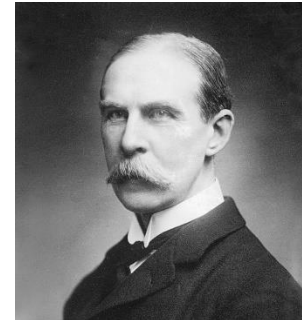


Newsletter

October 2022

Last year's October Newsletter started off with the paragraphs below (in blue), and I believe it is an obvious way to start this newsletter ...

1899 – On the afternoon of 9 October the ZAR (Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek / Transvaal) Government handed the British envoy, Sir 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.



Sir Conyngham Greene

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."

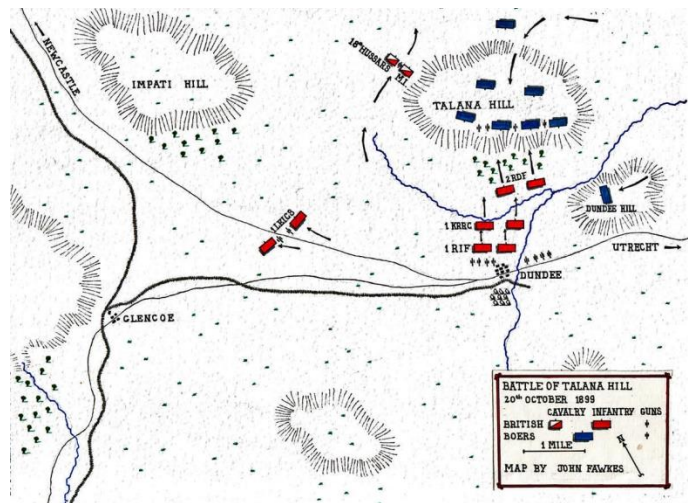
The British reply, delivered through Sir Alfred Milner, as recorded in 'The Great Boer War', by A. Conan Doyle stated (page 79) – *"Her Majesty's Government have received with great regret the peremptory demands of the Government of the South African Republic, conveyed in your telegram of the 9th October. You will inform the Government of the South African Republic in reply that the conditions demanded by the Government of the South African Republic are such as her Majesty's Government deem it impossible to discuss."*

Conan Doyle went on – *"There was no people in the world who had more qualities which we might admire, and not the least of them was that love of independence which it is our proudest boast that we have encouraged in others as well as exercised ourselves. And yet we had come to this pass, that there was no room in vast South Africa for both of us."*

Boer Generals Joubert, Schoeman and Cronje, who had distinguished themselves in the 1st Boer War, mobilised the various commandos and proceeded with the 'winning formula' from the 1st Boer War – to siege the major garrisons on the borders of the Free State and Transvaal. These garrisons were at Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking. This tactic had worked 20 years earlier, but now there were troops coming from India, Great Britain and other countries under the reign of Queen Victoria. Many discussions, over a few beers, have taken place as to what might have happened had the Boers not stopped at Ladysmith and instead encamped at Durban, and prevented the troops from India from landing. After all, a Long Tom had a range which could have prevented an immediate landing. Similarly, instead of stopping at Kimberley, had they progressed to Cape Town – who knows what might have happened.

The first 'shots' of the war were fired at Kraaipan on 12 October, with the first set-piece battle being the Battle of Talana just outside Dundee, Natal, on 20 October.

The following day saw the Battle of Elandsplaagte, where four V.C.s were earned.



Picture: Map of the Battle of Talana

On 30 October, which was later to be called 'Mournful Monday', a number of attacks on Boer positions on the outskirts of Ladysmith, ended disastrously. At Nicolson's Nek Lieutenant-Colonel Carleton's losses were 106 men killed, 374 wounded, and 1 284 taken prisoner. This defeat, and the retreat of British forces to Ladysmith, is regarded as the start of the Siege of Ladysmith. The sieges of Kimberley and Mafeking had commenced within the first week of the war.

1900 – Other than the Boer tactic of 'hit and run', the only real battle during the month of October 1900 was the 5-day siege of the railway station at Frederikstad, where British losses were 29 killed and 88 wounded, with the Boers having 46 killed. Lord Milner, who is not everyone's favourite, expressed his concern about the indiscriminate burning of houses. In the book, which is a record of letters between the author and his family, 'With Milner in S. Africa' by Lionel Curtis (who was on Lord Milner's staff at the time) the following is recorded from a letter he wrote to his mother on 27 October 1900 (page 144) – *"The diary is my own personal talk to you and perhaps I ease off steam there because I am trying not to ease it off in a way that will do no good. But the Devil is walking up and down this land and people have gone mad. We are doing things that 100 years ago Wellington would have none of and which a year ago we should have said were impossible. Thank God Lord Milner sees the sin and folly of it, but wrong has been done and more will be done before he can stop it, that will follow in our trail from generation to generation."*

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.

