

Newsletter

January 2025

The major battles that took place during the months of January 1900, 1901, and 1902 in the South African War (1899-1902) have been covered in previous newsletters. This newsletter will record other interesting aspects of the war, together with other notable 'January' events.

January 1900: Much has been recorded about the three major Sieges (Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking) of the Boer War, and it is a pity that these sieges are the only focus for tourists who are unaware of the extent of the guerilla phase of the South African War. However, there were several other sieges that took place during the course of the war, for example the Siege of Kuruman which ended on 1 January 1900. The Times History of the War, volume III records (page 114) – *"Thus Kuruman was surrendered after a very creditable defence by the little garrison, which succeeded in keeping, on an average, ten times their number of Boers, occupied during the most critical weeks of the war."*

Kuruman is a small town in the Northern Cape which lies 120 miles north-west of Kimberley and is regarded as the '*Oasis of the Kalahari*'. It receives its water source from a spring which gives about 20 to 30 million litres of water daily. At the outbreak of the war the small garrison at Kuruman comprised 35 Cape Policemen under Captain Bates, about 30 'able bodied locals', together with 50 from the local tribe, who were employed mainly as labourers. The Boers held siege of the small settlement from 12 November. Casualties, according to The Times History were – '*Total British casualties were three killed and fifteen wounded*'.

Although covered before, it would be remiss of me not to mention Spioenkop. This battle took place 125 years ago, and thanks to local enthusiasts, a memorial wreath laying service took place on the summit this year. The battle site has been referred to as the '*Acre of Massacre*'. The British suffered 243 fatalities during the battle and 1 250 were either wounded or captured. The Boers suffered 335 casualties of which 68 were killed in action.



Picture: Spioenkop Battlefield

January 1901: The book 'Music of the Guns' by Henry John May has an interesting insight into the feelings of Lord Kitchener. What has been covered in previous newsletters are the three 'embarrassing' setbacks that Kitchener experienced soon after Roberts departed for England and left him commanding British forces in South Africa – Buffelspoort (3 December 1900), Nooitgedacht (13 December 1900) and Helvetia (29 December 1900). May records (page 159) – *"Kitchener must choose between laying waste the country or seeking peace."* Kitchener chose the

latter, but Botha declined any approaches from the British. Kitchener then approached the ageing ex-President of the South African Republic, Marthinus Pretorius and asked him to take a message to Botha.

Pretorius met with Botha and reported back to Kitchener. May carries on – *"As soon as Botha saw me, he abused me for carrying messages for the British. He said, 'Had it been anyone else I would have shot him. Tell Lord Kitchener if he wants to send any messages to me to send them with soldiers with a white flag which we will respect, but if he sends any by Boers, we will shoot them whoever they are. Tell him we don't want messages, and we don't want peace. It is he that wants peace. We want our independence, and we will fight till we get it.'"*



Picture: Lord Kitchener

Towards the end of January Kitchener embarked on his scheme of 'universal devastation'. The Times History records, vol. V (page 162) – *"Under his present instructions, the columns were not only to endeavour to envelop the enemy, but were to clear the country systematically of supplies, horses, cattle, crops, transport-vehicles and non-combatant families. Explicit rules were issued for carrying out this object. Every farm was to be visited, and not only women and children, but natives living on farms, were to be sent to the railway by empty convoys. Supplies, wagons and standing crops, if they could not be used, were to be burnt. Bakeries and mills were to be destroyed. In view of the extent of the country to be traversed and its immunity hitherto from any such measures, this was a gigantic non-military labour to impose on troops."*

The Times History carries on (page 163) – *"The difficulty of maintaining touch (for the British), particularly at night over such a wide front was already apparent; for Beyers and Kemp, with the commandos of Zoutpansberg, Waterberg, and Krugersdorp, had managed to slip back through the line, and on the 29th had damaged the branch railway between Springs and Brakpan, burnt two mines at Benoni, and cut the field telegraph cable. The remaining unit of Beyers' force, the Pretoria Town Commando, under Commandant Botma, together with all the local burghers along the whole line were in full retreat east, covering a terror-stricken exodus of old men, women and children, crowded into wagons with all that they could save of their property, and preceded by enormous herds of sheep and cattle."*

January 1902: One of my 'favourite' Boer Generals was Ben Viljoen, and I featured him as my personality in my newsletter in January 2021. He fought courageously and intelligently against the British, and when the war was over, didn't deviate from his principles – he refused to sign allegiance to the King. He made a new life, and name for himself in Mexico. On 25 January 1902 he was captured by the British and sent to St. Helena as a Prisoner of War. In his 'Reminiscences of the Boer War' Viljoen records (page 273) – *"I am not superstitious, but I must confess that somehow or other I experienced considerable disquietude about this time and felt cold shivers*

running down my back. We were just approaching Boomplaats, which is about two and a half miles to the west of Lydenburg, when we observed something moving ... Our suspicions were aroused, and we went in pursuit, but soon lost sight of the object of our quest. We discovered afterwards that our suspicions were well-founded, and that the moving objects were 'local' spies, who returned to the British lines and reported our approach ... Presently we approached a deep spruit, and having dismounted, we were cautiously leading our horses down a steep bank, when suddenly we found ourselves the centre of a perfect storm of bullets."

Viljoen ends his description of his capture – *"I afterwards learned that the name of my assailant was Patrick, and that he belonged to the Irish Rifles."* Being a medal collector – I wonder who owns his medal?

Other interesting events during the month of January:

- **29 January 1856** – Queen Victoria issued a warrant establishing the Victoria Cross to recognise acts of valour during the Crimean War. To date it has been awarded 1 358 times with three men having been awarded it twice.
- **16 January 1902** – Lieutenant Harry Morant and six other Bushveldt Carbineers were put on trial for executing Boer prisoners.

