

Newsletter

September 2024

The major battles that took place during the months of September 1900 and 1901 in the South African War (1899-1902) have been covered in previous newsletters. This newsletter will record other interesting aspects of the war, together with other notable 'September' events.

September 1900: Early in September, following the defeat of the Boers at Bergendal, Lord Roberts wrote a letter to General Botha, stating, amongst other things – *"... warn all burghers on commando whose families are living in districts occupied by our troops to make timely preparation for receiving and sheltering their families. The expulsion of these families will commence within a few days, a start being now made with those now in Pretoria."*

Daniël Theron, about whom much has been written in the past, was killed in action on 5 September 1900. What is probably only known to medal collectors in South Africa is that a medal was struck in his honour in 1970 and was in use until 1993. The medal could be awarded, in times of peace or war, to members of the Commandos, the rural defence component of the South African Defence Force, for exceptionally diligent and outstanding service. Further conditions were that the recipient must be a South African citizen who had completed ten years' service in the SADF and who had not yet received an award for devotion to duty or diligent service. From 1970 to 1975, the Daniël Theron Medal was awarded to officers only, since the Jack Hindon Medal was the equivalent award for other ranks. When the Jack Hindon Medal was discontinued in 1975, the Daniël Theron Medal became available for award to all ranks.



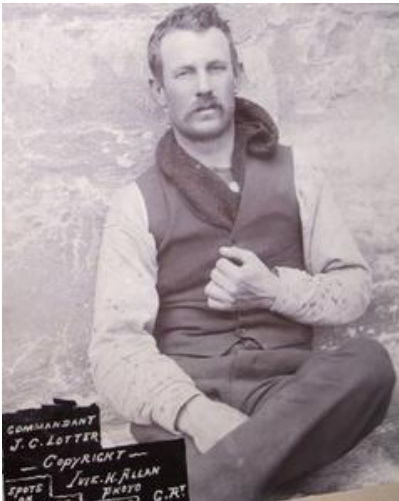
Picture: Captain Daniël Theron

During the month of September, General Buller was chasing the Boer force, under the command of General Botha, through the old Eastern Transvaal. Roberts in the meantime, seemed to be desk-bound, writing letters, almost in desperation as his prediction of a 'quick war' was not materialising. On 14 September he wrote – *"... the war is degenerating, and has degenerated, into operations carried on in an irresponsible manner by small, and in many cases, insignificant bodies of men. I should be failing my duty to Her Majesty's Government and to Her Majesty's Army in South Africa if I neglected to use every means in my power to bring such irregular warfare to an early conclusion."*

On 23 September Roberts wrote to Major-General Clements – *"It is absolutely essential to force all the people south of the Magaliesberg to submit and it is not clear that this can only be done by severe measures. You must please have no mercy, and what you cannot bring away, you must destroy."* And on 27 September Roberts gave orders to Generals Rundle, Hunter and Hamilton to – *"... clear the whole Free State of supplies and inform the burghers that if they choose to listen to de Wet and carry on a guerrilla warfare against us, they and their families will be starved."*

Was Roberts losing it? ... had he reached his 'sell by date'?

September 1901: The month of September 1901 is devoted, mainly to Botha and Smuts. Smuts was very active in the Northern Cape, with two objectives – one to gain support from the Boers in the Cape Colony, a British territory, and the second to keep part of the huge British force in South Africa as 'split' as possible. Botha in the meantime had decided to invade Northern Natal, and although he had limited success, he was in a numbers game, and the numbers were against him.



Boer Commandant Lötter, who has been featured in these newsletters before, and his commando were captured near Cradock. Lötter was one of the most wanted 'rebel' commandants and was injured in the attack. Once he was fit enough to stand trial, he was taken to Graaff-Reinet and charged with, amongst other atrocities, treason, murdering unarmed British scouts, destroying railway lines, etc.

The trial was straightforward, because Lötter was a citizen of the British-controlled Cape Colony, and therefore a rebel. He was executed on 12 October 1901.

Picture: Commandant Lötter

Smuts was in the Cape, Botha was in Natal, de la Rey was not to be outdone and was active in, amongst other engagements with British forces, the Battle of Moedwil in the Rustenburg area, and Ben Viljoen was keeping British General Benson chasing Boer commandos around the Eastern Transvaal. Benson was making a name for himself with his night raids on the Boers, but his luck was soon to run out as we will find in next month's newsletter. Kitchener must have wondered what he had let himself in for. Having not been in the 'job' for a year, he was now active in trying to contain Boer activities, covering the four points of the compass, after Roberts had left with the words – *"the war is nearly over"*.

Other interesting events during the month of September:

- **6 September 1898** – Rorke's Drift hero, Private Robert Jones, committed suicide. The coroner heard that he was plagued by recurring nightmares arising from his desperate hand-to-hand combat with Zulus.

