

The Man behind the Medal

4935 Private Benjamin Pope (Liverpool Regiment)

Queens South Africa Medal – Four Bars

(Defence of Ladysmith; Laing's Neck; Belfast; South Africa 1901)



Private Pope's and Private Higgins' Medals

In my Mid-Month visit of March 2021 I reported on a visit to Helvetia, near Machadadorp, and gave the reason for my interest in the battle. In summary, the largest portion of the Garrison at Helvetia was of men of the 1st Liverpool Regiment, and being a Liverpool Football supporter there was an immediate interest – I was 'hooked' on the events that transpired on 29 December 1900. Boer General Ben Viljoen attacked the Garrison at Helvetia where many of the soldiers encamped there were still either hung over from Christmas celebrations, or 'practising' for New Year. Many of the soldiers captured were too inebriated to 'march into captivity'. What a disaster ... but I had to get a medal.



The ruins of the Trading Post at Helvetia – photo taken in 2001 – ruins are no longer visible as they are in the midst of a forest

At the end of 2006 a medal dealer in the U.K. listed a 'Wounded in Action – Helvetia' medal for sale and I bought it. It was a Queen's South Africa – four bars (Defence of Ladysmith, Laing's Nek,



Belfast, South Africa 1901) with the last bar being loose. With the medal came a whole lot of research.

Benjamin Pope was born in Aston, Birmingham in April 1878. On 10 September 1895 he attested for service with the King's Liverpool Regiment, giving his age as 18 years and 5 months, and his trade being that of a 'wood turner'. His medical records state that he was 5 foot 5 inches tall and weighed 123 pounds, had blue eyes and brown hair, and his religion was listed as being Church of England. He gave his father, Robert Pope, as his next of kin whose address was listed as 39 Barker Street in Birmingham.

On 17 May 1896 he was listed as a deserter but a month later returned to his unit. As a result he was tried by a District Court Martial for desertion and for losing, by neglect, items of property belonging to the army. He was sentenced to 42 days imprisonment with hard labour. In November 1897 he transferred to the 1st Battalion of the Liverpool Regiment which was then serving in South Africa, and on 25 November embarked to join the regiment in Natal. The regiment were in Ladysmith when war was declared and were part of the force that fought in the action at Rietfontein. The retreating British force from Dundee, under the command of General Yule, were approaching Ladysmith. During the Siege of Ladysmith the regiment were located on the north side of the town.

When General Buller moved north from Natal the regiment formed part of the 4th Division under General Lyttleton and saw action against the Boers in Northern Natal and the then Eastern Transvaal, where on 23 August 1900, they were engaged with the Boers near van Wyk's Vlei. In an ambush, the regiment lost 10 men killed and one officer and 45 men wounded, and I wonder where Pope was during this engagement.



Memorial to those killed at the Ambush at van Wyk's Vlei

After the subsequent Battle of Bergendal, where the regiment were held in reserve, the regiment operated in the area between Lydenburg and Belfast. John Stirling, in his book 'British Regiments in South Africa 1899-1902' records (page 103) – *"Part of Buller's force long continued to garrison Lydenburg and the posts between the town and the railway. One of the posts, Helvetia, close to the line, was garrisoned by about 250 men of the Liverpools with a 4.7 naval gun when the place was attacked and captured by a strong force of Boers on 29th December 1900. In his telegraphic*



despatch Lord Kitchener described Helvetia as a 'very strong post', and he seemed to be surprised at its capture. Our losses were 11 men killed, 4 officers and 20 men wounded, and the remainder taken prisoners. No official explanation of the loss of the post has ever been made public, and from some points of view this is a matter of regret, as the incident, left as it is, tarnishes the reputation of a regiment which had done very good work."



The insignia of the Liverpool Regiment

Pope was injured during the attack with a gunshot wound to his left thigh. The medical report stated that the muscles of the left leg became wasted and he battled to get around on crutches. As a result he was invalided back to the U.K. on 23 June 1901. In August that year he was discharged on medical grounds with his conduct shown as 'very good', habits as 'regular' and his temperance as 'temperate'. His place of residence was given as 37 Springhill Passage in Birmingham.

In January 1916 Pope, who now resided at 5 Violet Place, Edward Street Parade in Birmingham, enlisted for 'short service' with the Worcestershire Regiment and was assigned to the 2nd Works Company of the Royal Berkshire Regiment at Codford. Over the next three years he saw service in a number of posts in various Companies and Corps, eventually being discharged on 22 March 1919. I do not have his World War 1 medals and it is a great pity that this group has been 'split' – for whatever reason.

Staying with Helvetia – but moving away from Benjamin Pope – I have a medal to Private J. Higgins, who was taken prisoner at Helvetia. I am trying to find out whether this man was able to accompany his fellow soldiers 'into captivity' or whether he was one of the soldiers who 'failed to make the journey'. The comment in the Casualty Roll of the Boer War was that he was 'released'. Further research is needed.

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