

## Mid Month Visit – January 2021

**Compliments of the season to all our readers!** Here's hoping that the New Year is kind to you, your families and friends, and most of all, that we say goodbye to this dreaded virus. BattleToursZA would certainly like to have conducted a number of tours by this time next year.

Janet and I have had time to think about what we can do in the short term, so we spent the first Sunday of 2021 planning a 1-day tour around the immediate surrounds of Johannesburg and have put together, what we believe to be, an interesting 'Introduction to the Guerrilla Phase of the South African War (1899-1902)'. The tour which covers six battle-sites and one cemetery, traverses 230 km, and has good stops along the route for food, refreshments and biological breaks. The battle-site stops are not to walk the battlefield, but rather to see the 'site' and get an appreciation for what happened. More in-depth tours/visits to specific sites of interest can be arranged. This is a very good 'introductory tour', not only for interested locals, but for overseas visitors who are looking for an 'introductory experience', and who have a spare day when visiting our country. We have advertised our first tour for 28 March 2021 and have received a few bookings. Those interested, please get in touch with us for further details.

The cemetery that we visited was Rietfontein Cemetery, very close to Hartebeespoort Dam, which wasn't there at the time of the South African War. Construction of the dam started in 1920 and took four years to complete.

The cemetery had its beginnings as part of a military post, established by Lieutenant-General Baden-Powell after he had been relieved from Mafeking, to secure the supply route between the towns of Pretoria, Krugersdorp and Rustenburg.

It was an ideal position, being close to mid-way between the towns, and close to two very strategic Neks (breaks in the mountain range) through which the Boers needed to travel to get from the Western Transvaal to the Northern Transvaal.



*Picture: Rietfontein Cemetery*



In September 1900, Lieutenant-Colonel Baden-Powell established Rietfontein - a fortified camp. Within a few months the site developed into a 900-man garrison and depot, complete with batteries of guns. A tented hospital comprising 200 beds served the garrison and also provided a facility for units stationed in the area. It was also well positioned for casualties from events in the Western Transvaal (now North West Province), saving casualties the trauma of a further day's wagon ride into the Pretoria based hospitals. Not far from the hospital was the cemetery.

Apart from being a centre/base for clearing the countryside of enemy units and to re-supply British units with provisions, Rietfontein was the first staging post, after Pretoria, for convoys going to the depots at Rustenburg and Krugersdorp. In December the outward 'Christmas Convoy' was attacked opposite Buffelspoort, halfway to Rustenburg. This successful attack by the Boers was the prelude to the largest battle in the area, at Nooitgedacht, a week later. In both cases many casualties were brought back to the Rietfontein Hospital.

In January 1901 the Lincolnshire Regiment took over command of the garrison from the Northumberland Fusiliers. The Northumberland's had, during the last part of December 1900, built three forts on the hills to the South overlooking Rietfontein to protect the garrison and the hills from attack by the Boers.



In June and July they built several blockhouses at Kalkheuwel extending the telegraph line to Signal Hill, a position which was visible from both Pretoria and Johannesburg.

A blockhouse was also built at the position called 'Orange Grove' which overlooked Klipspruit Farm on the Broederstroom road.

*Picture: an example of a Blockhouse*

Only after August 1901 was the 'formal' blockhouse' building policy introduced along the Magaliesberg and its passes. The Royal Engineers were commissioned, and it was about this time that Captain Rice of the Engineers designed a cheaper blockhouse of round or hexagonal shape, with a double layer of corrugated iron on a wooden frame. The space between the two layers was filled with stones. This design was vulnerable to lightning, and two graves at Rietfontein are a result of lightning strikes. The Lincolnshire Regiment occupied the Magaliesberg blockhouse forts for the remainder of the war.

