

Mid Month Visit – April 2021

I think I was always destined to become a Tour Guide. Early in 2001 I invested in a Bed and Breakfast in Thailand, and whenever we had guests from South Africa, I was called 'Tommy the Tour Guide' when I showed them around. Well, we no longer have our investment in Thailand, and although I have been to many battle-sites with friends and family, and have explained what happened, these have never been formal tours.

Two weeks ago I organised a 1-day trip to seven battle-sites, one cemetery and one stop of 'Boer War' significance – for 24 people. Due to the virus, we travelled in convoy in our own vehicles, which worked, but wasn't ideal. Helping me out was Andre Wedepohl, a renowned local historian. What a success! The tour is a trip around battle-sites on the doorstep of Johannesburg, so, for anyone, whether a local or a tourist, if you have a spare day in Johannesburg, BattleToursZA has a very interesting offering.



The magnificent Magaliesberg Mountains

An early start, setting off at 7 am for our first stop, the Battle of Kalkheuwel. Today the site is very commercial with the Lion Park development, on the then Boers eastern flank of their 'defence' in 1900. There were very few casualties, but the Boers who were 'getting out of Johannesburg' after the British had taken the town, were able to get most of their wagons through the pass and delay General French's left-flank advance on Pretoria. Of general interest was the fact that Major Stevenson-Hamilton, later to become the first warden of the Kruger National Park was there, as well as Captain Lawrence Oates who took his own life in the Antarctic expedition in 1915 to avoid hindering the expedition.



We then moved on to Schoeman's Cross, overlooking Hartbeespoort Dam. Most people, and there are hundreds who travel the road every day, are unaware of its significance. General Schoeman was a hero from the 1st Boer War and took part in the South African War (1899-1902) before he was tragically / or accidentally killed (depends on your interpretation of the facts) on 26 May 1901. Our next stop was breakfast and a long overdue cup of coffee.



Rietfontein Cemetery

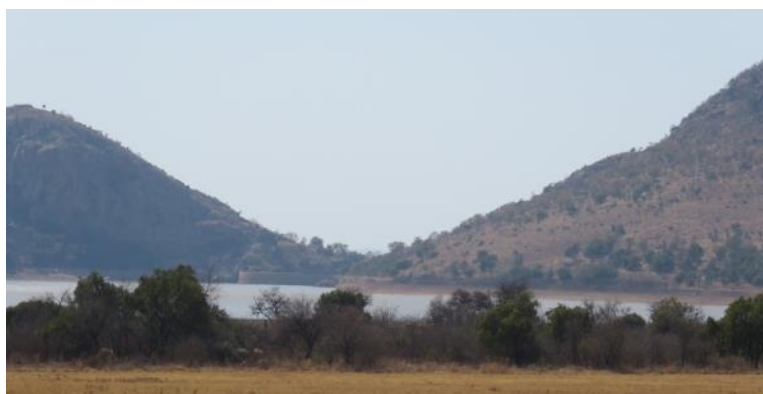
Then to the Rietfontein Cemetery which was attached to the British base that had been established because of its strategic significance. Next was Silkaatsnek – at this stop overlooking the Nek Andre went through in detail what had happened in the two battles which were fought there in 1900. The Boers, under General de la Rey, attacked the British base at the Nek on 11 July with great success, capturing two guns. 30 British soldiers managed to escape to Pretoria, however 190 were taken prisoner. The British had 22 men killed in the battle. British General Lord Roberts however needed to re-take Silkaatsnek as this was one of three passes which enabled a safe link between Rustenburg and Pretoria. The second battle was fought on 2 August, with the British force of over 7 500 soldiers and 20 field guns managing to defeat a force of about 300 Boers. Casualties were light with six British losing their lives. This victory enabled the British to establish a substantial garrison and supply depot at Rietfontein.

From there we made our way to Buffelspoort. At the beginning of December 1900, General de la Rey got word that a supply convoy was leaving Rietfontein for Rustenburg. He and General Smuts planned their attack on the convoy which took place on 3 December. The convoy of 138 wagons was attacked and the Boers managed to get much needed arms, ammunition, food and clothing. Being 'in the middle of nowhere', the British



prisoners we set free to make their own way back to their lines. 15 British soldiers were killed in the battle. After stopping for a 'comfort' break at the nearby Buffalo Grill Restaurant, we made our way to Brauhaus Afrika for lunch.

Brauhaus Afrika is a craft brewery on the banks of the Olifantsnek Dam and offers an ideal viewing point for the Battle of Olifantnek which was fought on 21 July 1900.



Olifantsnek viewed from Brauhaus Afrika

At the time of the South African War there were three major passes through the Magaliesberg mountain range between Rustenburg and Pretoria – Silkaatsnek, Commando Nek and Olifantsnek. With General Baden-Powell being in Rustenburg, and the distinct possibility of the Boers planning another siege, Lieutenant-General Methuen was ordered to attack the Boers who were occupying Olifantsnek. The plan was to drive the Boers through the pass into the path of Baden-Powell. However, Baden-Powell was late and allowed the Boers to escape. The battle was over in a few hours with few casualties on both sides. Having enjoyed a break for lunch and a description on the battle, we made our way to Nooitgedacht.

The Battle of Nooitgedacht was probably the most significant battle fought in the area during the guerrilla phase of the war. Major-General Clements was conducting his 'scorched earth policy' in the area between Rustenburg and Rietfontein, on the southern side of the Magaliesberg mountains. Following the Battle of Buffelspoort on 3 December, where the Boers had replenished their supplies, General de la Rey planned a substantial attack on Clements who had established his camp at Nooitgedacht. De la Rey's force was made up of four commandants (Kemp, Krause, van Staden and Marais) who would attack from the north, the summit, and de la Rey, together with Smuts and Bronkhorst attacking from the south. The battle lasted the whole day, with Clements eventually retreating to Rietfontein. British losses were 66 killed, 187 wounded, and 350 taken prisoner. Lord Roberts had just handed over command of all British forces in South Africa to Kitchener, so this wasn't a very good start to his command.



British Artillery Soldiers

After Nooitgedacht we made our way to our last stop – the Battle of Dwarsvlei. The battle-site can easily be viewed from another craft Brewery – The Bru House & Diner. Dwarsvlei was fought on 11 July 1900, the same day as the first battle of Silkaatsnek. Major-General French, with a force of just under 1 500 men had left Krugersdorp for Hekpoort, where he was going to meet up with a force of the Scots-Grey's, before proceeding to Olifantsnek. The Boers attacked the convoy, and as with Colenso, the guns moved too far forward from the infantry, and were caught in open ground. During this action, two V.C.'s were awarded to Lieutenants from the Gordon Highlanders. A third recommendation was made, but Corporal Mackay, also of the Gordon's, had already been recommended. Maybe this was a good case for a V.C. and bar?

So ended a full day of 'Boer War' interest. In total the trip covered just around 250 km and there has been huge interest from reports received for future tours. So, if anyone is in Johannesburg, and would like to experience what we have on our doorstep – please make contact.

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

Allan Gordon