

Newsletter

November 2020

November 1899 saw the three Sieges well under way, with the Boers waiting for the Garrisons at Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking to surrender, and the British troops holed up in these Garrisons, waiting for the relief forces. Civilians wishing to leave Ladysmith made use of the train service to Pietermaritzburg, with the last train leaving on 2 November. Commandant Wessels, in command of the Boers surrounding Kimberley offered a safe passage for women and children, with only one family accepting the offer. During the month, continued artillery attacks by the Boers were daily occurrences for the besieged towns. Ladysmith had the 'dis-pleasure' of being introduced to the Boer Long Tom Gun.

After the Boer success at Nicholson's Nek in Ladysmith, the Boers decided to split their force, and to 'scout deeper into Natal'. This force was under the command of Louis Botha, then a recently appointed Commandant. This force reached Willow Grange, where half the force, under Commandant Dawid Joubert, found themselves encamped between two British forces who were making their way from Durban to join General Buller. Before the British could mount a substantial attack on the Boers, the Boers decided to retreat and head back to Ladysmith. At the battle of Willow Grange the British had 11 men killed and 65 wounded.



Meanwhile, down in the Cape, Lieutenant-General Methuen was making headway with a considerable British force towards the relief of Kimberley. His first encounter with Boer forces was at Belmont on 23 November 1899, about 125 km south of Kimberley. The battle didn't go according to Methuen's plans, and they suffered over 50 killed and 245 wounded in the process of dislodging the Boers.

Two days later, the Boers had regrouped in the hills (Graspan) around Enslin Station. Methuen believed that he was encountering a demoralised group of about 600 Boers. However, the Boers had about 1 800 men under the recently arrived General de la Rey. Methuen's plan was an artillery attack followed by a bayonet charge. On establishing the size of the Boer force, Methuen called for re-enforcements from Belmont.

After a battle lasting four hours the Boers retreated. British casualties were 20 officers and men killed with 150 wounded.

Picture: Lieutenant-General Methuen

On 28 November the British encountered the Boers again, who deviated from their normal battle plan of occupying the 'high territory'. At Modder River the Boers dug themselves in trenches on the banks of the river and waited for the British force. When they were in range the Boers opened fire, and managed to keep the British at bay for the whole day. However, in the afternoon, Lieutenant Pole-Carew managed to cross the river on the Boers right flank, and although the Boers countered this 'movement', they realised that they were outnumbered and vulnerable, and withdrew after nightfall. British casualties were 70 killed and 376 wounded – including Methuen. General de la Rey's son was mortally wounded in the battle.

November 1900 saw the guerrilla phase of the war well under way. The Battle of Doornkraal (or as it is sometimes called the Battle of Bothaville – our 'Battle of the Month', featured on www.battletoursza.com) which saw the narrow escape of General de Wet and Free State President Steyn was fought on 6 November 1900. Although these two high profile men managed to evade being captured, the Boers lost 25 killed and about 130 captured, including 30 men wounded. The Boers also abandoned their supply wagons, four Krupp field guns, a Pom Pom, and two artillery pieces captured from the British at the Battles of Colenso and Sanna's Post. British losses were also serious with 39 men either wounded or killed in action. Colonel Le Gallais died that night of wounds received.

A day later, some 450 km north east of Bothaville, on a farm Leliefontein near Carolina, Major-General Smith-Dorrien's column were attacked by Boers from the Carolina commando. In the action three men from the Royal Canadian Dragoons were awarded the Victoria Cross for saving the guns from being captured by the Boers.



Having escaped from Bothaville in mid-November 1900, de Wet was again becoming a menace to the British and they started their second attempt to find and capture him.

Ironically, on 21 November 1900, the battle for Dewetsdorp, a town 70 km south east of Bloemfontein and named after General de Wet's father, commenced.

After a day when the Boer commandos attacked the town from all four sides, nightfall brought no action. The following day the Boers overran a picket on a strategic hill and advanced on the town.

On 23 November, after a day of sporadic rifle fire from both sides and an artillery attack from the Boers, the British, with their ammunition running low, were forced to surrender – to none other than General Christiaan de Wet.

Picture: General Christiaan de Wet

British losses were 15 killed, 79 wounded, and 391 taken prisoner. Private C.T. Kennedy of the Highland Light Infantry was awarded the Victoria Cross for two acts of bravery during the battle.

General Ben Viljoen was operating in the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) when guerrilla activities commenced and in mid-November 1900 had successfully attacked the British position at Balmoral. On 28 November he entrenched himself on a mountain range, named Rhenosterkop, 30 km north west of Bronkhorstspuit and waited for the British column under the command of Major-General Padget. Although the Boers had the best of the battle which was fought on 29 November, aware that his retreat could be cut off by British re-enforcements, Viljoen withdrew his force that night. British casualties were 17 killed and 68 wounded.

November 1901 focussed on 'minor' skirmishes by the Boers in order to replace dwindling supplies of necessities, together with Boer activities in the Cape where Jan Smuts was making a nuisance of himself, by keeping British forces active in the area who were trying to track him down. The ZAR 'Government', who were always on the move, made their headquarters near Lake Chrissie in the Eastern Transvaal. Lieutenant L. Maygar of the Victoria Mounted Rifles was awarded the Victoria Cross on 23 November 1901 for rescuing a wounded comrade under heavy rifle fire on the farm Geelhoutboomt in the Utrecht district of northern Natal.

