

## Newsletter

October 2021

**October 1899** – On the afternoon of 9 October the ZAR (Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek / Transvaal) 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. The start of the Second Boer War was announced in Pretoria on that day at 5 p.m.

Byron Farwell's book, 'Queen Victoria's Little Wars' (page 339) records – *"For most Englishmen the war with the Dutch farmers of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State broke what was frequently called 'the long peace' – the eighty-four years between the Battle of Waterloo and the outbreak of the Boer War. So little did all of Queen Victoria's little wars penetrate the consciousness of most of her subjects.*

*The Boer War, or South African War (the Afrikaners called it the English War) was not the usual little war fought by professional soldiers with armies largely composed of native troops, but a major war, a serious war, in which the general public became intimately involved.*

*The Boer War had many of the characteristics of the later world wars: it involved large armies and masses of ill-trained volunteers; it affected large numbers of civilian non-combatants and drew rather heavily on the civilian resources of the countries involved; it was affected by technological changes in warfare and presented great logistical problems; and it lasted longer than any previous conflict since the Napoleonic Wars."*

The first 'shots' of the war were fired at Kraaipan (Battle of the Month – [www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)), approximately 40 km south west of Mafeking, where the Boers attacked a British armoured train, on their way to besiege Mafeking.



Picture : Battle of Kraaipan – armoured train attack

Boer forces were also making their way into Natal and the Cape Colony.

The sieges of Kimberley and Mafeking commenced within the first week of the war. Lieutenant-General White had been sent to command the British forces in Natal and arrived in Durban on 7 October. On his arrival he found out that Major-General Penn-Symons had weakened the garrison

in Ladysmith by taking a brigade to Dundee, 70 km north-east of Ladysmith, to defend the strategic coal mines in the area. This proved to be an easy target for the Boers who engaged the British in the first battle of the war at Talana on 20 October. Penn-Symons died of wounds received in this battle, and the British retreated to Ladysmith after this defeat.

The following day a Boer force attacked the British at Elandslaagte, with the Boers being driven off late in the day when re-enforcements arrived from Ladysmith. White, who was now in Ladysmith, sent a force to protect the retreating force from Dundee, now under the command of Brigadier-General Yule, and this force engaged the Boers at Rietfontein on 24 October. The month ended with the British disaster at Nicholson's Nek/Tchrengula where Lieutenant-Colonel Carelton's force suffered 105 killed, 372 wounded, and 1 285 men taken prisoner.

**October 1900** saw the five day siege of the railway station at Frederikstad, where British losses were 29 killed and 88 wounded, with the Boers having 46 killed.

The guerrilla phase of the war was in its initial stages and there were a number of these engagements. Ventersburg Road, Philippolis, Fauresmith and Jagersfontein in the Free State were some of the minor engagements with Jacobsdal, also in the Free State, on 25 October resulting in a number of casualties.

The town garrison was attacked and 14 men were killed with a further 11 being wounded. Residents of the town were held responsible for housing the Boers and the houses from where the attack had been mounted were razed.

Jacobsdal is a small town about 170 km east of Bloemfontein and 60 km south of Kimberley.



*Picture : Queen South Africa Medal awarded to a member of the Cape Town Highlanders – 710 Private R. Smail, who was wounded at Jacobsdal on 25 October 1900 and died of the wounds. (Authors collection)*

**October 1901** – the war which was supposed to be over by Christmas 1899, had entered its third year. The guerrilla phase of the war was now into its second year, and as had been a year earlier, there were a number of these engagements. Vaal Krantz and Geluk were both as a result of Louis Botha's second raid into Natal, Rietkuil in the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga), and Ventersburg in the Free State where Lieutenant-General Hunter had one man killed and 14 wounded.