Bakenlaagte was the major battle of the month of October 1901 where the British had 66 killed and 165 wounded.

Amongst those casualties was Colonel Benson who died from injuries received.



Picture: Battle of Bakenlaagte

R.W. Schickerling in his book 'Commando Courageous – A Boer's Diary' recorded the following (page 315) – *"October 10th 1901. It is two years ago today since my horse stood pawing at the frontier, eager to enter upon the territory of the enemy. I was then nineteen; I am now twenty-one, and in the interval have ridden more than six thousand miles."*

The Times History of the War records (vol V, page 391) – *"Disregarding affairs of minor moment, we find that between September 15 and October 30 there were fought nine actions of varying importance, in which the British losses in round numbers were 800 killed and wounded and 560 prisoners of war; while the Boer losses may be fairly estimated at 430 killed and wounded. These figures fairly represent the decided superiority, both tactical and individual, of the Boers at this period."* However it should be noted that the Boers, at this late stage of the war, did not take prisoners. After relieving them of their rifles and ammunition, these prisoners would have been set free, and marched off in the direction of the nearest town.

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 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

Victoria Cross of the Month

Captain Robert Johnston – Imperial Light Horse

It was indeed a privilege for me to meet the grand-nephew (Richard) of Robert Johnston some years ago, when he was in Johannesburg. At that stage I was looking at bringing bowls tours into South Africa, and being a member of the Wanderers Club, Richard asked if I could take him to the club so that he could experience a little of what Robert had experienced some hundred years prior to Richard's visit. When Richard saw my medal collection and library relating to the 'Boer War', he told me I was wasting my time with bowls tours, and I should rather bring 'military' enthusiasts to South Africa. BattleToursZA is the result of Richard's visit.



Robert Johnston was born at Laputa, Donegal, Ireland on 13 August 1872. He went to school on the Isle of Man and then joined the army at the age of 18.

From 1890 to 1894 Johnston served in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.

He represented Ireland at rugby in 1893 and toured South Africa with the British Isles team in 1896. Johnston and a fellow team mate, Tommy Crean, remained after the tour and played rugby for Wanderers and the Transvaal.

At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902) he was commissioned in the Imperial Light Horse. Robert Johnston was promoted to Captain before the Battle of Elandsplaagte. He and Lieutenant Brabant supported Captain Mullins in checking the retreat at a crucial stage.

Picture: Captain Robert Johnston V.C.

Citation:

On 21st October 1899 at Elandsplaagte, Captain Robert Johnston, at a most crucial moment, the advance being momentarily checked by a severe fire at point-blank range, most gallantly rushed forward under this heavy fire and rallied the men, thus enabling the flanking movement which decided the day, to be carried out.

(London Gazette – 12 February 1901)

Johnston was seriously wounded at Ladysmith and retired from active service. He was decorated with the V.C. by King Edward VII at St. James Palace, London, in July 1901. In 1902 he was Commandant of a concentration camp at Middelburg and in 1903 District Land Commissioner of the Eastern Transvaal. He returned to Ireland and in 1911 joined the prison service.

During 1914-15 Major Johnston was commandant of the PoW Camp at Oldcastle, and was appointed governor of HM Convict Prison at Maryborough. In 1918 he was appointed as a resident magistrate. Johnston was very fond of fishing and golf, though he farmed and bred thoroughbred cattle. He died at Killarney, Eire, on 24 March 1950, aged 77 years.

As a side-line, it is interesting to note that Tommy Crean, who remained in South Africa after the 1896 British Isles Rugby tour with Johnston, was also awarded the V.C. during the South African War (1899-1902).

His citation reads – During the action with de Wet at Tygerskloof on 18th December 1901, this officer continued to attend to the wounded in the firing line, under a heavy fire at only 150 yards range, after he had himself been wounded, and only desisted when he was hit a second time, and, as it was first thought, mortally wounded. (London Gazette – 11 February 1902)

Tommy Crean died in London on 25 March 1925, aged 51.

Picture: Major Dr. Thomas Crean V.C.



Johnston died one day before the 25th anniversary of his great friend Crean's death.