- **30 September 1899** – The Irish Transvaal Committee was formed in Dublin. The strong links between Irish and Boer nationalists stretched back to at least 1896 when Dr Mark Ryan, the leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), struck up a friendship with Solomon Gillingham, an influential second-generation Irish settler in Pretoria. A question remains – twenty years before staging the Easter Rising, was the IRB trying to open a second front against the British?
- **11 September 1950** – Field Marshal Jan Christian Smuts, a South African statesman, military leader and philosopher, died – aged 80. In addition to holding various military and cabinet posts, he served as prime minister of the Union of South Africa from 1919 to 1924 and 1939 to 1948.



Picture: Field Marshal Jan Smuts

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

1900

Lt. G.G.E. Wylly
Tpr. J.H. Bisdee

Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen
Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen

Warmbaths
Warmbaths

1901

Lt. L.A.E. Price-Davies
Dvr. F.H. Bradley
Pte. W. Bees

King's Royal Rifle Corp.
Royal Field Artillery – 69 Batt.
Derbyshire Regiment

Blood River Port
Itala
Moedwil

Victoria Cross of the Month

Driver F.H. Bradley – 69th Battery, Royal Field Artillery

Frederick Henry Bradley was born in London on 27 September 1878. He joined the Royal Field Artillery as a Driver and served in the South African War (1899-1902). When General Louis Botha invaded Natal in September 1901 his Boer force attacked the Itala garrison, south of Vryheid with 1 600 men.

The British, mainly mounted infantry, held their positions for 19 hours. During the battle, Bradley, who would celebrate his 25th birthday the following day, ensured that they would hold on.

Citation:

During the action at Itala, Zululand, on 26 September 1901, Major Chapman called for volunteers to carry ammunition up the hill: to do this a space of about 150 yards, swept by heavy cross-fire, had to be crossed. Driver Lancashire and Gunner Bull at once came forward and started, but halfway across, Driver Lancashire fell wounded: Driver Bradley and Gunner Bull, without a moment's hesitation, ran out and caught Driver Lancashire up, and Gunner Rabb carried him under cover, the ground being swept by bullets the whole time. Driver Bradley then, with the aid of Gunner Boddy, succeeded in getting the ammunition up the hill.

(London Gazette 27 December 1901)



Driver Bradley was awarded the V.C., whilst Driver Lancashire and Gunners Bull, Rabb and Boddy were each awarded the DCM. Bradley was promoted Bombardier and presented with his V.C. by Lord Kitchener in Pretoria. Bradley remained in South Africa and served in the Zulu Rebellion of 1906 as a Mounted Machine gunner in the Transvaal Mounted Rifles.

He was commissioned in the 10th Infantry (Witwatersrand Rifles) and served in South West Africa as OC of 'C' company. He was attached briefly to the Railway Regiment, before sailing to France to serve in the Royal Field Artillery.

Picture: Driver Bradley V.C.

Captain Bradley commanded six batteries of mortars in the Somme until wounded near Delville Wood in November 1916. He was then released from the Imperial Army and returned to South Africa, where he joined the Active Citizen Force.

In 1928 Bradley was transferred to the Reserve of Officers with the rank of major. He remained in South Africa and ran a native trading store at one stage. He died in Gwelo, Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) on 13 March 1943. His uniform was on display at the MuseuMAfrica, Johannesburg, whereas his medals were sold by Spinks in December 1988.

Anniversary of the birth of Lord Frederick Sleigh Roberts – 30 September 1832

Frederick Sleigh Roberts was born at Cawnpore, India, on 30 September 1832, and being the son of General Sir Abraham Roberts, it was not surprising that he pursued a career in the military. He was educated at Eton, Sandhurst, and Addiscombe Military Seminary before entering the Bengal Artillery of the East India Company Army as a second lieutenant on 12 December 1851. In 1854 he transferred to the Bengal Horse Artillery and was promoted to lieutenant at the end of May 1857.

Roberts fought in the Indian Rebellion of 1857, where he was slightly wounded. He was present at the Relief of Lucknow where he was awarded the Victoria Cross for actions on 2 January 1858 at Khudaganj. The citation reads: *"Lieutenant Roberts' gallantry has on every occasion been most marked. On following the retreating enemy on 2 January 1858, at Khodagunge, he saw in the distance two Sepoys going away with a standard. Lieutenant Roberts put spurs to his horse and overtook them just as they were about to enter a village. They immediately turned round, and presented their muskets at him, and one of the men pulled the trigger, but fortunately the caps snapped, and the standard-bearer was cut down by this gallant young officer, and the standard taken possession of by him. He also, on the same day, cut down another Sepoy who was standing at bay, with musket and bayonet, keeping off a Sowar. Lieutenant Roberts rode to the assistance of the horseman, and, rushing at the Sepoy, with one blow of his sword cut him across the face, killing him on the spot".*

(The London Gazette 24 December 1858)

Roberts was transferred to the British Army in 1861 and saw service in Abyssinia and Afghanistan before spending just a few months in South Africa as Governor of Natal and Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Transvaal Province. He then returned to the Indian Army in 1881, spending a further 12 years in India before being relocated to Ireland as Commander-in-Chief of British forces in October 1895. He was promoted field marshal on 25 May 1895.