During two of the three November months of the South African War (1900 and 1901), five V.C's were awarded, strangely none were awarded in 1899:

1900

Lt. H.Z.C. Cockburn	Royal Canadian Dragoons	Komati River (near Belfast)
Lt. R.E.W. Turner	Royal Canadian Dragoons	Komati River (near Belfast)
Sgt. E.J.G. Holland	Royal Canadian Dragoons	Komati River (near Belfast)
Pvt. C.T. Kennedy	Highland Light Infantry	Dewetsdorp

1901

Lt. L.C. Maygar	Victoria Mounted Rifles	Geelhoutboomt - Natal
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Anniversary of the birth of Winston Churchill – 30 November 1874

Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill was born on 30 November 1874 at his family's ancestral home, Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, England. Wikipedia says the following about Sir Winston - *He was a British statesman, army officer, and writer. He was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945 during the Second World War, and again from 1951 to 1955. Apart from two years between 1922 and 1924, Churchill was Member of Parliament (MP) from 1900 to 1964 and represented a total of five constituencies. Ideologically an economic liberal and imperialist, he was for most of his career a member of the Conservative Party, as leader from 1940 to 1955. He was a member of the Liberal Party from 1904 to 1924.*

His early life at school was unspectacular and he narrowly passed the entrance exam for Harrow. His father wanted him to pursue a military career and so his last three years at Harrow were in the army form. After completing school he had two unsuccessful attempts to gain admittance to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, finally succeeding on his third, where he was accepted as a cadet in the cavalry. He graduated from Sandhurst in February 1895, being commissioned as a second lieutenant in the 4th Queen's Own Hussars Regiment.



Churchill spent time with his regiment in India before volunteering to join Bindon Blood's Malakand Field Force in its campaign against the Mohmand rebels in north-west India.

Blood accepted him on condition that he was assigned as a journalist.

This was the beginning of Churchill's writing career and on his return to Bangalore he wrote his first book - The Story of the Malakand Field Force, which received positive reviews.

In mid-1898 he used contacts in London to get himself attached to General Kitchener's campaign in the Sudan as a 21st Lancers subaltern whilst additionally working as a journalist for The Morning Post.

Picture: Sir Winston Churchill

After fighting in the Battle of Omdurman the 21st Lancers returned to England and Churchill began writing the book, The River War. This was an account of the campaign in the Sudan and was published late in 1899. It was at this point in time that he decided to leave the army. It is probably important to note that he was critical of Kitchener's actions during the war, particularly Kitchener's unmerciful treatment of enemy wounded and his desecration of Muhammad Ahmad's tomb in Omdurman.

Anticipating the outbreak of War between Britain and the Boer Republics, Churchill sailed to South Africa as a journalist for the Morning Post. In October 1899, he travelled to the battlefield near Ladysmith which was besieged by the Boers. After the train on which he was travelling, an armoured train carrying British troops, was derailed by the Boers, he was captured as a prisoner of war and sent to Pretoria. In December he escaped from the prison and evaded his captors by stowing away aboard coal freight trains and made it to safety in Portuguese East Africa. His escape attracted world-wide publicity and the Boers made much of his possible recapture.

In January 1900, on arriving back in Durban, he enlisted with the South African Light Horse as a Lieutenant, joining General Buller's troops in the relief of Ladysmith. With Ladysmith relieved he joined up with General Roberts' Forces in the capture of Johannesburg and Pretoria. After the capture of Pretoria, Churchill saw action at the Battle of Diamond Hill, 15 km east of Pretoria, the position the Boers took up after not defending their capital. Colonel Ian Hamilton, in his book *'Listening for the Drums'*, has the following to say about an incident in the battle: *"Our troops laid below a high mound, the crest of which was held by the Boers. The key to the battlefield, lay on the summit, but nobody knew it until Winston Churchill, who had been attached to my column by the High Command, somehow managed to give me the slip and climb this mountain, most of it being dead ground to the Boers lining the crest-line, as they had to keep their heads down owing to our heavy gun fire. He climbed this mountain as our scouts were trained to climb on the Indian Frontier, and he ensconced himself in a niche not more than a pistol shot directly below the Boer Commando – no mean feat of arms in broad daylight. It was also a feat which showed 'a fine trust' on Churchill's part in the accuracy of the British artillery which was firing at the crest. Had even half a dozen of the Boers run 20 yards over the brow, they could have knocked him off his perch with a volley of stones. Thus it was that from his lofty perch, Winston had the nerve to signal me with his handkerchief on a stick, that if I could only manage to gallop up at the head of my mounted infantry, we ought to be able to rush this summit. Hamilton did just that, and the Boers were driven back."*

Hamilton's full account refers to Churchill's 'conspicuous gallantry', a phrase which is often used in recommendations for the VC.

Throughout the war, he had publicly chastised anti-Boer prejudices and was opposed to the policies of scorched earth and concentration camps – both of which were being implemented by Kitchener. Due to his experience with his Boer captors on being taken prisoner, he urged the British to treat the Boers with generosity and tolerance. In July 1900, having resigned his lieutenancy, he returned to Britain. His Morning Post despatches had been published as 'London to Ladysmith via Pretoria' and had made him a household name, in addition to selling well.

In the book *'Churchill Wanted Dead or Alive'*, written by his granddaughter, Celia Sandys, she writes – *"In South Africa Churchill had also established a reputation within the army, and had made friends in high places. Many of the officers with whom he had mixed would rise to high command in the First World War, when Churchill would be a member of the war Cabinet. There*



were some members of the high command, like Kitchener, who thought him too hot to handle, but as he climbed the political ladder he would win them over."

These newsletters are really about the South African War (1899-1902) and Winston Churchill was much more than this. The introductory paragraph explains what he was all about – one of the greatest men to grace the earth. So, just to finish with a South African War story, the Battle of Spioen Kop was fought on 24 January 1900. Together with Louis Botha and Mahatma Ghandi, these three great men were all on the summit on that day.

Churchill died on 24 January 1965 and was given a state funeral.

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