

Newsletter

November 2021

November 1899 : The siege of Ladysmith began on 2 November 1899 when over 30 000 Boers from the Transvaal and the Orange Free State surrounded 12 000 British forces in the town and cut the railway link to Durban. The town was besieged for the next 118 days. By the end of the siege, every day, 28 British soldiers were being buried in the Intombi Military Hospital Cemetery having died from disease. Early in the siege an agreement between General White, Garrison Commander in Ladysmith, and the Boer Commander, Piet Joubert, led to the creation of the neutral Hospital, five kilometres outside the town. The hospital was run by Major-General Bruce and his wife.

During the siege, the number of beds grew from an initial 100 to 1 900. Admissions for treatment at Intombi totalled 10 673.

One train a day was allowed access to the hospital from Ladysmith.

No remains of the hospital are evident as it was a tented structure, however the memorials in a cemetery on the site are well worth a visit.

Picture : Intombi Cemetery



In the Western Transvaal, on the border between the then Bechuanaland (now Botswana) and the Transvaal, about 250 km north east of Mafeking, a small Boer laager at Derdepoort was attacked by a British force under Lieutenant-Colonel Holdsworth, accompanied by Bakgatla 'warriors' on 25 November 1899. Holdsworth claimed he didn't realise that he had crossed the border and eventually withdrew the British contingent. The Bakgatla saw this as an opportunity to 'settle old scores' and in the attack 20 Boers were killed. There were 14 Bakgatla killed, but the 'warriors' made off with oxen, horses, and Boer women and children that they took hostage, making them walk for two days to the town Mochudi in Bechuanaland, about 45 km north east of Gaborone.

In the Cape, Lieutenant-General Methuen was making headway with a considerable British force towards the relief of Kimberley. The Battle of Belmont on 23 November 1899, and two days later the Battle of Graspan, in the hills around Enslin Station, were followed by the Battle of Modder River (Battle of the Month – www.battletoursza.com). At the end of the Battle of Modder River the British were forced to camp for ten days in order to evacuate their casualties, to receive further reinforcements and to repair the lines of communication which had been destroyed by the Boers.

To quote from Methuen's dispatch after the battle, as recorded in 'Goodbye Dolly Gray' by Rayne Kruger (page 118) – *"It had been one of the hardest and most trying fights in the annals of the British Army."* Kruger goes on – *"He little guessed that he had fought the precursor of battles which were to sear millions of lives in another Western Front only fifteen years later. But he might have reflected on something Lord Roberts had recently remarked, that the new conditions of warfare made a frontal attack over open ground impossible, and that a commander's first duty was reconnaissance. At the Battle of Modder River an untutored farmer (here he means de la Rey) of genius proved the truth of both principles."*

November 1900 saw the guerrilla phase of the war well under way and a number of engagements took place. Doornkraal, or Bothaville as it is sometimes referred to, Wonderfontein near Zeerust, Balmoral, Dewetsdorp, Zand Drift on the Orange River and Rhenosterkop, near Bronkhorstspuit.

At Rhenosterkop the British mounted an attack on General Ben Viljoen's base camp, from where he had been conducting guerrilla activities. The British outnumbered the Boers and after a day's exchange of rifle and artillery fire, at night on 29 November, Viljoen withdrew the Boers. The British casualties were 15 killed and 70 wounded.

Picture : British soldiers at the Battle of Rhenosterkop



November 1901 focussed on 'minor' skirmishes by the Boers in order to replace dwindling supplies of necessities. In the Cape, Jan Smuts was making a nuisance of himself, by keeping British forces active in the area. Skirmishes in Piquetberg and Darling in the Western Cape and at Gatberg in the Eastern Cape ensured that Lord Kitchener had to have a British military presence almost throughout South Africa. The ZAR 'Government', who were always on the move, made their headquarters near Lake Chrissie in the Eastern Transvaal, now Mpumalanga Province.

Although my interest, and the theme of these newsletters is the South African War (1899-1902), the 1914 Rebellion in South Africa involved many of the Generals and names about whom you have read, so the month of November, has snippets of 'news' which might be of interest, not only to South Africans, but readers elsewhere. This is a subject on its own and I am not going to try and do justice to it in a paragraph. Those who are interested in the whole rebellion can either research it, or contact me and I will try and direct them towards appropriate literature. In summary, Britain had declared war on Germany, and because of the Treaty of Vereeniging, South Africa were almost obliged to support Great Britain in their efforts. However, there were many

Boer Generals, from the South African War (1899-1902), who saw this as an opportunity not to support the Empire, and again strive for their own freedom. People like General de la Rey, General de Wet, General Beyers, General Kemp, and others, who were now in positions of influence in the recently established Union of South Africa (1910), opposed the government of Botha and Smuts, and a bloody Rebellion, of Afrikaner against Afrikaner resulted. Defiance endured from August 1914 to January 1915 with November 1914 being the month where most hostilities were experienced. Many towns were occupied by rebel forces and battles were fought at Winburg, Virginia and other small towns. It was a horrific situation into which the young Union of South Africa was thrust. The Rebellion is sometimes referred to as the Maritz Rebellion or the Five Shilling Rebellion.

