

Newsletter October 2020

The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1884 was the start of the Gold Rush into Paul Kruger's Zuid Afrikaans Republic (ZAR) and the influx of thousands of foreigners, referred to by the locals, as 'Uitlanders'. The right to vote, or the 'franchise law' was set by Kruger as 14 years of residency, which was seen as unreasonable as much of the 'wealth' belonged to these Uitlanders, and they wanted the vote. This is a subject on its own, as in the latter part of the 1890's many meetings were held, both locally and in Britain, with petitions being sent to the latter with more than 20 000 signatures demanding Britain's intervention in relaxing the franchise law.

In September 1899, Joseph Chamberlain, the British Colonial Secretary sent a communiqué to Kruger in which he insisted on five years without conditions, else the British would 'formulate their own proposals for a final settlement'. Kruger and his government met and resolved that war was inevitable as they were aware of the deployment of British troops to South Africa from elsewhere in the Empire. On the afternoon of 9 October the ZAR Government handed the British envoy, Conyngham Greene, an ultimatum advising that if Britain did not withdraw all troops from the border of the ZAR within 48 hours, a state of war would exist. The British government considered the conditions impossible and informed Kruger of this on 11 October 1899. The start of the Second Boer War was announced in Pretoria on that day at 5 pm.



The first engagement of the South African War was at Kraaipan, 40 miles south west of Mafeking, where the Boers attacked a British armoured train.

Boer commandos had also started making their way to the Natal border where there were a number of British garrisons.

The garrison at Dundee was attacked (Battle of Talana) which resulted in the death of Major-General Penn Symons.

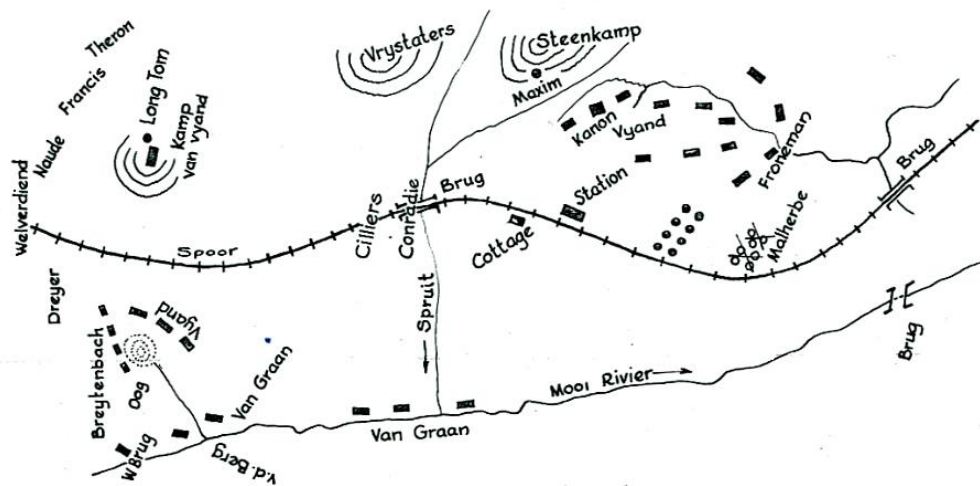
Picture: Major-General Penn Symons

The surviving troops, under Lieutenant-General Yule then made their way to the garrison at Ladysmith. Boer troops had occupied the railway station at Elandslaagte, which resulted in the Battle of Elandslaagter (this month's Battle of the Month on the website), followed by the Battle of Rietfontein.

The month of October 1899 ended with the disaster at Nicholson's Nek (Tchrengula) when General White decided to mount an attack on the Boers, having been informed of their presence on Pepworth Hill, Long Hill and Bulwana Mountain, mountains to the north and east of Ladysmith. Two major attacks were planned – one on Long Hill under Lieutenant-Colonel Grimwood who was to attack Long Hill and the other under Lieutenant-Colonel Hamilton who was to attack Pepworth Hill. A third attack was planned under Lieutenant Colonel Carleton who was to make a night march to Nicholson's Nek. The plan for Carleton was to hold the ground for the British cavalry who would be pursuing the Boers after the two main attacks.