Seven Carbineers, including Lieutenants Morant, Peter Joseph Handcock (aged 30) and George Ramsdale Witton (aged 25), also Captain Alfred 'Bulala' Taylor, were arrested on 25 October 1901 and charged with shooting Boer prisoners and a German missionary. Captain Taylor immediately resigned his commission! Taylor was effectively in charge in the Spelonken and he gave the orders.



The court-martial only began in January 1902 after Taylor's resignation had come through and he was effectively a civilian – worthy of further 'investigation'.

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	Colesburg (Cape)
Lt. R.J. Digby-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	Caesar's Camp
Pvt. J. Pitts	1 st Manchesters	Caesar's 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 R. Scott – 1st Battalion Manchester Regiment



Private Robert Scott was born in Haslingden, Lancashire, on 4 June 1874. He joined the Manchester Regiment in February 1895 and was serving with them in Natal when the war began.

Scott was under the command of Lieutenant Hunt-Grubbe when they were attacked at Caesar's Camp, east of Wagon Hill.

By the end of the day only these two men survived at a post that had been held by 16 men. Robert Scott later became a quartermaster-sergeant.

Picture: Private Robert Scott V.C.

Citation:

R. Scott, Private and J Pitts, Private, 1st Battalion Manchester Regiment – during the attack on Caesar's Camp, in Natal, on 6th January 1900, these two men occupied a sanger, on the left of which all men had been shot down and their positions occupied by the Boers, and held their post for fifteen hours, without food or water, all the time under an extremely heavy fire, keeping up their fire and a smart look-out, though the Boers occupied some sangers on their immediate left rear. Private Scott was wounded.

(London Gazette 6 July 1901)

He died at Downpatrick, Co Down, Ireland on 21 February 1961, aged 84 years.



Picture: Private Scott V.C.'s grave

Anniversary of the death of Major J.M. Vallentin – 4 January 1902

Major John Maximilian Vallentin was born in February 1865 and educated at Haileybury. He entered the Somersetshire Light Infantry in February 1885 and was promoted Captain in June 1892, and Brevet-Major in November 1900. He served in the Burmese Expedition of 1886-87 with the 2nd battalion of his regiment and received the medal with clasp. He graduated at the Staff College in 1897, and before the outbreak of the war in South Africa was Brigade-Major at Ladysmith. On the re-distribution of the brigades of the Natal Field Force, after the arrival of Sir George White, Major Vallentin was appointed Brigade-Major to Lieutenant-General Ian Hamilton.

At the Battle of Elandslaagte, Major Vallentin behaved with conspicuous gallantry in rallying the flank attack, during the most critical phase of the assault. He served throughout the Siege of Ladysmith, where he contracted a serious bout of Enteric Fever. When convalescent, he elected to return to his chief, Ian Hamilton, and joined him in Bloemfontein just after his appointment to the command of a division.

After the occupation of Heidelberg, Major Vallentin was appointed commissioner of the town. In the autumn of 1900, while holding this position, he was sent out with one of Lord Roberts' Proclamations to a commando in his neighbourhood, and lived with the Boers for a week, as their guest, while the object of his visit was under discussion.



Picture: Major Vallentin

In early 1901 he was ordered to raise a corps of volunteers to operate as law-enforcement and counter-insurgency agents in the Heidelberg District. The unit became known as Vallentin's Heidelberg Volunteers or the Nigel Mine Guards. Never exceeding more than 200 men, they were nicknamed the 'Witkoppen' by the Boers, after the white hat bands that they wore. Many of these volunteers were 'joiners' – Boers who had accepted the British terms of surrender and now worked for them. Needless to say, these men were hated by the Boers still on commando and were shown no sympathy if captured.

On one occasion (1 September 1901) Vallentin was captured by a Boer Commando. He had approached a commando believing it to be de Wet but found Theron instead. In his diary he states, "*Went out 3pm, came on Boer outpost, 6pm, found not de Wet but Theron at home: had long talk with him; he was rude and held me prisoner.*" He was detained until Saturday, 8 September 1901 and released as the Boers had no facilities to hold prisoners.

Vallentin left Heidelberg in December 1901 to command a mixed force of men in General Plummer's column near Ermelo. He met his death on 4 May 1902, at Onverwacht, 32 km east of Ermelo. While pursuing about 50 Boers, with about 110 British soldiers, they were surprised by 300 Boers, under the command of General Koos Opperman. The General also died in the skirmish.

General Koos Opperman was regarded as one of the bravest and best commanders of General Louis Botha's army.

Major Vallentin was mentioned in despatches by General George White on 2 December 1899, and again in the despatch of 23 March 1900. He was mentioned again in the despatches of General Kitchener dated 28 July 1901 and 8 August 1901, the latter making the fourth occasion on which he was mentioned during the war.

(Acknowledgement – Alexander Palmer – The Boer War Casualty Roll 1899-1902)



Picture: Major Vallentin's medals

Ian Uys in his book 'Heidelbergers of the Boer War' records (page 186) – "*Vallentin was forced to make a last stand on a small ridge, which was virtually bereft of cover. Vallentin strived to the last to avert defeat and rally his force, but when the Boers worked their way to his rear and began firing at 50 metre range, he knew they stood no chance. Vallentin stood, exposed to the enemy fire, issuing instructions when he was shot down.*"

Major Vallentin and the men who fell at Onverwacht have been reburied at the Ermelo Garden of Remembrance. So died an officer and a gentleman."

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

Allan Gordon