

## Mid-Month Visit – July 2024

I recently attended a Highland Gathering (Piping, Drumming & Highland Dancing Competitions) and was in awe with the number of different kilts and related 'garb' being worn by band participants and spectators. Having a number of Sgian-Dubh's in my collection, I got thinking about why I haven't heard of any Boer War battles being commemorated on these 'knives' which are an integral part of the Scottish dress. For those who are unfamiliar with what a Sgian-Dubh is, this is what Wikipedia records – *"The Sgian-Dubh anglicized as Skene-Dhu – is a small, single-edged knife worn as part of traditional Scottish Highland dress. Originally used for eating and preparing fruit, meat, and cutting bread and cheese, as well as serving for other more general day-to-day uses such as cutting material and protection, it is now worn as part of traditional Scottish dress tucked into the top of the kilt hose (socks) with only the upper portion of the hilt visible. The Sgian-Dubh is normally worn on the same side as the dominant hand."*



The numbered, special edition, Sgian-Dubhs that I have in my collection are

- one to the Battle of Tobruk (WW2), where my father (a member of the Transvaal Scottish 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion) was captured, and
- one to the Battle of Delville Wood (WW1), a battle where the South Africans excelled, and a battle which is of special interest to my medal collection.

*Picture: The Author's Sgian-Dubhs*

My thoughts went to a special edition Sgian-Dubh to a battle in the Boer War (South African War 1899-1902), and I immediately came up with the Battle of Dwarsvlei, fought on 11 July 1900.

Next year will be the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle, and what a tribute it would be, not only to the battle, not only to those who lost their lives, but also to the two Victoria Cross recipients for their acts of bravery in rescuing the guns which had been 'abandoned' – later to be rescued. The recipients were two Gordon Highlanders – Captains Gordon and Younger.

The site of the battle is a thirty-minute drive from Johannesburg, on the perimeter of the mighty Magaliesberg mountain range, un-signposted, so unless you know where you are going, you will be unaware of its existence.

The Battle of Dwarsvlei has also been referred to as: 'Leeuhoek', 'Doornboschfontein' and 'Onrus', all being names of farms in the vicinity of the action that took place on that day.



On 11 July 1900, the Gordon Highlanders and Shropshire Regiment under the command of Major-General Smith-Dorrien left Krugersdorp for Hekpoort to join the Scots Greys from Pretoria and link up with Major General Lord Baden-Powell at Olifantsnek, south of Rustenburg.

Yeomanry scouts were out in front making sure the area was clear of Boers. Smith-Dorrien's force consisted of about 1 335 men, 597 Gordon Highlanders, 680 Shropshires, 34 Imperial Yeomanry with a Colt gun, two guns of Royal Field Artillery's 78<sup>th</sup> Battery, three ambulances and forty wagons.



Picture: The 'blue plaque' erected to commemorate the Battle of Dwarsvlei

Unbeknown to Smith-Dorrien, the Scots Greys were being attacked by the Boers at the same time at Silkaatsnek. The Boers were in fact involved in four battles on this day – Witpoort, east of Pretoria; Onderstepoort to the north; and Zilikat's Nek (Silkaatsnek) and Dwarsvlei in the west. The results of the actions at the last three sites/battles were disastrous to the British.

When the column approached a range of hills, the Boers, mainly from the Krugersdorp Commando under General Sarel Oosthuizen, opened fire on them from the high ground. As at Colenso, the horse-drawn artillery in their eagerness to come into action, had left the infantry behind and found themselves in an exposed position. Having stationed the guns they sent the limbers 500 meters to the rear, instead of taking advantage of the perfect cover provided by kopjies in front of the Boer position, and the British troops that had just occupied them.

The deadly Boer fire, 750 metres away, soon took its toll and within half an hour, fourteen of the seventeen gunners had been hit and the guns had been silenced. The section commander, Lieutenant Turner, although wounded three times, continued for some time to fire one of the guns himself. One of the limber teams, in endeavouring to remove a gun, had four horses shot and gave up the attempt, while the horses of the other had taken fright and bolted.

Gordon-Duff, in his book 'With the Gordon Highlanders' records (page 116) – *"The whole thing began at 12 a.m. and about 1 p.m. a very fine account was made to save the guns. I did not know anything of it till I happened to look around. I saw about a dozen of our fellows trying to haul out the guns led by Gordon and Younger. However, it was absolutely impossible under such a fire and lots of them were hit, poor Younger first in the head, which apparently was not very serious, then in the thigh, and badly in the stomach."*

In the history of the Gordon Highlanders during and after the Boer War, 'The Life of a Regiment', by Lieutenant-Colonel A.D. Greenhill Gardyne, there is a quote from a diary (page 219) – *"We four reserve companies lay down in lines (five or more paces), some behind rocks which helped in places, some behind small ant-heaps, some flat along the bare ground, their rolled blankets sticking up; many bullets hummed above us. I couldn't see the guns now, but they were silent."*



*Then two teams rolled at slow canter up the slope, drivers shouted, horses strained, they passed over. A few minutes of fierce fire and back over the rise came one team; three horses, one failing, two men flogging and swearing. Another team strained up, another burst of still hotter firing, back came a limber furiously urged by two men only. Down past me came three gunners all bloody, all furious, they strolled past careless of the bullets. The musketry lessened and that was all.*

*Between the little kopjes not 100 yards apart, crowded with the front companies of the Gordons, the guns stood deserted, surrounded by the dead horses. Of the detachment of seventeen, the Officer and fourteen men had been hit."*

This is not a story of the battle, which I have visited often, just some background as to why I believe a limited edition, commemorative Sgian-Dubh would be an appropriate collection item. The guns were rescued when the sun set, in spite of an attempt by the Boers to capture them. In this attempt by the Boers, their commander, Sarel Oosthuizen was wounded and eventually died of the wounds he received.



*Picture: Captain Gordon V.C.*



*Picture: Captain Younger V.C.*

Both Sarel Oosthuizen and Captain Younger are buried in the Krugersdorp Cemetery with not much space separating the two memorials.

This engagement was described by Major-General Smith-Dorrien as their "*most trying fight of the whole war*".

Casualties for the British were one killed, two died from wounds received, and 33 wounded.

Captain William Eagleson Gordon and Captain David Reginald Younger, both Gordon Highlanders were awarded the Victoria Cross – Younger's award being posthumously on 8 August 1902.



Lance-Corporal John Frederick Mackay, also of the Gordon Highlanders, was recommended for the Victoria Cross at Dwarsvlei for bravery in rescuing a number of the wounded gunners.

However, he had been recommended for the Victoria Cross for similar gallantry at the Battle of Doornkop on 29 May 1900, and the London Gazette citation for his Victoria Cross, lists Doornkop as where he achieved his recognition. He was decorated in Pretoria on 25 October 1900.

*Picture: Lance-Corporal Mackay V.C.*

Should Mackay have been the first double Victoria Cross recipient? What a commemorative Sgian-Dubh this would then have been had this been the case. I am ordering mine – any other takers?

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**Allan Gordon**