

Mid-Month Visit – March 2024

Most recent visits have taken me to sites and farms in the vicinity of specific battles to orientate myself, so that when I take a tour to the site of the battle I am 'on top of my game', rather than having the feeling of 'winging it' or being found to be 'un-informed'.

Last month's visit took me to Bakenlaagte, and although much has changed, major landmarks remain, so the story of the battle, with the use of maps, is possible. The barn to which Colonel George Benson was carried as an injured man, remained untouched for over 110 years, but was then demolished due to locals looking for a 'roof over their heads'. It is now just a heap of rubble.



Picture: *The Battle of Bakenlaagte*

Bakenlaagte is part of Day-1's program on a 2-Day Tour currently in development, and I was looking for a battle, and/or something with substance, to round off day 2, and the tour. Much of which was on my 'radar' was kind of 'wishy-washy', or just a 'landmark'. The Battle of Grootvlei was always in the back of my mind, but I believed it was too far off the beaten track – so I headed off in that direction to investigate. Before setting out I contacted Ludwig Ankiewicz, a local historian, who has a wealth of knowledge of the surrounding area. Due to his age, he doesn't travel much anymore, so I met him on his farm – which is probably in the middle of the triangle created by joining Grootvlei, Villiers and Greylingstad.

Ludwig has plenty of anecdotes from the area ranging from the arrival of the Voortrekkers to the Boer War, and to the mid-1950s, but my purpose of being there was the Battle of Grootvlei. He told me that once operations ceased, the headgear had all been sold off or moved to another mine, and that all traces of the mine were sealed/covered up, but that he could point them out to me on a map. I had not taken a map with me, thinking that I would find all the info with Ludwig – so, I am going to have to go back.

Ian Uys in his book 'Heidelbergers of the Boer War' introduces the battle with the following (page 92) – *"During December a large English column under Colonel Colville was occupied in clearing farms between Standerton and Heidelberg. Their path was clearly indicated by the columns of smoke which rose behind them, as they razed every farmhouse on their route. The commandos were too weak to stop their depredations, however skirmished with and overpowered smaller groups that strayed from the main column."*



Gert and Erika van der Westhuizen, in their book 'Guide to the Anglo Boer War in the Eastern Transvaal', have the following description of the battle (page 151) – "On 26th December 1900, the Battle of Grootvlei – also known as the Battle of South Rand Mine – took place where the town of Grootvlei is today. The British under command of Colonel Colville were burning farms in the Standerton-Heidelberg district when they pitched camp on the South Rand Mine on Christmas Day 1900.



On the morning of 26th December Commandant Buys and a few men of the Heidelberg Commando led Colville away from his camp. When they were approximately 5 kilometres way, Field Cornet Biccard and Commandant Org Meyer attacked the camp from the east. Field Cornet Spruyt attacked from the south-east, Field Cornet Grobler from the south, Commandant Mears from the south-west, and Field Cornets Hans Botha and van der Westhuizen from the west.

British losses were 60 men killed or wounded, and 19 taken prisoner of war. The Boers lost burgher Dirk van Niekerk."

Picture: A 'typical group of Boers 'on Commando'

'The Times History of the War' records (page 119, Vol.V) – "Colonel Colville's column of 1 400 men (1 000 1st Rifle Brigade, 2 x troops 13th Hussars, 4 x guns 63^d Battery R.F.A., and 2 x pom-poms 'O' section), had been occupied during December in clearing farms between Standerton and Heidelberg. There were constant petty skirmishes, culminating on the 26th in an affair of more serious moment. On this day, Captain Radclyffe's company of the Rifle Brigade and a pom-pom were left in camp at the South Rand Mine, twelve miles west of Greylingstad, while the rest of the column left at 7 a.m. to raid farms in the vicinity. A commando of Heidelbergers, about 600 strong, under Commandant Buys, had concentrated in the neighbourhood, and while Buys with 200 active skirmishers occupied the attention of Colville, who had only the miserable allowance of 50 mounted men, the rest of the Boer force, under Commandant Trichardt, fell upon Radclyffe's small detachment at the camp."

Going through Alexander Palmer's 'The Boer War Casualty Roll (1899-1902)', I have extracted the following casualties:

Casualty	Camp	Colville
Killed in Action		9
Died of Wounds	1	3
Wounded	40	
Prisoner of War	16	
Total	57	12



I have tried to establish the progress of the name Oceana Gold Mine (initial name) to South Rand Mine, to Grootvlei Gold Mine, but there don't seem to be any records. So, I have taken what Ludwig has recorded in one of the four books he has written, about the history of the region. He records, in his book 'From the Suikerbosrante down to the Vaal River' (page 40) – *"With the search for gold in full swing in 1887, a geologist walked over the Vaalrand, about eight kilometres north-east of the present Grootvlei, and immediately suspected the presence of rich gold deposits in the area.*

A Company was formed, and drilling started in the 1890's. Within the next 10 years about 10 boreholes were drilled from the Vaalrand to the Vaal River. One borehole was bored where the present Grootvlei Dam is and a rich coal-layer was found. When the Gold Company started to experience cash-flow problems, it was decided to open a coal mine and to generate enough money by selling coal, in order to resume the boring for gold."



Picture : Grootvlei Gold Mine – several years after the South African War

Ludwig gives a comprehensive history, but with reference to my interest, he records – *"During the Boer War (1899-1902) the mine was closed, and the English forces used the mine offices to live in whenever they were in the region."*

And so we have a fitting end to our tour – a battle, more than a handful of casualties, and a story, which will certainly generate some discussion as in March 2010, the then owners (family of the ex-President Zuma) started to strip the assets. The company sold off the equipment (that did not belong to them) and gave Reclaim the scrap metal contract to strip the mines down to the ground. By August 2010, all the shafts were flooded and destroyed. The damage to the assets amounted to R1.4bn. The jobs of 5 300 employees were also destroyed. Certainly, a significant point to generate discussion – hopefully Grootvlei's place in the Boer War will not be diluted by current events.

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) - for regular updates and news.

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