

## Newsletter

June 2024

Past newsletters have recorded the main battle that was fought in the month of June, during the South African War (1899-1902) – the Battle of Diamond Hill (11 June 1900), so I am going to try highlight other events during the June months of the war (1900 and 1901).

**June 1900:** This is the month which is recognised as the start of the scorched earth policy. On 16 June, Lord Roberts issued a proclamation to all Republican forces in the field, stating, amongst other things that – *"small parties of raiders have recently been doing wanton damage to public property by destroying railway bridges and culverts, and cutting the telegraph wires, and whereas such damage cannot be done without the knowledge and connivance of the neighbouring inhabitants, and the residents in the districts concerned. I therefore warn the inhabitants and residents that, whenever public property is destroyed in the manner specified above, they will be held responsible for aiding and abetting the offenders. The houses in the vicinity of the place where the damage is done will be burnt, and the residents will be made prisoners of war."*



With Boers in the Transvaal trying to reorganise themselves after the Battle of Diamond Hill, General de Wet was very active in the Free State. On 7 June he commanded a three-pronged attack on Vredefort Road Station, Rhenoster River Bridge and Roodewal Siding. Roodewal Siding was a postal and supplies depot and the defences that were erected, once the Boer attack was imminent, comprised of bales of clothing, post bags, food tins and sacks. Once the Boers had over-run the depot, they spent some time going through the British post, taking what they deemed valuable. These attacks resulted in British casualties of 47 killed, 121 wounded and 676 men taken prisoner. What the Boers didn't manage to take away, in the form of ammunition and supplies, they set fire to, which resulted in a firework display which was visible 50km away.

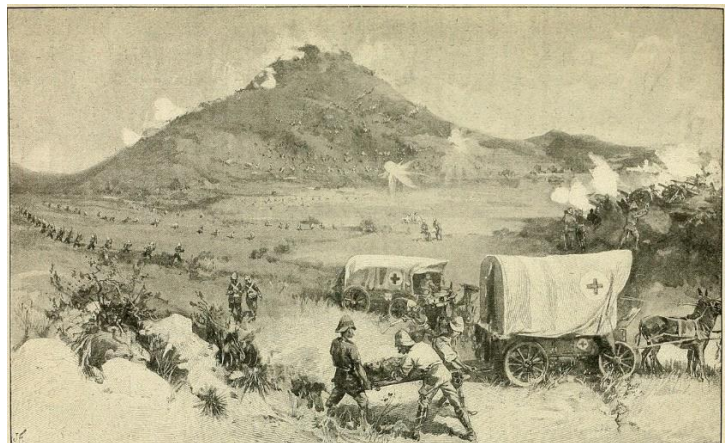
*Picture: General de Wet*

Following the above success, de Wet planned another three-pronged attack on the British garrisons on the railway line, closer to Kroonstad, at Serfontein Siding, America Siding and Heuningspruit Siding. This planned attack was less successful due to poor communication between the three Boer forces, and the imminent arrival of a British relief force from Kroonstad and was called off with no success gained by the Boers.

### Other events during June 1900:

- **1 June** – Lieutenant Sir J.C. Power died in Lindley from wounds received on 29 May. He was a whiskey baron from Ireland and volunteered for active service in The South African War (1899-1902), joining the 46<sup>th</sup> Company Imperial Yeomanry.
- **7/8 June** – British Captain H. Lambart, of the Kimberley Mounted Corps., convinced Andries Cronje (brother of Piet Cronje), who was ill in Klerksdorp, that he and his force of 300 Boers were totally outnumbered, and it was best that they surrendered the town. The British marched into Klerksdorp on 14 June without a shot being fired.
- **11 June** – Lord Airlie was killed at the Battle of Diamond Hill.
- **14 June** – Royal Scots Fusiliers marched into Potchefstroom (see June Mid-Month visit for full details).
- **18 June** – General Baden-Powell arrived in Pretoria to a hero's welcome after the Relief of Mafeking.
- **27 June** – Boer Commandant, Sarel Eloff (grandson of President Kruger), arrived on the island of St. Helena as a Prisoner of War, after his capture by the British at Mafeking.

**June 1901:** After the Battle of Graspan, a farm 10km east of Reitz in the Orange Free State, on 6 June, President Steyn with Boer Generals de Wet, de la Rey and Hertzog, accompanied by a party of Boers, travelled to the Transvaal to meet with the representatives of the ZAR. Having crossed the Vaal River they travelled to Piet Retief, then Amersfoort, before meeting with the ZAR Government at Waterval, about 5km east of Val.