To quote again from Byron Farwell (page 340) – *"When the spring grass covered the veldt, Paul Kruger demanded that Britain give up her claim to suzerainty over the Transvaal, and he issued an ultimatum. When this expired at 5.00 p.m. on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1899 the Boers moved on their British neighbours, across the border from the Transvaal and the Orange Free State into Cape Colony and Natal. The first act of the war had begun.*

*As usual, the British were not quite ready. There were only 14 750 regulars in South Africa, but a field force of 47 000 men under General Sir Redvers Buller was on its way. This was a very sizeable portion of the British Army, which then consisted of only 250 000 regulars, 70 000 of whom were in India while 60 000 were scattered around the rest of the Empire."*

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

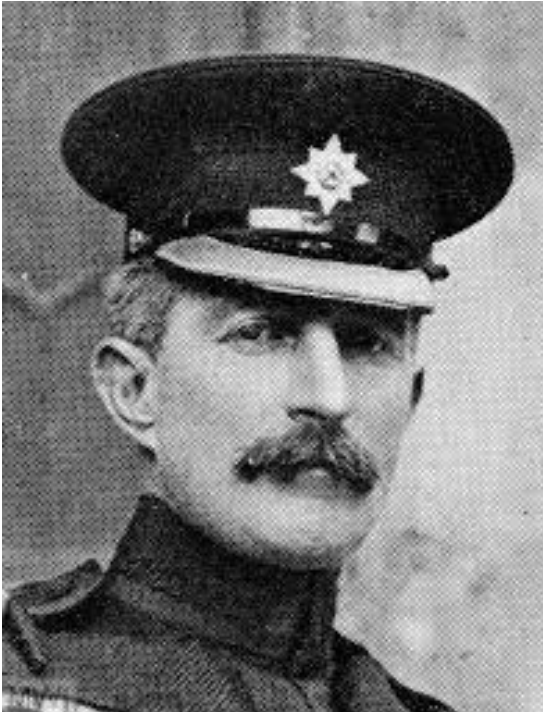
### 1899

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 <sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards	Nicholson's Nek

### 1900

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

## Victoria Cross – Captain Charles FitzClarence – Royal Irish Fusiliers



*Picture: Captain FitzClarence V.C.*

The first award of the Victoria Cross in the South African War (1899-1902) was to Captain Charles FitzClarence, of the Royal Irish Fusiliers.

FitzClarence was born at Bishops court, County Kildare, Ireland on 8 May 1865. He was the son of the Honourable George FitzClarence of the Royal Navy, and the great-grandson of King William IV. He was educated at Eton and Wellington and commissioned in the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) in 1886.

After serving in the Khartoum Campaign he was promoted to Captain in April 1898. That month he married Violet Churchill, a cousin of Winston Churchill, and they had a son and a daughter.

He was sent to South Africa on special service in July 1899 and was present during the Siege of Mafeking, where he earned the nickname 'The Demon'.

On formation of the Irish Guards in October 1900 FitzClarence was transferred to that regiment and promoted to Major. He served as Brigade Major until February 1901. From 1903-06 he was Brigade Major of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade at Aldershot. He was given command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Irish Guards in 1909.

At the outbreak of the Great War FitzClarence commanded the 29<sup>th</sup> Brigade, then was given command of the First Guards Brigade in France. On 31 October 1914 during the 1<sup>st</sup> Battle of Ypres he rallied the Worcester Regiment and directed a counter-attack which saved the line. Brigadier-General FitzClarence was killed while leading the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade against the Prussian Guard at Polygon Wood, Zonnebeke, east of Ypres during a night attack on November 11/12, 1914. He is commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial in Belgium.

