

Newsletter

May 2020

Early in May 1900 the British force under the command of General Roberts started its march from Bloemfontein and Thaba Nchu to Johannesburg and Pretoria. Over 40 000 men were part of the force. Boer General de la Rey gathered his commandos and a number of engagements took place in order to make the British progress as difficult as possible. Bridges and railway infrastructure were destroyed as part of this strategy. On the Natal front, General Buller, also with a force of over 40 000, left Ladysmith, after a two month break for re-grouping, and the force made their way towards the Eastern Transvaal – now Mpumalanga. During the course of the month they made steady progress and occupied Newcastle and Vryheid.

The battle of Zand River (Sand River), about 100 km north of Bloemfontein, was probably the most significant in the advance of Roberts' troops northwards. General Botha had made a stand and had blown up the bridge across the river, but being totally outnumbered, was forced to withdraw his commandos. Continued engagements with Boer commandos failed to halt the progress of Roberts' force and he crossed the Vaal River on 27 May 1900. Having crossed the Vaal, the immediate focus was on taking Johannesburg.



Further east, on 12 May 1900 the Boers launched what turned out to be their final attack on Mafeking. After an initial success by Commandant Eloff, he, together with a number of his commando were taken prisoner. Four days later the town was relieved following a siege which lasted 217 days.

The last day of May 1900 saw the fall of Johannesburg after the battle of Doornkop where the Gordon Highlanders excelled themselves. (The Battle of Doornkop will be the Battle of the Month – www.battletoursza.com) With Johannesburg surrounded, the British demanded the unconditional surrender of the town. Commandant Krause agreed to these terms on condition that the British allowed a 24-hour truce. This enabled the Boers time to evacuate with the necessary supplies and arms to carry on fighting. This was granted – it is said that General Roberts was worried that if he didn't agree to the terms, the Gold mines would be dynamited.

May 1901 was full out guerrilla activity in both the then Eastern and Western Transvaal with many engagements and skirmishes taking place. The most significant battle was the Battle of Vlakfontein, near the current town of Derby (named after the Derbyshire Regiment who were based in the area) in the North West Province. In a battle which raged the whole day, with fluctuating fortunes, the British force which was twice the size of the Boers, eventually managed to get the upper hand. That night, under a flag of truce, both parties removed their dead and wounded. The British losses were over 50 killed and 120 wounded and the Boers had over 30 killed.

May 1902 saw the end of the war with the Peace of Vereeniging being signed at Melrose House in Pretoria. Senior Boer leaders spent most of the month in negotiations, deliberating on the future of carrying on with their efforts. The Battle of Holkrans, early in the month had a huge influence on General Botha's thinking, as a new dimension, the Zulus were now active in the conflict. General Smuts' Siege of O'okiep also ended during May 1902, having lasted for six weeks.

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

1900

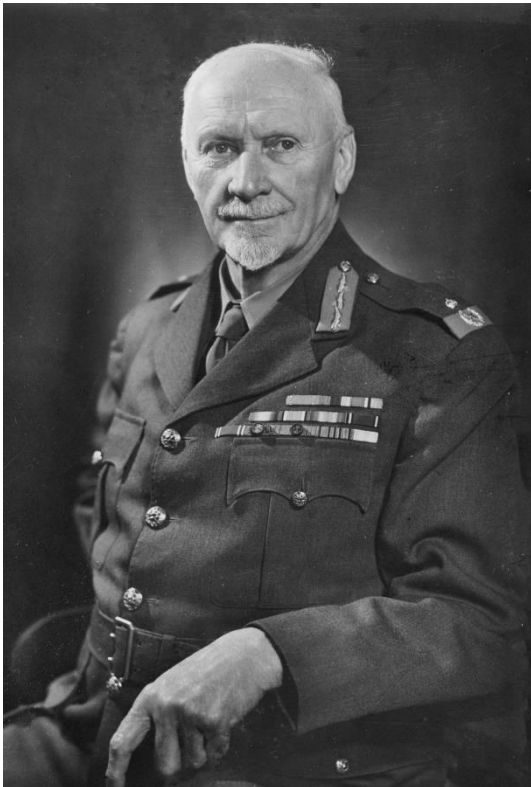
L/Cpl J.F. Mackay	1 Batt Gordon Highlanders	Doornkop
Cpl. F.H. Kirby	Royal Engineers	Eastern Transvaal
Pvt. C.B. Ward	Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry	Lindley

1901

Lieut. F.W. Bell	West Australian Mounted Infantry	Brakpan
Lieut. G.H.B. Coulson	1 Batt. Kings Own Scottish Borderers	Lambrechtsfontein

Anniversary of the birth of Jan Christian Smuts – 24 May 1870

One hundred and fifty years ago, on 24 May 1870, one of the greatest South Africans was born. Not only was he a statesman, military leader, and philosopher who held various cabinet posts, he also served as Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa from 1919 until 1924 and from 1939 until 1948. One of his closest friends and allies was Sir Winston Churchill. In the few paragraphs that follow I cannot do justice to a man of his stature, but it would be remiss of me not to feature the man in my monthly newsletter on this milestone anniversary of his birth.