*Picture: Battle of Graspan*

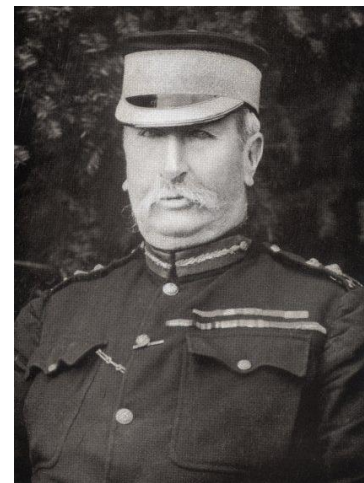
The Waterval meeting took place on 20 June, and after President Steyn made it quite clear that he wasn't interested in peace, by declaring "*make peace if you will, I shall not*", it was decided to carry on with the war. One of the outcomes of the meeting was General Smuts was to prepare a force to invade the Cape Colony, with the purpose to try and deflect the interest of the British and relieve the pressure on the two Republics.

Although a number of battles and skirmishes took place during the month of June 1901, the one which seems to get the least 'recognition', but enjoyed the most repercussions, was the Battle of Wilmansrust, fought north of Bethal on 12 June. A force of 350 men of the 5<sup>th</sup> Victoria Mounted Rifles camped at the farm Wilmansrust and were attacked by the Boers under General Muller. Due to the planning of the Boers and the exposure of the camp, the attack lasted less than 30 minutes, with the Australians completely over-run. The Victorians were part of General Beatson's force, that had left Middleburg to sweep the area south of the town.

After the rout of the camp at Wilmansrust, General Beatson, in the presence of officers, referred to the Australians as "*a damned fat, round shouldered, useless crowd of wasters*". A few weeks later the Australians were ordered to march again, and when three men of the unit refused to march they were arrested and court-martialled for inciting mutiny. Lord Kitchener intervened and saved them from being shot. After involvement from the British and Australian Governments, the sentences were quashed. An almost insignificant battle – but a very interesting story. (For those joining the Tour to the Eastern Transvaal – this battle is part of the Tour.)

### Other notable events that happened over the years in the month of June:

- **1 June 1879** – The French Prince Imperial, serving with the British army, was killed by the Zulus in a surprise attack.
- **4 June 1902** – Lieutenant Robert McKeich, of the 9<sup>th</sup> Contingent of the New Zealanders, whilst out hunting, was confronted by Boers who were unaware that peace had been declared. The Boers ordered him to dismount and take off his uniform. When he refused, an exchange of fire took place, and McKeich was killed.
- **2 June 1908** – General Sir Redvers Buller V.C. passed away, aged 69.
- **5 June 1916** – Field Marshall Kitchener was killed when the ship he was on, sank off the coast of Scotland after striking a mine.



*Picture: General Sir Redvers Buller V.C.*

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

#### 1900

Pvt. C.B. Ward	King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry	Lindley
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#### 1901

Sgt. J. Rogers	South African Constabulary	Thaba 'Nchu
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## Victoria Cross of the Month

During the months of June (1900 and 1901) in the South African War (1899-1902), two V.C.s were awarded and they have both been covered in past newsletters. So, what I have done is to find a story to someone who was either born or died in the month of June, and where hopefully there was a relationship to a V.C. action. After much research I got lucky. This month we pay tribute to:

### Lieutenant-Colonel A.J. Watson – 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Suffolk Regiment

Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur John Watson was born in June 1853 and was killed in action near Rensburg on 6 January 1900. Again, after much research, I have established that he was killed in action at Grassy Hill, which is a hill north of Colesburg in the Cape Colony. Rensburg is south of Colesburg, but between December 1899 and early February 1900, General French was headquartered at the station at Rensburg, and had set up a defensive position around the town of Colesburg. But back to Watson.

He entered the 12<sup>th</sup> Foot in August 1873, being promoted Captain in April 1883, Major in October 1886, and Lieutenant-Colonel in September 1898. He was an instructor of musketry to his battalion from February 1880 to January 1883. He served with the Bechuanaland Expedition under Sir Charles Warren in 1884-85 as Brigadier-Major and was mentioned in despatches. He was employed with the Egyptian Army from February 1886 to the following September. He took part in the Hazara Expedition in 1888 as Brigadier-Major to the First Column, under Brigadier-General Channer, was mentioned in despatches and received the medal with clasp. He also served with the Chitral Relief Force under Sir Robert Low in 1897, as road commandant on the lines of communications, receiving the medal with clasp.



*Picture: Memorial Plaque to Lieutenant-Colonel Watson in the Regimental Chapel, St. Mary's Church, Bury St Edmunds*

Lieutenant-Colonel Watson was D.A.A.G. in Bengal from July 1889 to February 1896. He obtained command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Suffolk Regiment in September 1898 and took the battalion to South Africa in November 1899.

He fell in the night attack on the enemy, who held a kopje which formed the key to their position round the town of Colesburg. The Boers who were apparently well informed of the intended British attack, opened an early fire. Lieutenant-Colonel Watson was killed early in the fight. A monument has been erected in Colesburg in memory of all those who fell in this engagement. (Reference – The Boer War Casualty Roll 1899-1902 by Alexander F. Palmer)

Casualties for this engagement are recorded as 35 killed, 53 wounded and 100 taken prisoner.