FitzClarence's Citation for his Victoria Cross award reads:

*"On the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1899, Captain FitzClarence went with his squadron of the Protectorate Regiment, consisting of only partially trained men, who had never been in action, to the assistance of an armoured train which had gone out from Mafeking. The enemy were in greatly superior numbers, and the squadron was for a time surrounded, and it looked as if nothing could save them from being shot down. Captain FitzClarence, however, by his personal coolness and courage, inspired the greatest confidence in his men, and by his bold and efficient handling of them, not only succeeded in relieving the armoured train, but inflicted a heavy defeat on the Boers, who lost fifty killed and a large number of wounded: his own losses being two killed and fifteen wounded. The moral effect of his blow had a very important bearing on subsequent*

*encounters with the Boers. On the 27<sup>th</sup> October 1899, Captain FitzClarence led his squadron from Mafeking across the open, and made a night attack with the bayonet on one of the enemy's trenches. A hand-to-hand fight took place in the trench, while a heavy fire was concentrated on it from the rear. The enemy was driven out with heavy loss. Captain FitzClarence was the first man into position, and accounted for four of the enemy with his sword. The British lost six killed and nine wounded. Captain FitzClarence was himself slightly wounded. With reference to these two actions Major-General Baden-Powell states that had this officer not shown an extraordinary spirit and fearlessness, the attacks would have been failures, and we would have suffered heavy loss both in men and prestige. On the 26<sup>th</sup> December 1899, during the action of Game Tree, near Mafeking, Captain FitzClarence again distinguished himself by his coolness and courage, and was again wounded severely through the leg."*

(London Gazette, July 6, 1900)

Acknowledgement – Ian Uys

## **Anniversary of the birth of President Marthinus Theunis Steyn – 2 October 1857**

Marthinus Theunis Steyn was born on 2 October 1857, on the farm Rietfontein near Winburg in the Orange Free State. Steyn's initial schooling was at a local farm-school, however he completed his schooling at Grey College in Bloemfontein. After a short period in farming he decided to study law and was sent to the Netherlands to further his education. He departed for Europe in May 1877.

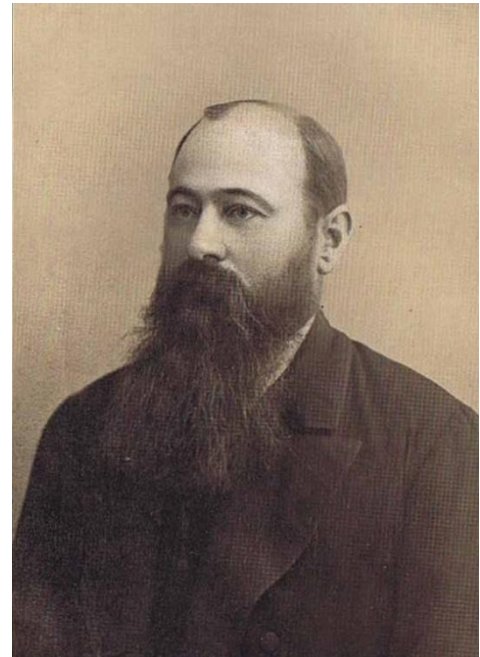
On board the same ship were the Reverend Colin Fraser and his family which included his daughter, the young Tibbie Fraser, who was later to become Steyn's wife. Steyn married Tibbie Fraser in 1887 and they had seven children.

Steyn's initial studies, for entry into the University of Leiden, were at the Gymnasium in Deventer.

In September 1879 he decided to move to England and qualify at a University in that country to enable him to practice law in South Africa.

In November 1882, having completed his studies in London he was called to the English bar but decided to return to South Africa.

On his return to South Africa he set up a practice in Bloemfontein and in 1889 he was appointed State Attorney of the Orange Free State.



*Picture: President Marthinus Steyn*

In 1895 on the resignation of the then President of the Free State, F.W. Reitz, Steyn put himself forward as a candidate, of the pan-Dutch party, for the vacant post. The election was held in February 1896 and resulted in a decisive victory for Steyn, who became the sixth and last president of the independent republic of the Orange Free State from 1896 to 1902. On taking office he pursued a policy of economic independence against English-speaking immigrant influences which had gained momentum through the discovery of diamonds and gold in the country. Although his home language was English he championed the cause of the Boers. Under his government, agricultural practices were updated, and schools were built. He also worked toward a Free State / Transvaal alliance due to the latter facing similar immigrant challenges, with a formal alliance being signed in 1897. In an effort to prevent a conflict between Britain and the Transvaal, Steyn hosted the unsuccessful Bloemfontein Conference between President Kruger of the Transvaal and Alfred Milner, the British High Commissioner which commenced on 31 May 1899.