Grimwood's attack went horribly wrong and the Boers took advantage of the situation. Hamilton, instead of advancing on Pepworth Hill, was redirected to support Grimwood. Carleton was forced to surrender the following day – and the Siege of Ladysmith which was to last for 118 days was in effect.

The Siege of Mafeking, which lasted for 217 days, also started in October 1899 – on 14 October. Mafeking was situated on the main railway line to the north and was seen as strategic to the British for supplies. One of the first objectives of the Boers was to capture the waterworks which forced the British to rely on borehole water. On the same day the Boers commenced with the Siege of Kimberley which was to last for 124 days.



Picture: Map based on a sketch by du Toit of the Battle of Frederikstad

October 1900 saw the 5-day siege of the railway station at Frederikstad, where General Barton's column had arrived and encamped on 17 October. On 20 October the Boers under General de Wet and Commandant Liebenberg had taken up positions on the hills surrounding the town which forced Barton to abandon his position on the nearby railway bridge. From reports, most evenings of the siege experienced severe thunder storms with heavy mist being experienced the following morning. On 25 October the Boers were planning on making a final attack on the British, but because of the mist, Liebenberg failed to arrive.

Colonel Hicks arrived late morning with British re-enforcements and fierce fighting ensued. However, with the Boers running low on ammunition, they withdrew. The battle was over by early afternoon. British losses were 29 killed and 88 wounded, with the Boers having 46 killed.

October 1901, the war which was supposed to be over by Christmas 1899, had entered its third year. General Smuts was giving the British the run around in the Cape Province and the British continued with their execution of 'Cape Rebels'. Generals de la Rey and Kemp were keeping the British busy in the Western Transvaal, whilst General Botha was doing the same in the Eastern Transvaal. Lieutenant-Colonel George Elliot Benson was killed on 30 October 1901 at the Battle of Bakenlaagte. Benson commanded the British No. 3 Flying Column, which comprised of 2 000 men and specialised in night raids on the Boer Commandos on the Highveld. General Botha had come across the British column which was spread out over a wide area and decided to attack the isolated rear guard. The battle lasted less than an hour and it is reported that casualties on both sides were high.

During two of the October months of the South African War (1899 and 1900), eight V.C's were awarded:

1899

Capt. C. Fitzclarence	Royal Fusiliers	Mafeking
Capt. M.F.M. Meiklejohn	Gordon Highlanders	Elandslaagte
Sgt.Maj. W. Robertson	Gordon Highlanders	Elandslaagte
Capt. C.H. Mullins	Imperial Light Horse	Elandslaagte
Capt. R. Johnston	Imperial Light Horse	Elandslaagte
Lt. J. Norwood	5 th Dragoon Guards	Nicholson's Nek

1900

Maj. E.D. Brown	14 th Hussars	Geluk
Lt. A.C. Doxat	3 rd Bn. Imperial Yeomanry	Zeerust

As a side-line I met with Richard Johnston whose great Uncle, Robert Johnston, was one of the recipients of the Victoria Crosses awarded at the Battle of Elandslaagte. Robert Johnston played for the British Lions rugby team when they toured South Africa in 1896. He then stayed on in South Africa where he joined the Imperial Light Horse Regiment at the outbreak of the South African War. He was besieged in Ladysmith, where he was seriously injured. He was also a member of the Wanderers Club in Johannesburg where he played rugby. During Richard's visit I took him to the War Museum in Johannesburg and to the Imperial Light Horse Museum. He has the V.C. safely locked away.

Anniversary of the death of Lieutenant-General (Sir) Ian Standish Monteith Hamilton – 12 October 1947

Sir Ian Hamilton died on 12 October 1947, aged 94, in London and was buried at Stirlingshire, Scotland.

