

## The Man behind the Medal

### 9806 Private W. J. Park – Rifle Brigade

Queen South Africa Medal 1899-1902 – (2 Bars – Laing's Nek, Belfast)



*Picture: The QSA Medal awarded to Private Park*

William John Park was born in Bristol, Gloucestershire, and on the 1881 England Census record, it gave his date of birth as 1870. He attested for the Rifle Brigade at Winchester on 19 November 1888 and saw service with the Brigade in India and Hong Kong from October 1890 until February 1896. I haven't been able to find out whether he was awarded the Hong Kong Plague Medal and the India Medal, but my 'gut feel' tells me that these medals, to Park, are out there somewhere, and I have his QSA from a split group. What a pity that this group has been split.

The Hong Kong Plague Medal was awarded to nurses, civil servants, police, British Army and Royal Navy personnel who rendered assistance when the crown colony was stricken by a severe epidemic of bubonic plague in May 1894. The India Medal was awarded to combatant troops who were involved in actions on the North West Frontier between 1895 and 1902.

In March 1896 he transferred to the Army Reserve and started working as a labourer in the Gas Works in Bristol. He was recalled to the Rifle Brigade on 15 February 1900, at the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902), arriving in South Africa in March 1900. He missed all the action in the Relief of Ladysmith, but was involved with the Regiment in operations around Laing's Nek between 2 and 9 June 1900, for which he received the bar Laing's Nek on his Queen South Africa Medal. Regiments who were awarded this bar were The Royal Dragoons, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dragoon Guards, Hussars (various), and the Rifle Brigade (reference British Battles and Medals).

Laing's Nek had been held by the Boers under Commandant Erasmus since the outbreak of hostilities. Once Buller had relieved Ladysmith, his vast army progressed north, reaching the Nek at the beginning of June. The Nek was the major rail link between the Transvaal (now Gauteng) and Natal (now KwaZulu Natal), and the Boers had destroyed the tunnel.



From the 'Gazetteer of the Second Anglo-Boer War', by Huw and Meurig Jones (page 134) – *“Buller held discussions with Assistant Commandant-General C. Botha (in command in the absence of Erasmus) below the Nek on 2 June followed by an armistice for 3 days. They evacuated their positions at and around the Nek on 11 June 1900 which were occupied that evening by the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade of Major-General Sir C.F. Clery's 2<sup>nd</sup> Division.”*

The book 'British Regiments in South Africa 1899-1902' by John Stirling records that the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Regiment were at Laing's Nek and that they then moved on to Heidelberg in the Transvaal, where they were positioned for a long time. Heidelberg is a town about 50 km south east of Johannesburg, and was for a time, the capital of the ZAR during the 1<sup>st</sup> Boer War in 1881. The same publication records that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was at Belfast, so I am not sure when our man, Private Park, transferred from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. However, Park was definitely at Belfast as it was there that he was killed in action.

The Battalion was part of General Walter Kitchener's Brigade which saw some action at Amersfoort and then Geluk, before the Battle of Belfast, or Bergendal/Dalmanutha as it is more popularly known. Bergendal was a farm roughly 5 km south-east of Belfast and Dalmanutha and was the name of the station on the railway line, about a 1.6 km further east.



*Picture: A small stone cairn was erected in memory of the 25 Officers and men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Rifle Brigade who died in the Battle of Bergendal – Private Park is listed on this memorial.*

Stirling records (page 388) – *“The Boer position was an extremely strong one stretching for miles on either side of the Belfast-Komati Poort Railway”*. Buller decided that the Boer position, on the hill on the farm should be attacked, and ordered a three hour artillery attack on the position before the infantry moved in. Stirling goes on (page 389) – *“The Rifle Brigade being extended to about ten paces, had reached a point 800 yards west of the hill when there opened a terrific rifle-fire both from the hill and from the hills north of the railway. The attackers lay down, then after a great effort by our artillery, the Rifle Brigade again advanced by rushes and ‘there never was a waiver from start to finish’. The Boers of course bolted, but a pom-pom,*



*complete, and 19 prisoners were taken – 14 of their dead were found. The Rifle Brigade lost 3 officers killed or mortally wounded and 21 riflemen killed or died of wounds. General Buller said – ‘The honours of the assault belong to the Rifle Brigade, as they had to attack that part of the hill which had been most protected from our artillery fire.’”*

The book ‘Jackets of Green’ by Arthur Bryant records the following on the battle (page 200) – *“Lysley was dead, Bogey Steward mortally wounded, Campbell very seriously hurt. The Colonel, Alexander, Maitland and Basset, all more or less badly wounded, made a terrible gap in our domestic circle. Then there were all those good fellows among our non-commissioned officers and men. Seven officers and seventy seven non-commissioned officers and men was the total for about 15 minutes work.”*

The ‘Times History’ recorded – *“the Riflemen swept onward towards the position regardless of their losses. Two Captains, Lysley and Steward and the adjutant, Maitland, fell; three other officers and seventy-five riflemen, dropping in their tracks, testified to the steadiness and marksmanship of the hard fighting Boers.”*

So, having seen no action at Laing’s Nek, was this, the Battle of Bergendal, the first real action that Private Park had experienced in the War? Just a few minutes – and then the ultimate sacrifice?

So, having seen no action at Laing’s Nek, could this have been the first real action that Private Park had experienced in the War? As the record said *“the Rifle Brigade again advanced by rushes and ‘there never was a waiver from start to finish’”* - Private Park was part of this rush ... just a few minutes of action – and then the ultimate sacrifice?



*Picture: The Rifle Brigade approach to the Boer position – this is the ground they covered as it looks today.*

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

**Allan Gordon**