

## Mid Month Visit – June 2021

The third wave of the Covid virus is really creating havoc – not only in South Africa, but certainly in other parts of the world too. I have had to postpone my Magaliesberg 1-day tour, and to get material for my monthly mid-month visit has become a little more challenging. With the first two 'waves' we used to listen to the numbers being broadcast on TV – with the third wave those numbers seem to have been translated into names, and I for one, dread un-anticipated calls. Bad news seems to be the order of the day these days.

However, with all that said, there was a very special celebration on 12 June, which I missed – the unveiling of commemorative Blue Plaques for placement around the Diamond Hill battlefield. For those who are unfamiliar with the term 'blue plaque', the definition given by Wikipedia is as follows – "A blue plaque is a permanent sign installed in a public place to commemorate a link between that location and a famous person, event, or former building on the site, serving as a historical marker." Several such ceremonies have been carried out in South Africa, and for those who live in Gauteng (Johannesburg), there are a number of plaques at South African War (1899-1902) battlefields within easy driving distance.



*One of the Blue Plaques recently placed at Diamond Hill*

The Battle of Diamond Hill was BattleToursZA's 'Battle of the Month' a year ago, and without repeating what is on my website, it is important to give the background to the battle.

On 4 June 1900, after a number of skirmishes to the south, east and west of Pretoria, General Louis Botha, through a message (ultimatum) sent by the British that evening, was informed that



unless the Boers surrendered, the bombardment of Pretoria would commence mid-morning on the following day. Having received the ultimatum, General Louis Botha, together with his Senior Officers, decided to evacuate Pretoria. They also decided, at the subsequent Council of War, to make a stand north east of the City – Diamond Hill, or sometimes referred to as Donkerhoek. Jan Smuts, who was still the State Attorney at the time the ultimatum was delivered, managed to load all state capital, and whatever he could find at the mint, on a train bound for Machadadorp, where President Kruger and his government were housed. At 10 am on 5 June 1900 General Roberts entered Pretoria unopposed.

The Boers were now waiting at Diamond Hill for the British forces which had occupied Pretoria. The British force of about 20 000 men with over 80 guns, comprised soldiers from a number of countries. Men from England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand fought in the battle which lasted two days. Casualties were 28 men killed and 134 wounded. The Boers were totally outnumbered – they had about 6 000 men and 30 guns, and that they held out for two days says a lot about their fighting spirit.

A number of wreaths were laid at the ceremony on 12 June 2021, one being laid by the Australian High Commissioner in South Africa, Gita Kamath.

A wreath was also laid at the grave of Lieutenant-Colonel the Earl of Airlie, who commanded the 12<sup>th</sup> Royal Lancers and was killed whilst riding the grey (white) horse given to him by his wife Mabell, who had explicitly ordered him NOT to ride it in battle.



*The grave of Lieutenant-Colonel the Earl of Airlie*



One can only imagine what a target this would have been for the Boer sharp shooters. The Earl, who was christened David Stanley William Ogilvy, was born on 20 January 1856 and educated at Eton College and Balliol College, University of Oxford. He entered the army in June 1874 with the First Royals and progressed through the ranks with the Hussars, Dragoon Guards and the Lancers.

During the South African War (1899-1902) he was mentioned in despatches for gallantry at the Battles of Modder River and Magersfontein by Lieutenant-General Methuen who reported that he did excellent work with two dismounted squadrons when good service was needed. In the beginning of May 1900 he was involved in the fighting around Brandfort, where he was wounded. It is recorded that he was nursed back to health by his wife whilst in hospital in Bloemfontein.

Late in the afternoon of the second day of the battle, General de la Rey who was on the Boer right flank, asked General Botha for re-enforcements as he believed that he had the upper hand against Lieutenant-Colonel French. Botha could not help with reinforcements as the Boers were busy trying to delay the British at Diamond Hill and Donkerhoek – the Boers centre. With the British now in command of both Diamond Hill and Donkerhoek, Botha realised that the Boers could be cut off from their way to the East. Elandsriver Station, to the east of Pienaar's Poort, could easily have been taken by the far superior British force, thus cutting off the retreat of supplies and the rail mounted Long Tom.



*The cemetery at Diamond Hill*

As with the previous day, when night fall came, silence prevailed and both forces were given the opportunity to plan their next moves. The Boers retreated to Machadadorp to regroup.

Although I wasn't at the celebration, I have been there on number of occasions, and it is a battle field well worth visiting. I look forward to seeing the plaques on my next visit.

**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.

**Allan Gordon**