In 1870 Hamilton attended the Military College at Sandhurst and in 1871 he received a commission as an infantry officer with the Suffolk Regiment. He was later transferred to the 2nd Battalion of The Gordon Highlanders.



During the First Boer War he was present at the Battle of Majuba, where he was wounded and taken prisoner of war by the Boers.

Joseph Lehmann in his book 'The First Boer War' says the following about the wound Hamilton received – "The hand was saved but remained a pathetic but neatly manicured wreck. His friend, Winston Churchill saw it as a glorious deformity."

After the battle, whilst lying injured, Hamilton had his officer's sword taken, and Lehmann describes the incident as follows – "A big, ugly, black-bearded Boer proceeded himself to take Hamilton's claymore, the same one his father had carried while serving the 92nd." Lehmann goes on to say that the sword was later recovered and returned to Hamilton.

Picture: Major-General Penn Symons

In August 1899 Hamilton accompanied Lieutenant-General White to South Africa with White taking command of British forces in Natal. They proceeded to the garrison in Ladysmith and soon after arriving in the town, the South African War broke out. Hamilton commanded the infantry at the Battle of Elandsplaagte. During the Siege of Ladysmith Hamilton was given command of the southern sector of the town's defences and was present at Platrand on 6 January 1900 where he led reserves to the Boer positions and recaptured some empty gun pits. Late in the afternoon, a terrific rainstorm broke, and the Boers withdrew under cover of it. The British suffered 175 killed and 249 wounded.

After the relief of Ladysmith in February, Hamilton took command of a brigade of Mounted Infantry, and from April 1900, command of the Mounted Infantry Division. He was involved in the occupation of both Bloemfontein and Pretoria, and fought in many battles with the Boer forces.

In the book 'Frontiers and Wars' by Winston S Churchill, Churchill devotes almost 100 pages to Ian Hamilton's March from Bloemfontein to Pretoria which describes Hamilton's involvement in the war after the Relief of Ladysmith. It describes in detail the battles and engagements with the Boers from Sanna's Post to the Battle of Diamond Hill. He was again recommended for the Victoria Cross which was considered inappropriate because of his rank. He had been recommended for the Victoria Cross at Majuba, but was considered then too young (Lehmann).

In May 1901 Hamilton returned to the U.K. to take up the post of Military Secretary at the War Office. He returned to South Africa in late November 1901, and in April 1902 he took command of the military columns operating in the Western Transvaal.

When World War I broke out, Hamilton, back in the U.K. was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief, Home Army and was appointed commander of the force which was charged with preparing for, and repelling any seaborne invasion of the east coast of England by Germany. In March 1915, Lord Kitchener appointed Hamilton, then aged 62, to command the Allied Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. His orders were to gain control of the Dardanelles Straits from the Ottoman Empire and to capture Constantinople. Much has been written about this campaign with regard to the under sized strength sent to accomplish the objective, as well as the tactics used. Wikipedia sums up the campaign as follows – "Starting on 19 February 1915, British and French warships attempted to take the strait using naval power alone but failed after an abortive attack foundered upon sea-mines. Lord Kitchener then decided that an invasion by troops of the Gallipoli peninsula would be required to support the naval operation with a land campaign, led by Hamilton, who became responsible for organising landings there. Hamilton had no specialised landing craft, the disparate troops he had been given had no training for seaborne operations, and supplies for the army had been packed in ways which made them difficult to access for landings. Hamilton believed that the Royal Navy would make further attacks during his campaign, however, realising its likely losses, and fundamentally opposing the idea that tactical losses of its ships in the operation was an acceptable price to pay, the Royal Naval high command declined to mount another attack."

With the Gallipoli Campaign stalled, Hamilton was recalled to London on 16 October 1915, effectively ending his military career.

Charles Bean who was an Australian World War I war correspondent and historian describes Hamilton as follows – "A breadth of mind which the army in general does not possess." (Wikipedia)

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