

Newsletter

September 2020

The Battle of Bergendal at the end of August 1900 was the last set piece battle of the South African War. At a krigsraad (council of war) after the battle it was decided that commandos should return to their home areas and that the Transvaal would be divided into logical, manageable areas. The Western Transvaal was placed under the command of General de la Rey, the North under General Beyers, the East (to the north of the Pretoria-Delagoa railway line) under General Ben Viljoen, and the South-Eastern Transvaal under General Chris Botha, whilst General Louis Botha would take command of the area south of the Pretoria-Delagoa railway line. In the Orange Free State, although the major towns were under the control of the British, guerrilla activities were well under way in the rural areas of the Republic.

During the month of September 1900, President Kruger moved his headquarters from Waterval-Onder to Nelspruit, eventually leaving the country for Europe and exile. The decision for him to leave was made by the Boer Generals as had President Kruger been captured by the British, that would have resulted in the end of the war.

Following Bergendal, General Buller was in hot pursuit of the Boers with a major engagement outside Lydenburg at Paardeplaats. Two of the Long Tom Guns were in action and their withdrawal happened along a pass which is now known as the Long Tom Pass. The first of the four Long Tom guns was destroyed during September 1900 to prevent it getting into the hands of the British.



On 4 September 1900 Danie Theron, who was out scouting in the Fochville hills, ran into a British cavalry platoon.

He reacted quickly and opened fire, killing three and injuring four.

Unfortunately, his gunfire drew attention to the escorting artillery, and the field guns opened a barrage on the koppie, killing him.

Picture: Danie Theron Memorial

Many South Africans have heard the name Danie Theron, but what they probably don't know is that:

- During the South African War he formed a military bicycle corps which was used by the Boer Army for scouting and relaying messages,
- During the War he is reported to have used the alias of Captain James Bond, and

- In one of the very rare occasions where President Nelson Mandela spoke Afrikaans in public, he said he valued the fighting spirit of Danie Theron, his honesty, bravery and his determination to do the right thing for his nation and his beliefs. Mr. Mandela said that the modern South Africa needs more Danie Therons in order to meet the challenges that lie ahead. (Acknowledgement Wikipedia)

General Smuts who had been campaigning with General de la Rey in the Western Transvaal decided at the beginning of September 1901 to take a commando of hand-picked men to travel to the Cape. His mission was twofold – to give the British another front on which to concentrate and to try and get support and buy-in from the Afrikaners in the Cape. In the book 'General Jan Smuts and his Long Ride' by Taffy and David Shearing, it states, "The long ride, one of the epics of the war, didn't make a difference to its final outcome, but it made a world of difference to Smuts. He was now strong and dominant. The war had given him a crash course in leadership and decision making. What he learnt would carry him into the future to become a South African Prime Minister twice and a statesman of international reputation."

September 1901 also saw General Louis Botha join up with his brother-in-law, General Emmett and start an invasion in Northern Natal. This invasion with about 2 000 men resulted in the battles of Blood River Poort, Fort Prospect and Itala, with considerable success.

The featured Battle of the Month on the website is the Battle of Moedwil. Moedwil was a farm about 25 km west of Rustenburg, and Colonel Kekewich who was scouting for Boers in the area, camped on the farm on 29 September 1901. The camp was not ideally situated as it was visible over miles of flat terrain, and was bordered on the one side by a river bed which offered great cover to the attacking Boers. The Boers under the command of Generals de la Rey and Kemp attacked the British in the early hours of 30 September. After less than three hours of chaos in the British camp, the attack was over and the Boers withdrew. The British lost 61 killed or mortally wounded and 158 wounded, including Kekewich. Private W Bees, Derbyshire Regiment was awarded the VC for gallantry in this action – fetching water for the wounded from a nearby river under heavy rifle-fire.

During the two September months of the South African War (1900 and 1901), five V.C's were awarded:

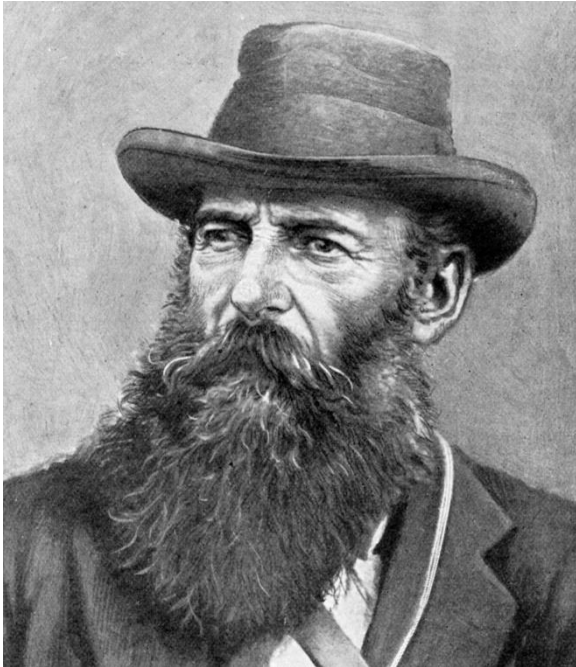
1900

Lt. G.G.E. Wylly	Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen	Warmbaths
Tpr. J.H. Bisdee	Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen	Warmbaths