Anniversary of the death of Colonel George Elliot Benson – 31 October 1901

George Elliott Benson was born in 1861 at Allerwash, Northumberland, United Kingdom. After completing his schooling he entered the Royal Artillery in 1880 and saw his first action in Egypt in 1885. Before seeing service in South Africa he was part of the Dongola Expeditionary Force in 1896 which was the first significant action of the re-conquest of Sudan, which culminated in the September 1898 Battle of Omdurman.



When he arrived in South Africa he was a Major, but was soon promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Six months later he was promoted to Colonel.

He took part in various engagements as part of Lord Methuen's column on the march to Kimberley.

It has been reported that Benson was responsible for guiding the Highland Brigade at the Battle of Magersfontein. However, Benson was forty-five minutes behind Major-General Wauchope's Scottish Brigade. When the Boers opened fire, the Scots were still in a dense mass, un-deployed, and as such, suffered accordingly.

Picture: Colonel George Benson

After the fall of Pretoria he was appointed Staff Officer of the British Headquarters at Rustenburg and distinguished himself in the guerrilla operations in the Western Transvaal (now North West Province). He then moved to the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) where he carried out raids along the Delagoa Bay rail-line. He 'nearly captured' Boer General Ben Viljoen in a surprise attack on Viljoen's camp.

To quote from the book 'Jan Smuts – Memoirs of the Boer War', edited by SB Spies and Gail Natrass, the following is recorded about Colonel George Elliot Benson (page 173/174) – "*In September 1901 when Boer leaders ignored Lord Kitchener's proclamation to surrender, Benson intensified his activities. He was later in command of the only remaining British column on the Highveld and caused considerable disruption among Boer commandos, particularly by means of nocturnal attacks.*"

On 26th October 1901, Boer General Louis Botha took action against him. Benson moved to the vicinity of Bethal but heavy rain prevented him from advancing further than Bakenlaagte."

Bakenlaagte was a farm about 40 km north-west of Bethal. It is often referred to as Brakenlaagte, but this is incorrect.

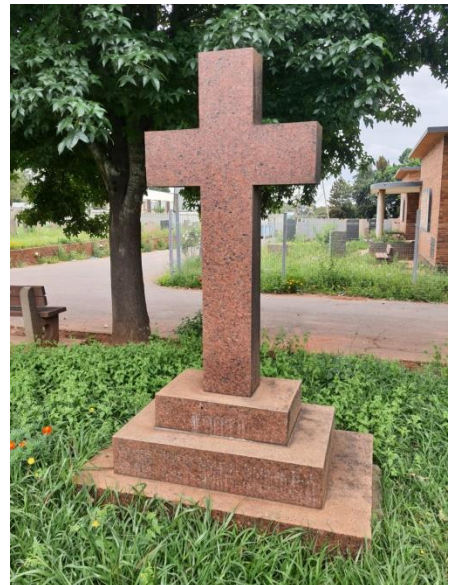
Smuts' book carries on (page 174) – *"When he (Benson) fell back with a small force to cover his rear-guard, Botha compelled him to withdraw still further to a low ridge, later known as Gunhill. Here the British line was virtually wiped out on 30 October 1901. Benson was twice seriously wounded but continued fighting with what has been described as the utmost courage. He died the following morning, 13th October 1901. His plundering actions had weakened the Boers physically and morally, and had made them cry out for revenge. Benson was nevertheless courageous and able."*

Benson had become one of the most successful column commanders, moving at night to attack Boer positions at dawn and making great use of intelligence. It is recorded that Colonel Woolls-Sampson, who had co-founded the Imperial Light Horse was one of his scouts. On 20 October 1901 Benson had led a column south from Middelburg in the Transvaal and had scored some minor successes against the Boers. However, the forces of General Botha, and Commandants Grobler and Opperman joined forces with the purpose of cornering Benson north-west of Bethal. Benson had organised a tough defence, which enabled the bulk of his column to withdraw, but the cost was high and Benson himself was fatally wounded.

In the book 'Louis Botha, A Man Apart' by Richard Steyn, he records (pages 106-107) – *"Lieutenant-Colonel G E Benson's flying column, the scourge of the Boers in the Eastern Transvaal, would often march for up to 64 kilometres at night to attack the commandos in their laagers at dawn, forcing them to saddle up in the early hours to avoid capture. Botha had demanded that the activities of Benson and his 'restless column' be brought to an immediate end."*

When he died, at the age of 40, he was a Colonel with the Royal Field Artillery.

Benson is buried in the Primrose Cemetery, Germiston, South Africa.



Picture: Colonel Benson's grave in the Primrose Cemetery

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

Allan Gordon