The relation to a V.C. action is that awarded to Lieutenant Sir J.P. Milbanke.

Lieutenant Sir John Peniston Milbanke was born in London on 9 October 1872 and was educated at Dover and Harrow. He joined the 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars in November 1892. During the western campaign in South Africa, he served as ADC to General French. While near Colesburg Sir John Milbanke wished to reconnoitre a hill and took a corporal and three men with him.



*Picture: Lieutenant Sir Milbanke V.C.*

**Citation:**

On the 5<sup>th</sup> January 1900, during a reconnaissance near Colesburg, Sir John Milbanke when retiring under heavy fire with a small patrol of 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars, notwithstanding the fact that he had been severely wounded in the thigh, rode back to the assistance of one of the men whose pony was exhausted, and who was under fire from some Boers who had dismounted. Sir John Milbanke took the man up on his own horse under a most galling fire, and brought him safely back to camp.

(London Gazette 6 July 1900)

(Reference – Ian Uys)

### Anniversary of the birth of Major-General R.G. Kekewich – 17 June 1854

Robert George Kekewich was born on 17 June 1854 and educated at Marlborough and King Edward's School, Birmingham. At the age of twenty he entered the army, joining the Royal East Kent Regiment (the Buffs). He fought in the Perak War of 1875–6, and in the Sudan, 1884–5. After his experience in Sudan, he saw service in the Anglo-Burmese War. With war clouds looming in South Africa, Kekewich was selected for a 'special assignment' in South Africa. David Biggins' book 'Kimberley – Siege Account & Medal Roll' records (page 9) – *"Early in September 1899, Milner persuaded his Ministers to send two thousand Lee-Metford rifles and a small quantity of ammunition to Kimberley, and to order detachments of Cape Police to guard the more important points to the north and south of the town. Milner also made a further suggestion that a senior Imperial officer should be sent to Kimberley to report confidentially on what was happening. For this task, Lieutenant-General Sir F. Forestier-Walker, the new Commander in Chief of British troops in South Africa, selected Lieutenant-Colonel Robert George Kekewich, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, and on 11<sup>th</sup> September Kekewich received his instructions personally from Milner. His brief was to investigate the arrangements being made for the protection of Kimberley and to check on the state of communications to Mafeking in the north and to Orange River Station in the south. Kekewich was also told to keep his mission a closely guarded secret."*



Biggins' account of the siege is a continuous saga of conflict between Rhodes, who had found himself 'locked up' in Kimberley for the duration of the siege, and Kekewich. When the British force, under the command of General French relieved Kimberley after 126 days of siege, Rhodes voiced his disapproval of Kekewich and demanded his removal as commander of the garrison. The day after French left for Paardeberg, Kekewich was relieved of his position.

*Picture: Major-General Kekewich*

Biggins records (page 85) – *"Kekewich was not aware of French's departure but this was not his only surprise that morning. When he arrived at his headquarters he found Colonel Porter had been given command of Kimberley. The only explanation for this sudden change is that Rhodes must have talked French into replacing Kekewich. It reflects very badly on French that Kekewich's service in the defence should have ended this way. Kekewich returned to command his regiment, and it was not until 26<sup>th</sup> July 1901 that he was again given a position of responsibility, with his appointment to command a mobile column, and Kekewich believed that Rhodes continued to exert his influence to block his promotion, until he (Rhodes) died."*

On 30 September 1901 he commanded the British force that was attacked by the Boers at the Battle of Moedwil. During the attack he was wounded, but with heavy losses, the British managed

to repulse the attack. The British lost 61 killed or died of wounds received, and 158 wounded. During the attack many horses and draught animals stampeded and were lost to the force. This forced Kekewich to return to Rustenburg to be refitted.

On 11 April 1902 Kekewich commanded the British force in the Battle of Rooiwal which turned out to be the last major battle during the war. British casualties were 15 killed and 60 wounded. He stayed in South Africa until just after peace had been signed in June 1902.

Kekewich retired from the army in 1904 but was appointed to the honorary position of Colonel of the Buffs on 5 October 1909. However, at the outbreak of World War I in 1914 General Kekewich was recalled for service on the western front.

Shortly after his appointment, suffering from poor health and depression, he was hospitalised. On returning home, on 5 November 1914, he took his own life – aged 60. He is buried in St. Martin's Churchyard, Exminster, Devon.



*Picture: Memorial to Major-General Kekewich in Exeter Cathedral*

Wikipedia records a wonderful tribute to the man, who died so tragically – *"The historian Thomas Pakenham describes Kekewich as 'a pleasant ... unassuming man' but also a serious, painstaking soldier with strong nerves and diplomatic skills. These traits were needed during the siege of Kimberley when Cecil Rhodes behaved in an emotional and irresponsible manner, undermining Kekewich's leadership and standing with his military superiors, and at one stage threatening to surrender the town."*

**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) - for regular articles, updates, etc.

**Allan Gordon**