1901

Lt. L.A.E. Price-Davies	Kings Royal Rifle Corp.	Blood River Poort
Dvr. F.H. Bradley	Royal Field Artillery – 69 Batt.	Itala
Pte. W. Bees	Derbyshire Regiment	Moedwil

Anniversary of the death of Commandant-General Jacobus Hercules de la Rey – 15 September 1914



Jacobus Hercules de la Rey, better known as Koos, died tragically on 15 September 1914.

He was also affectionately known as 'The Lion of the West'.

He was born in the Free State, on a farm in the Winburg District but the family was forced to move when the British confiscated the family farm and burnt the farmhouse after the battle of Boomplaats in 1848.

De la Rey was a young boy when the family relocated to Lichtenburg in the Transvaal, but the above action by the British left a life-long scar.

He received little formal education.

Picture: Koos de la Rey

De la Rey was not actively involved in the First Boer-War (1880-1881) however, as a Field-Cornet, he took over from Piet Cronje at the Siege of Potchefstroom when Cronje fell ill.

At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902), de la Rey was a Commandant who led the attack on the British armoured train at Kraaipan. This action is regarded as the first of the war. He then moved down to the Cape where he fought in most of the battles leading up to the Relief of Kimberley.

De la Rey has been credited for the change of tactic at the battle of Magersfontein where, instead of the Boers occupying the strategic mountains, they dug trenches to await the British forces. After the British had bombarded the mountains for a number of hours, to no effect, they marched towards the awaiting Boers and into a 'massacre'.

After the last set piece battle of the war, the Battle of Bergendal, the Boers resorted to guerrilla tactics and de la Rey was assigned the Western Transvaal. Over the next year and a half, until peace was declared, he and his men saw considerable success at the Battles at Moedwil, Nooitgedacht, Driefontein, Donkerhoek, Ysterspruit and Tweebosch. At the battle of Tweebosch the British commander, Lieutenant General Methuen was injured and de la Rey afforded him safe passage to the British lines in order to get the required medical treatment. De la Rey was at the signing of the Peace Treaty on 31 May 1902.

After the war, de la Rey was active in politics and he was one of the delegates to the National Convention which led to the Union of South Africa in 1910. He became a Senator and supported Louis Botha in his attempts to unite Boer and British. At the outbreak of World War 1, Prime Minister Louis Botha agreed to send troops to the German colony of South West Africa (now Namibia). Many Boers, still hurting from the effects of the South African War, were opposed to fighting for Britain and against Germany, who had supported their cause during the South African War. De la Rey advocated neutrality and stated that he was opposed to war unless South Africa was attacked. He was persuaded by Botha and Jan Smuts not to take any actions which might arouse the Boers.

A number of the Boer Generals from the South African War had formed a political party in opposition to Botha and Smuts where they were 'fighting' for Boer independence from Britain. On 15 September 1914 General C.F. Beyers requested a meeting with de la Rey, and together they travelled to meet with General Kemp in Potchefstroom. A number of roadblocks had been set up in and around Johannesburg to capture wanted criminals, and when the car carrying de la Rey and Beyers failed to stop, shots were fired at the vehicle. A bullet struck de la Rey in the back and he died almost immediately. Many Boers were convinced he had been deliberately assassinated.

Shortly after de la Rey's funeral, Generals De Wet, Beyers, Maritz and Kemp took up arms against their former colleagues. The Rebellion was short lived with the rebel leaders being arrested, a number of their followers being killed in engagements with Union forces, and General Beyers drowning in the flooded Vaal River trying to evade arrest.

And finally, to quote Johannes Meintjies, who in his book 'De la Rey – Lion of the West', says –
"The face that comes down to us resembles that of a prophet out of the Old Testament. It is of a man in his fifties, with sombre eyes, a hawk-like nose, and a square beard. This was de la Rey, patriot, mystic, military genius, pacifist, aristocrat – a prince amongst men – striding the South African landscape of history, in a lonely magnificent dignity."



Picture: Statue of de la Rey in Lichtenburg

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) - our blog has regular posts on Anniversaries / Battles / Activities / Births & Deaths / etc.

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