Before I get into his exploits during the South African War, let me table a few interesting facts about the man:

- He was the only person present at the signing of the Peace Agreements after WW1 and WW2.
- Albert Einstein, in 1936, said that Smuts was one of only eleven men in the world who understood the theory of relativity. (Source – Unafraid of Greatness by Richard Steyn)
- There are 11 statues in Parliament Square in London of which four are non-British – Jan Smuts, Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi.
- The Prime Minister of Great Britain, Sir David Lloyd George, in his memoirs stated, "Smuts, more than anyone else, had the right to be called the 'Father of the RAF'".

Picture: Jan Christian Smuts

As was custom in his youth, due to circumstances, he only started school at the age of 12. This late start was not to deter him and he graduated from both Stellenbosch and Cambridge Universities with Honours. One of his lecturers at Cambridge described Smuts as the most brilliant student he had ever taught. He became the first person at Cambridge to take both parts of the Law Tripos in the same year, and was placed first in both with distinction - (Source – Unafraid of Greatness by Richard Steyn). On his return to South Africa, he set up a law practice in Cape Town. He was a staunch supporter of Cecil Rhodes and supported his principles whenever the chance presented itself. However, the Jameson Raid, with Rhodes's involvement, changed all of that.

He moved to the Transvaal where he immediately made an impression, serving on the administration of President Kruger and in 1898 was appointed State Attorney. In 1899 he was considered to be President Kruger's 'right hand man' and he accompanied the President wherever he went. At the outbreak of war, although Smuts was keen to get in on the action, his administrative duties were considered to be too important. Although he visited the front in Natal, the purpose of these visits was really to apprise Kruger of what was happening. When the British force crossed the Vaal River in May 1900, Kruger and his government moved north and left Smuts in charge to 'tidy things up'.

After the fall of Pretoria and the subsequent Battle of Diamond Hill (Donderhoek), the Boer Leaders met to strategise their next moves. This resulted in a reorganisation and General Koos de la Rey was put in command of activities in the Western Transvaal (now North West) and he asked for Smuts to join him. Smuts first had to complete his 'administrative' commitments and once those were done he joined the commandos. He missed the action at Silkaatsnek, but was in time to take part in the planning of the Battle of Elands River. De la Rey and Smuts spent much time visiting families in the District trying to restore morale which had waned amongst the local population after the fall of Johannesburg and Pretoria. They achieved much success and many Boers who had laid down arms and returned to their farms, took up arms once more.

The latter months of 1900 saw Smuts and de la Rey engaging with the British on the southern side of the Magaliesberg in a number of skirmishes, as the British had started their campaign of burning farms. In December the two Boer Generals were involved at Buffelspoort where a British convoy of 120 wagons was ambushed, and Nooitgedacht where Major-General Clements was defeated. With apparent disputes amongst the commandos in the south-west of the district, de la Rey and Smuts agreed to split, with the latter moving to the Potchefstroom District to take command of operations.



Smuts' first action in command was late in January 1901 at the Battle of Modderfontein in the Western Transvaal. Over a period of three days the Boers managed to occupy and hold their position, forcing the British to retire with considerable casualties. This was followed by a number of other engagements in the area, with Lichtenburg and Geduld being the most prominent. Smuts was slightly wounded at Geduld.

In July 1901 Smuts was given permission to proceed to the Cape to try and get the support of fellow Afrikaners in that Province. He was accompanied by 340 hand-picked Boers. Again, I can do no justice to the hardship and bravery of Smuts and his men in their endeavours in the Cape. Together with many skirmishes, this group of men travelled through the Free State, and the Eastern Cape, to the outskirts of Cape Town. Sometimes going days without food and at times using grain sacks to protect themselves from the cold weather, they not only survived, but forced the British to keep garrisons of soldiers in a part of the country they thought was safe. The journey ended with the Siege of O'okiep - until Smuts was called back to Vereeniging to attend the Peace talks.

To end the story (South African War) of Jan Smuts, I was in Scotland in 2000 where the Gordon's, from all over the world, were having a reunion. A commemorative dinner was held at the Gordon Highlander Museum to commemorate the Battle of Doornkop. The Queen Mother had just died and a question to the host, Lieutenant-General Sir Peter Graham, by an American guest was "who was the most impressive person that the Queen Mother had met in her 100 years of life?" The answer – 'Jan Smuts'. The American had no idea of who Jan Smuts was and I, being a South African, was left to answer the question.

For those interested, amongst other books, I can recommend the following:

- Jan Smuts, Unafraid of Greatness *by* Richard Steyn
- General Smuts and His Long Ride *by* Taffy and David Shearing
- Churchill & Smuts – The Friendship *by* Richard Steyn

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