An interesting story about Rietfontein, relates to the use of technology at the time. In October 1900 the road from Rietfontein to Pretoria was 'infested' with snipers and had to be cleared. Colonel Rockfort, of the Royal Artillery, took a small party of Dublin Fusiliers with him to deal with a particularly troublesome band of Boer marksmen who specialised in harassing convoys. He



succeeded in capturing all but one of them. On account of these hazards, instead of supply wagons drawn by oxen, steam traction engines were employed to pull five wagons at a time as far as Rietfontein. They were much more compact and easier to defend than bullock drawn convoys.

On our visit to the cemetery we photographed all the memorials and cross checked the names on the memorials with the reference books of casualties which I have in my library. There are 117 names listed (and regiment) on memorials in the cemetery, with Private Allison being listed as 'miscellaneous' and 10 unnamed British soldiers.....making a total of 128. Private Allison is not recorded in any of my references as being interred at Rietfontein, so more research and/or help is needed here. After reconciling the photographs, a 'source list' from a fellow historian and my research material there were two names on my source list of those interred at Rietfontein, missing from the photographs we took – Major F. Minsull-Ford and Trooper Mark Crampton, both of the South African Constabulary. On the source list, the names seemed to have been entered as an 'addendum'. There is, however, a cross in the cemetery, which just says – SAC. Could this have been erected there, from the original site of burial, for the names to be added later? Both men were killed at a skirmish at Mooimeisiefontein, which has added another 'can of worms' to my research.

For those who are interested in the battles in the area, the cemetery honours the following better known battles and regiments with multiple casualties:

<b><u>Battles</u></b>	<b>No. of Graves</b>	<b><u>Regiments</u></b>	<b>No. of Graves</b>
Buffelspoort	14	Dragoon Guards	6
Kalkheupal	3	Imperial Yeomanry	6
Nooitgedacht	8	Kitchener's Fighting Scouts	4
Silkaatsnek	27	Kitchener's Horse	3
Zoutpansberg	6	Lincolnshire	30
Died of Disease	35	Northumberland Fusiliers	7
		Royal Army Medical Corp	3
		Royal Berkshire	5
		South African Constabulary	22
		Worcestershire	4
		West Yorkshire	11

To put the above into perspective, there are 17 places where battles/engagements took place which resulted in the soldiers being interred at Rietfontein, with four of those soldiers, who are remembered, not being able to be associated with a 'place' – from the research records I have available. There are also a total of 28 Regiments 'represented' by soldiers interred at Rietfontein.

The 'Mooimeisiefontein' puzzle still exists. Andre Wedepohl has found a farm by the name of Mooimeisiefontein close to Brits. However, another explanation is that the old Mooimeisiefontein is now the modern Mooinooi, which is close to the Buffelspoort convoy attack. I will keep you posted.



I wonder how many readers remember the Flag of the Boer Republic of the Transvaal, or Zuid Afrikaans Republic (ZAR) as it was also known. For those who do, it was first flown on 6 January 1857 in Potchefstroom. The flag represented 'unity, loyalty, and patriotism' and it was fully recognised by the Volksraad (Government) on 18 February 1857.

The Vierkleur consists of 3 equally spaced horizontal stripes of red, white and blue, with one vertical stripe of green.



The top stripe (red) represented blood – the blood that would be offered for freedom. The middle stripe (white) represented purity. The bottom stripe (blue) represented the sky which covered the people like a blanket. It also represented God who looked over all his people. The green stripe (on the 'pole' side of the flag) represented hope, which brought all the other colours together. The green stripe was one and a half times the width of the other stripes.

*Picture: the 'Vierkleur'*

At the time of the annexation of the Transvaal by the British in 1880, the 'Vierkleur' was moved to Heidelberg, the new, interim capital of the Republic, until independence was restored after the Battle of Majuba. It was also the 'symbol of hope' which the Boers of the Transvaal/ZAR took into the South African War of 1899-1902, never to be officially recognised once the Peace Treaty of Vereeniging was signed on 31 May 1902.

*References/Acknowledgements: Professor I. Copley - Article  
The Anglo-Boer War, The Road to Infamy – Owen Coetzer*

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

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