It was only late in September 1899 that Steyn declared to the Free State government that he would rather lose the independence of the Orange Free State with honour, than fail to stand by the Transvaal in their hour of need. He also presented that should war break out, politicians would be obliged to hand over control to the military and he would join the commandos and fight

alongside the Burghers, and would not use his political powers to interfere in the military strategies of the Generals.

In October 1899 he joined in the hostilities and in November he sent his commandos across the Orange River to attack the Cape Colony and try to provoke a Cape Afrikaner rebellion against the British. After the surrender of Boer General Piet Cronje at Paardeberg, Steyn sought to rally the demoralised Boers. However after the Battles of Poplar Grove and Abrahamskraal, Lord Roberts entered Bloemfontein on 13 March 1900, with his British force. When the British seized Bethlehem, which had become the capital of the Orange Free State after the fall of Bloemfontein, President Steyn and his Executive Council joined the guerrilla phase of the war, fighting under the command of General de Wet.

On numerous occasions, President Steyn showed his displeasure when the Transvaal Generals sought to open up peace talks with the British. Having 'lost' their Republic, President Steyn, General de Wet and Hertzog remained adamant that the only condition for negotiations had to be the independence of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. In March 1902, President Steyn travelled to join up with Boer General de la Rey at Dooringspruit in order to receive medical treatment from de la Rey's doctor, Doctor von Rennenkampf, of the Russian Ambulance. Whilst with de la Rey, acting ZAR President Schalk Burgher informed Steyn of the talks taking place amongst the Boer leaders, relating to a peace agreement with the British, at Klerksdorp on 9 April 1902.

When the Treaty of Vereeniging was signed on 31 May 1902, Steyn was in Kroonstad receiving medical attention. After the treaty had been signed it was established that Steyn was suffering from Myasthenia Gravis (a condition caused by a breakdown in communication between nerves and muscles. Symptoms include weakness in the arm and leg muscles, double vision and difficulties with speech and chewing). In July 1902 he sailed for Europe for medical treatment, where he remained until the autumn of 1904.

Before returning to South Africa he took the oath of allegiance to the British crown, and resumed active participation in politics.

In 1908–09, he was vice-president of the National Convention, the convention which resulted in the four provinces – Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Orange Free State, proposing the establishment of the Union of South Africa.



*Picture: The provinces of the Union of South Africa*

Although he was battling with his health, he distinguished himself as a statesman and for his conciliatory attitude, while maintaining the dignity and rights of the Boer community. It was with combined regret of all present at the National Convention that Steyn, for reasons of health, could not accept the first premiership of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Even after the extensive medical treatment received overseas, his eyelids and hand muscles never recovered fully.

General Louis Botha became Prime Minister and when Botha supported the British war policy and declared war on Germany, President Steyn resigned from the South African Party, the party he co-founded. When Botha suppressed the subsequent 'Maritz' rebellion, Steyn pleaded for leniency for de Wet and other prisoners. However, the split in the Afrikaner ranks was irreconcilable. And, with General Hertzog and General Christiaan de Wet, they founded the National Party.

President Steyn died of a heart attack while addressing a meeting in Bloemfontein on 28 November 1916. He was only 58 years old.

He is buried at the Women's Memorial at the Anglo Boer War Museum in Bloemfontein. Steyn had been prominent in advocating the establishment of the National Women's Memorial which was unveiled in Bloemfontein on 16 December 1913.

The memorial was commissioned to commemorate the suffering of some 27 000 Boer women and children who died in British concentration camps during the South African War (1899-1902).



*Picture: President Steyn's grave*

Thirteen years after its commissioning, Emily Hobhouse's ashes were ensconced at the foot of the monument. Also beside the monument are the graves of Martinus Steyn, his wife, and Christiaan de Wet.

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

**Allan Gordon**