulted in supplying the Boers with a month's provisions and arms and ammunition, to establish the commando as a force in the Gatsrand.

The Boers, under General de la Rey, also attacked a British convoy at Middelfontein, south of Rustenburg. The British were able to hold out for two days before re-enforcements arrived.

The death of Queen Victoria, on 22 January 1901, was covered by the Editor (page 105) – *"The most noteworthy event was the death of Queen Victoria. In the light of her outspoken imperial sentiments, her lack of respect for her own government's conventions with the republics, and her lack of empathy with the Boers longing for freedom, it is difficult for any citizen of the Boer Republics to experience her passing away as a particular loss."*

January 1902 saw the capture of General Ben Viljoen, who was sent to St. Helena, and never returned to South Africa. He took part in the World Fair in St. Louis in 1904 and then settled in South America.

General Smuts was active in the Northern Cape. During the month a number of Cape Rebels were executed, the most notable being Commandants Scheepers and Liebenberg. Probably the most significant battle of the month was at Onverwacht, or Bankkop as it is sometimes referred to. British Major John Vallentin was killed together with 18 other British soldiers, with 36 being wounded. It has been recorded that Vallentin was 'one of the most enigmatic and impressive young officers who fought in the Boer War'.

During the three January months of the South African War (1900, 1901 and 1902), 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

Victoria Cross of the Month

Private J. Barry – 1st Battalion Royal Irish Regiment

I am currently working on a couple of itineraries, and Monument Hill, just outside Belfast, is one of the stops, so it was a 'no brainer' for this month's choice for the V.C. of the month.



John Barry was born at Kilkenny, Ireland, on 1 February 1873.

He joined the Royal Irish Regiment in December 1890 and served in the North-West Frontier of India and in the Punjab.

He transferred to South Africa and served extensively. It was two miles north-west of Belfast, Transvaal, that he won the supreme award.

Picture: Private Barry V.C.

Citation:

During the night attack on 7th – 8th January 1901, on Monument Hill, Private Barry, although surrounded and threatened by the Boers at the time, smashed the breach of the maxim gun, thus rendering it useless to its captors, and it was in doing this splendid act for his country that he met his death.

(London Gazette – 8 August 1902)

According to the Times History (Vol V, page 123) – "*Muller's (Boer General C. H. Muller) men effected a complete surprise, overpowered the sentries on Monument Hill and stumbling through the wire fencing, threw themselves upon the fort. Some were caught in the wire, many were shot down, but the greater number reached the walls and began to climb over them, firing down upon the defenders.*

Heavily outnumbered, (Captain) Fosbery and his men fought desperately to the bitter end, some men laying about them with the butt end of their rifles and others using their fists or wrestling with the enemy. In this brief but bloody struggle Fosbery fell dead and 39 of his (83) men were killed or wounded.

One of the maxim detachment, Private J. Barry, when all his comrades were down, seized a pick and began to smash up the breach of the gun. Called on to stop, he persisted until he rendered the gun useless, when the Boers, robbed of their spoil, shot him dead....."

John Barry is buried in the Belfast old municipal cemetery, Mpumalanga.

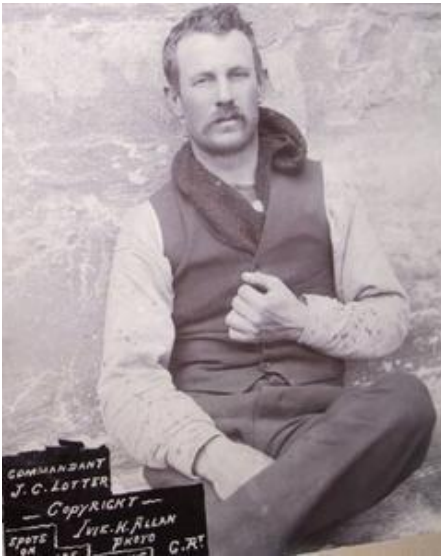
His medals were sold for 70 British Pounds, by his mother, Mrs. Catherine Barry, in 1907. In 1986 they were resold by Donald Hall.

Picture: Private Barry V.C.'s grave



Anniversary of the birth of Commandant Johannes Lotter – 15 January 1975

Johannes Cornelius Jacobus Lotter, who later in life was fondly called Hans, was born on 15 January 1875 on a farm between Pearston and Somerset East in the Cape Colony (now Eastern Cape). After completing his schooling at Cradock, he spent a few years in the Free State, before returning to the Cape where he ran a Bar in a town called Naauwpoort, about 60 km south of Colesburg.



