

## Mid Month Visit – May 2021

I wasn't going to produce a mid-month visit report, as what I did this month, was the same as what I did last month. However, I have received a number of enquiries as to whether it was sent out, got lost, etc. ... so let me correct the situation.

After the successful Magliesberg Tour, reported on in my April report, I was requested to run the same tour for the Toscani Association. The Toscani Association is an Association of Italians who live in and around Johannesburg, and can trace their 'roots' back to the region of Tuscany in Italy. They conduct regular tours, and having read about the rich Boer War (South African War) history on their doorstep, the request came in for a tour for mid-May. The difference between this tour and the tour conducted at the end of March was that the Association had arranged a bus, whereas for the March tour we travelled in a convoy of multiple cars.

Being a touring party of Italians I decided to do some research on the involvement of the Italian community in the Boer War – which I will now refer to as the South African War – its politically correct title. I think it is common knowledge that there were many non-Afrikaans speaking people in both the Transvaal and the Orange Free State Republics who had anti British feelings.

I have researched the number of ABO (Anglo-Boere Oorlog) Medals issued to foreigners and have come up with the following figures – Holland Corp = 112; Scandanavian Corp = 45; German Corp = 10; Irish Corp = 5; and the Netherlands Red Cross = 3.



*An ABO Medal*



To obtain such a medal, which was only issued in 1921 (and here lies a story for another day), one had to complete an application form, indicating involvement in the War, and having two 'involved' witnesses attest to the correctness of information supplied.

Of the ± 60 000 Boers, and foreign sympathisers who fought in the war, I can only trace 13 764 individuals who went to the trouble of applying for these medals. Was this because of the time-lapse (19 years) from the end of the war to issuing of the medal ... or that the Boers and their sympathisers just weren't interested ... or that witnesses had passed on ... or that many individuals weren't aware of the issuing of the medal? We will probably never know. However, no Italians applied for a medal. I also can't find any record of Russians, French, and I am sure other nations, whose citizens were involved in the war, applying for the ABO Medal.

But ... back to the Italian involvement.

Just before hostilities between the Boers and the British broke out in October 1899 there were about 3 000 Italians living in and around the mining town of Johannesburg, with many working on the recently established dynamite factory at Modderfontein on the outskirts of the town.

After an explosion at a Foundry (Thomas Begbie & Sons), where sabotage was expected, the Italian Volunteer Legion was formed and commanded by soldier and adventurer Camillo Ricchiardi.



*The aftermath of the explosion at Thomas Begbie & Son Foundry*

Ricchiardi had arrived in Johannesburg before hostilities commenced and at the outbreak of the war had joined up with the Krugersdorp Commando. He was with the Commando at the Armoured Train incident where Winston Churchill was arrested. At the time of the Italian Volunteer Legion's formation, the Italian contingent numbered 200.



The Italians mainly saw service as Scouts as they were renowned for their riding and shooting skills. Also, being expert in the handling of explosives, they were tasked with blowing up bridges and railway lines to hamper the British advance from the Tugela to Komatipoort. During this period the Italian Scouts operated with the assistance of a locomotive and a single carriage with a Long Tom canon fitted, to assist them in their rear-guard duties.

However, the Italians faced a huge dilemma in that Italy was a supporter of Britain in the war. This meant that any of its subjects fighting on the side of the Boers could be considered traitors if captured, and could be tried and if need be, face a British firing squad.



*An example of work done by Italian Scouts*

Thanks to a presentation given by Mario Lupini at the South African Military History Society on 7 February 2006, I managed to find out the following snippets of general interest concerning the Italian community during the days of the war.

After the fall of Johannesburg and Pretoria most foreigners were unhappy, and they planned a rebellion against the British forces. The proposed plot was to be known as the July Insurrection, or Gymkana Affair, which included a large number of Italians. As with all immigrant populations, word soon got out, with the British getting wind of what was going on. Some 500 Continental suspects were arrested. Not long after an Italian by name of Luigi Deli and some cohorts opened fire through an open window on members of Compton's Horse at a dinner party in Johannesburg, killing two. Of those arrested well over 100 were Italians. Shortly thereafter, some 159 Italians and their families were deported to Italy.

The plotters had planned to smuggle rifles into Johannesburg and attack the British officers at their 'Gymkana', shoot them down, and then overpower the 600 or so troops stationed in the city. They were to achieve this with the aid of the Italian Scouts who were



in the proximity of Johannesburg, attacking the British outposts and dynamiting the railway bridge and the station at Irene.

There was also a second, lesser well-known plot, hatched mostly by Germans and Hollanders with a smattering of Italians living in Pretoria in August 1900. Their aim was to assassinate General Roberts. Most of the suspects were again rounded up and also deported as undesirables.

Ricchiardi was in Lourenco Marques (now Maputo) when President Kruger was preparing to go into exile. With hugely suspected British involvement, Ricchiardi was arrested and spent time in prison. He was released after promising that he would not re-cross the border into the Transvaal.



*Giuseppe Camillo Pietro Ricchiardi*

On his return to Italy he busied himself in organising pro-Boer committees and narrating his adventures in a series of books. After the war, for those Boers who refused to take the Oath of Allegiance to Britain, he organised for the first Boers to emigrate to Rivadavia in Argentina. He later moved to Argentina and was appointed administrator of a colony of Boer refugees, called Colonia Escalante, in Chubut.

Although there was no involvement of the Italian 'commando' in the Magaliesberg, the tour was a huge success and enjoyed by all.

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**Allan Gordon**