

Mid Month Visit – August 2021

In preparation for our One-Day Tour on 22nd August, I took a trip out to the Magaliesberg to orientate myself with some of the facts about the Battle of Kalkheuwel and I was reminded about the involvement of a very interesting individual, a real hero – Lawrence Edward Grace Oates.

Oates was at the Battle of Kalkheuwel, was severely injured near Aberdeen in the Eastern Cape on 6 March 1901, and was part of the ill-fated Antarctic expedition in 1912, walking to his death with the famous last words to his fellow explorers – *"I am just going outside and may be some time."*



Picture: Captain Lawrence Oates

Oates was born in Putney, Surrey, on 17 March 1880.

He attended Eton College, followed by time at the South Lynn School in Eastbourne. In 1898 he was commissioned into the 3rd Battalion of the West Yorkshire Regiment as a Junior Officer.

At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902) he joined the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons.

In March 1901 a gunshot wound shattered his left thigh bone, leaving his left leg an inch shorter than the right. He and his patrol were called on to surrender, but in a written reply to the Boers he wrote – *"We came to fight, not to surrender."* He was recommended for the Victoria Cross for his actions.

In 1906 he was promoted to Captain and served in Ireland, Egypt, and India.

In 1910, he applied to join the Scott Expedition to the South Pole and was accepted, primarily because of his experience with horses. Early in November 1911 Scott's expedition set off from their base camp for the South Pole. On 4 January 1912, Scott trimmed his party down to five members, Oates being one of them, for the final march to the Pole. On 18 January, 79 days after the start of their journey, they finally reached the Pole – only to discover that the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen had beaten them by 35 days.

On their return journey Scott's party faced extremely difficult conditions. Horrendous adverse weather conditions made access to food camps difficult. On 17 February one of the party of five died. On 15 March Oates told his companions that he could not go on and suggested to Scott that they leave him in his sleeping-bag. The party refused this request. Two days later, on his birthday, Oates left the tent, telling Scott – *"I am just going outside and may be some time."*



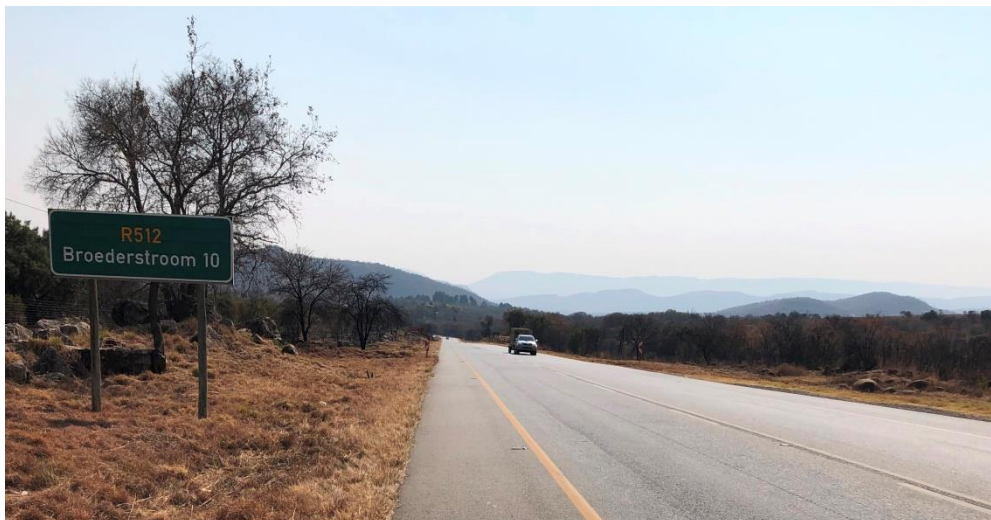
Taffy and David Shearing, in their book 'Commandant Gideon Scheepers and the search for his grave', record the following (page 65) – *"Ten days later Oates' big toe turned black. He struggled on, but his left leg swelled up and he was unable to pull his sleigh. On 17 March, his birthday, he stumbled out wretchedly in his socks into a blizzard and was never seen again".*

They go on – *"The remainder of the party, marooned by a great storm, died in their tent, unable to reach their next food store. Tragically Oates' war wound had slowed down their speed and played a considerable part in the collapse of the British polar party."*

A reference to a previous birthday, from the same book, (page 65) – *"Oates spent a boring 21st birthday lying on his back. Later he was moved to the hospital at Nauwpoort, where the bullet was removed and his leg set. He went home on crutches, but his left leg was always shorter than the right."*

In June 1984, Oates' Polar Medal was sold on auction for £50 000 (British Pounds). It was reunited with his South African War (1899-1902), Queen South Africa Medal, and they are now both on display at the Museum of the Royal Dragoon Guards in York. He framed and hung the note that he received from the Boers demanding that he and his men surrender, and hung it in his home. I am not sure where it is now, but it would be a valuable piece of Afrikaner memorabilia.

The Battle of Kalkheuwel had relatively few casualties. Three members of Oates' regiment, the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, were killed in the battle – Sergeant W. Belshaw, Corporal A. Blackman and Private A. Hall, however 50 horses were either killed in the battle or had to be euthanised due to injuries received.



Picture: Oates' view on the approach to the Battle of Kalkheuwel

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