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	Geelhoutboom – Natal
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Victoria Cross of the Month – 4347 Private C.T. Kennedy – 2nd Battalion Highland Light Infantry

Charles Thomas Kennedy was born at Westport, Edinburgh, on 6 January 1873. After schooling he went into the furniture trade, but during the 1891 depression he joined the Highland Light Infantry in Glasgow for service in India. He played half-back for the Infantry's soccer team, which won the Durand Cup in 1895. He served in the Malakand Field Force before returning to Scotland in 1898. He re-joined for service in South Africa and was present at the fighting near Dewetsdorp, 25 miles south east of Thaba N'chu, where he was to display extreme valour.

His Citation reads:

At Dewetsdorp on the 23rd November 1900, Private Kennedy carried a comrade, who was dangerously wounded and bleeding to death, from Gibraltar Hill to the hospital, a distance of three-quarters of a mile, under a very hot fire. On the following day, volunteers having been called for to take a message to the Commandant across a space over which it was almost certain death to venture, Private Kennedy at once stepped forward. He did not, however, succeed in delivering the message, as he was severely wounded before he had gone twenty yards.

(London Gazette – October 18, 1901)

Acknowledgement – Ian Uys



Kennedy was hospitalised in Bloemfontein, then sent to Aldershot in April 1901.

He was decorated by King Edward VII on 17 December 1901, at St. James Palace. He was then discharged from the army on account of poor health and returned to live in Edinburgh.

In Edinburgh on 24 April 1907, he was again called on to show his bravery. A horse bolted with a contractor's cart in Leith Walk, and in attempting to stop it he was knocked down and the wheels passed over him. Kennedy died on the way to the Royal Infirmary, and is buried in the North Merchison Cemetery, Edinburgh.

Picture : Private T.C. Kennedy – V.C.

His Queen South Africa Medal has the bars – Modder River, Paardeberg and Wittebergen. At Modder River, British losses were 70 killed and over 400 injured and one wonders what involvement Kennedy had in this battle as on the 'evidence' above, he was not scared to be in the thick of things.

Anniversary of the death of Major-General R.G. Kekewich – 5 November 1914

Major-General Robert George Kekewich died on 5 November 1914 and is buried in St Martin's Churchyard, Exminster, Devon. He had been in poor health and even though he was appointed to command a Division at the outbreak of the 1st World War in 1914, he was invalided home, suffering from severe depression. He was hospitalised, but returned home shortly before taking his own life.

Kekewich was educated at King Edward's School in Birmingham and joined the East Kent Regiment in December 1874. In his early military service he saw action in Malaysia, the Sudan and Burma. Early in September 1899, with the British anticipating hostilities in South Africa, Lord Milner proposed that Kimberley should be prepared for possible aggression and requested that a senior military officer be appointed to the local garrison. Kekewich was identified, and to quote from David Biggins's book 'Kimberley' (page 9) – *"on 11th September Kekewich received his instructions personally from Milner. Kekewich was also told to keep his mission a closely guarded secret."*

On his arrival in Kimberley he commanded the 1st Battalion North Lancashire Regiment and was in command of the garrison. It was to his detriment that Cecil John Rhodes was also in the town, and Kekewich had many differences with Rhodes. It is widely accepted that had Rhodes not been in the town at the time of the Siege, that Kekewich would have enjoyed as much fame and privilege as Baden-Powell enjoyed once Mafeking was relieved.

The defence of Kimberley had been skilfully managed, and at the conclusion of the siege, which had lasted 126 days, the gallantry and resourcefulness of Kekewich, on whom the command of the garrison was developed, was recognised in his promotion as Major-General.



Picture : Honoured Dead Memorial - Kimberley

When the British force under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel French relieved Kimberley, Rhodes convinced French that Kekewich was not the man to command the garrison, and Kekewich was relieved of his command. He was then part of the British advance on Bloemfontein and Pretoria, and was eventually part of Methuen's force, involved in the guerrilla phase of the war in the Western Transvaal (now North West Province).



On 30 September 1901 he was wounded at the Battle of Moedwil (which has been featured as a 'Battle of the Month', and can be found on the website – www.battletoursza.com).

In April 1902 he was in command of one of Kitchener's columns, and was ordered to support the British force which was positioned at Rooiwal. Kekewich's force supported the British left flank, which surprised the Boers who were unaware of his presence.

The battle which took place on 11 April 1902, was a victory for the British and was the last major battle of the South African War (1899-1902).

Picture : Major-General R.G. Kekewich

In a despatch dated 23 June 1902, Lord Kitchener, Commander in Chief in South Africa during the latter part of the war, wrote the following about Kekewich – "*Kekewich maintained his high reputation as a fine soldier of character, loyalty and discretion throughout the war, and is well qualified to hold high command.*" (London Gazette 29 July 1902).

In August 1902 he was promoted to Major-General for distinguished service in the Field. He retired from the army in 1904 and was appointed to the honorary position of Colonel of the East Kent Regiment in October 1909.

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

Allan Gordon