At the outbreak of hostilities Lotter 'disappeared' and was later seen as part of a Boer commando under Commandant Kritzinger. Later, Kritzinger acknowledged Lotter's leadership qualities and promoted him to the rank of Commandant. Lotter now had to recruit members of his newly formed commando and, in this regard, was successful in the Cradock and Graaff-Reinet districts.

Lotter was a tough leader and a strict disciplinarian. He also created fear amongst the civilians in the district in which he operated, threatening retribution should anyone be found to have aligned with the British.

Picture: Commandant Hans Lotter

Lotter, together with other Boer Cape Rebel leaders, such as Kritzinger, Scheepers, Wolfaardt and others were keeping the British busy in the Eastern Cape, something that the British didn't appreciate, as the Cape was a British Colony. The book 'Commandant Lotter and his Rebels' by Taffy and David Shearing records (page 20) – *"General J.D.P. French, a formidable soldier much respected by the Boers, took command of the Military forces in the Cape Colony in June 1901. He made his headquarters at Middelburg, re-organised his men and used massed columns against the Boer Commandos. In the early part of 1901 the columns pursued the Boers ahead of them. From June onwards all commandos had to be hustled in a westerly direction, or, if they were near the Orange River, out of the Cape into the Free State. Since his arrival in June his tactics were having definite results. Kritzinger had lost 18 men at Wildfontein and he had been driven over the Orange River. Commandant Scheepers had been driven out of his refuge in the Camdeboo, Commandant Lategan had been mauled at Tweefontein. Now he turned his attention to the capture of Commandant Lotter."*

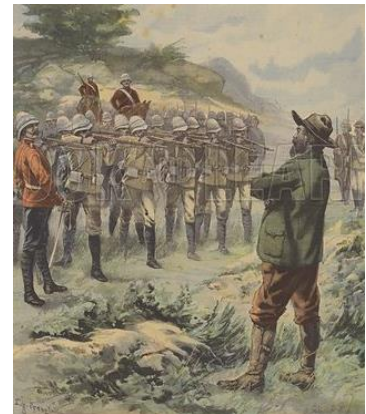
Henk Loots, a Boer War historian, wrote the following for the City Coin Medal Auction 71 – *"Colonel Scobell with a force of 'A' and 'D' Squadrons, 9th Lancers, as well as Cape Mounted Riflemen was tasked with capturing Commandant Lotter's Rebel Commando of some 120 men. Armed with information from the FID and guided by local coloured scouts, Scobell, on the 5th day of a 6 day mission, found his quarry on the farm Paardefontein. Believing that Lotter's men*

occupied a farm building, Scobell ordered a night march in pouring rain and deployed his 1 100 men on some ridges overlooking the farm.

At dawn, a squadron of Lancers was sent to investigate. The commanding officer, Lord Douglas Compton dropped his pistol near the entrance. As he dismounted to pick up his weapon, the Boers opened fire. Compton escaped, but the 6 men behind him were mowed down. Immediately, a thousand rifles opened up on the fearfully outnumbered Boers. After some 45 minutes of unequal contest the Boers surrendered. They suffered 13 killed and 46 wounded – with Lotter being one of those captured. Scobell's force lost 9 killed and 8 wounded.

As one historian points out – 'In losing Lotter, the Boers had lost more than a tenth of the guerrillas in the Colony south of the Orange – the British Empire was a bottomless well when it came to replacing lost Troops'."

Lotter was taken to Graaff-Reinet for his trial, and charged with treason, murdering unarmed British scouts, flogging two Afrikaners who had brought him terms of surrender, destroying railway lines, and marauding. The trial was straightforward, because Lotter was a citizen of the British-controlled Cape Colony, and therefore a rebel.



He was executed on 12 October 1901, together with seven of his men on the outskirts of Middelburg (Cape Province).

Picture: The execution of Commandant Hans Lotter

To quote again from the book by the Shearing's (page 41) – *"Before we dismiss Johannes Lotter, the gung-ho barman from Naauwpoort, as a loser because he lost, remember war is a terrible place to learn a new trade. To give him credit, he had tried to oppose General French, later a Field Marshall, and Colonel Scobell, who was called the ablest of cavalry leaders. He led the military no end of a dance for 9 months, and had gone to war with no resources and no reward in the offing. He threw away his life in sympathy for the Boer cause, and for that earned his place in the hearts of many, as one of the Cape's Boer War heroes.*

Eventually of the 155 men in the commando, 17 were killed or died of wounds, 118 were tried in batches of between 17 to 21. Of the 117 sentenced to death, 5 were executed and 112 had their sentences commuted to terms of imprisonment. Only 1 received a ten-year prison sentence. Four Republicans went to PoW camps and seven laid down their arms at the end of the war."

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

Allan Gordon