With the outbreak of war in South Africa in 1899, General Buller was sent out to South Africa to 'crush' the Boers. However, after a number of strategic defeats, the powers that be realised that the conflict against the Boers was going to be no push over, and Roberts was commissioned to take overall command of forces in South Africa. On 23 December 1899 he left England, together with Lord Kitchener as his Chief of Staff. On his arrival at Cape Town Roberts launched a two-pronged offensive against the Boers, with Buller commanding the Natal Field Force, with the responsibility of relieving Ladysmith, and Roberts personally leading the advance up to Kimberley and then to the Orange Free State.



Picture: Lord Roberts

After relieving Kimberley, Roberts effected the surrender of the Boer General Cronje and 4 000 men. Following a number of other victories, Roberts' force occupied the Free State capital of Bloemfontein on 13 March 1900. Due to the outbreak of a typhoid epidemic, he was forced to spend more time than intended in Bloemfontein before moving into the Transvaal.



On 3 May 1900, Roberts resumed the offensive on the Transvaal, occupying Johannesburg on 31 May and then Pretoria on 5 June 1900. These victories were followed by victories at Diamond Hill and then the last set piece battle of the war at Bergendal on 27 August 1900. After this victory Roberts believed the war was 'almost over'. However, the Boers had different ideas, and this was the start of the guerrilla phase of the war. Roberts will always be remembered, and credited, for the formalising of the burning of Boer farms and the introduction of 'concentration' camps for Boer women and children, who had been removed from their farms before the destruction took place.

Picture: The Battle of Bergendal Memorial

Believing the war almost over, Roberts returned to the U.K. on 12 December 1900, having handed over command of British forces in South Africa.

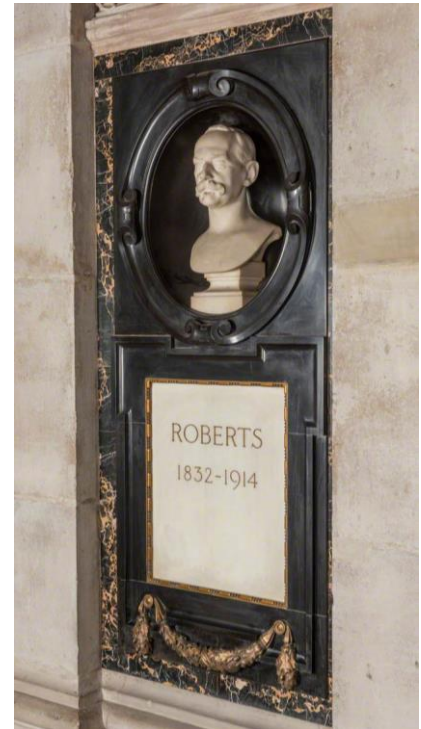
On his return to the U.K., and from experiences gained in South Africa, Roberts promoted the mass training of civilians in rifle shooting skills, encouraging the membership of shooting clubs. Following a visit to Germany, where he observed German army operations and manoeuvres, he advocated for introducing compulsory military training in the U.K. In a speech in October 1912 Roberts, amongst other topics, warned of a possible threat posed by German military build-up.

Roberts' final involvement in 'military politics' was early in 1914, in the Curragh incident, sometimes referred to as the Curragh mutiny. Wikipedia refers – "*The Curragh Camp (in Ireland) was then the main base for the British Army in Ireland, which at the time still formed part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Ireland was scheduled to receive a measure of devolved government, which included Ulster, later in the year. The incident is important in 20th-century Irish history and is notable for being one of the few occasions since the English Civil War in which elements of the British military openly intervened in politics. It is widely thought of as a mutiny, though no orders actually given were disobeyed.*" A number of Roberts' senior officers in the South African War (1899-1902) were involved – French, Gough, and Paget.

Roberts died on 14 November 1914, of pneumonia at St Omer, France, whilst visiting Indian troops fighting in the First World War.

His body was taken to Ascot by special train for a funeral service held on 18 November 1914 before being taken to London.

After lying in state in Westminster Hall (one of only two people who were not members of the royal family to do so during the 20th century – the other being Sir Winston Churchill), he was given a state funeral and was then buried in St. Paul's Cathedral.



Picture: A memorial to Lord Roberts' in St Paul's Cathedral

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

Allan Gordon