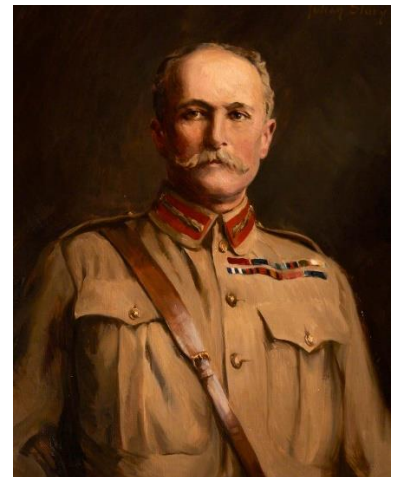


## Mid-Month Visit / Newsletter – May 2025

When one thinks about the current Limpopo Province (formerly the Northern Transvaal) in the context of the Boer War, almost nothing springs to mind. With regards to the old Transvaal, almost all the activity was in the Western, Eastern and Southern Transvaal. Even though there was a direct rail link between Pretoria and Pietersburg, 'war' activities were few and far between.

Pietersburg first came to the forefront in September 1900 when the Transvaal Boers were embarrassed at Komati Poort – they had reached the end of the line. 'The Times History of the War' records (page 476, Vol. IV) – *"Altogether, by 16<sup>th</sup> September, about 3,000 men who were assembled at Komati Poort, nearly all of them men who for various reasons, whether incapacity, lack of enthusiasm, or weariness, were unlikely to prove useful combatants in the rough war to come."* Superior British forces, in numbers, were approaching the border with Portuguese East Africa, and the Boers were forced to scatter. The leaders, from both the Free State and the Transvaal who were present, as they were bidding farewell to President Kruger, decided on a reorganisation of their force. 'The Times History of the War' carries on – *"After this clearance only enthusiasts were left, and as was usual after each defeat of the Boers, an attempt was made to supplement their enthusiasm by a better organisation. It was decreed that, in order to remove the confusion and insubordination due to the excessive proportion of officers to the men they were supposed to command, the burghers should be distributed into commandos of three hundred, each under a commandant, with a field-cornet to every hundred men, and a corporal to ten. The choice of the commandants was to be left to the commandant-general, and all commandants and field-cornets left without commands by the new scheme, were to be reduced to the ranks."*

To put into perspective what had happened at Komati Poort, 'The Times History of the War' records (page 483, Vol. IV) – *"Thus Pole-Carew, on his arrival, found Komati Poort, almost deserted. Smouldering stacks of stores, thirty engines and some 1,500 trucks laden with stores and ammunitions were discovered." ... and carries on – "The President had been forced to retire from the struggle, which most of the foreign enthusiasts had also given up, and all the representatives of foreign armies with the Boers had shown their appreciation of the situation, by returning to their own countries. On the other hand, hardly any impression had been made on the really strenuous members of Botha's commandos. All of them had made their good escape from the British forces, and were still as determined as ever to maintain the struggle for independence."*



Picture: Lieutenant-General Pole-Carew

Many of the Boer leaders, with their commandos, had made their way to Pietersburg. 'The Times History of the War' further records (page 45, Vol V) – *"Steyn and the Free State Government, who had made their dash for safety even earlier than Botha, were present here too. And now a still earlier defect in the British strategy, Carrington's failure to invade the Transvaal from the north,*



*told its tale. Pietersburg and the surrounding districts, as far south as Pienaar's River Station, where the nearest British column was posted, were a secure retreat."*

Page 196 of 'The Times History of the War' refers to all the above and denotes the movement of the senior Boer leaders once they had reorganised and moved away from Komati Poort. It goes on to record – *"At the same time there were imperative reasons for depriving the Boers of their last orthodox base. Pietersburg was still a source of supplies. Four large steam mills were constantly at work grinding mealies and wheat; salt, from the neighbouring salt pans, and other provisions were distributed in large quantities; ammunition was manufactured; depots of cattle and horses were maintained, and a newspaper was regularly published."*

Without going into too much detail, Pietersburg was occupied by the British on the morning of 8 April 1900.

End of the story? ... absolutely not ... Breaker Morant was to make sure that the area around Pietersburg and Louis Trichardt would enjoy continued interest, even to this day, with many prominent Australians endeavouring to have the executed pair, Morant and Handcock, posthumously 'pardoned'.



Breaker (Edwin Henry, or just plain Harry) Morant was born in Somerset in the U.K. on 9 December 1864. He travelled to Australia in 1883 and in the time before enlisting for the Boer War in 1899, built up a reputation as an outstanding horseman. He enlisted in the South Australian Mounted Rifles as a corporal, completing his initial term of service as a sergeant. Much of his time with his unit was spent as a despatch rider and it was in this capacity that he saw action at the Battle of Diamond Hill.

After his initial period of service in South Africa, he spent time in the U.K. before returning to South Africa at the beginning of 1901.

*Picture: Lieutenant Harry 'Breaker' Morant*

I have a book 'Scapegoats of the Empire' written by Lieutenant George Witton, the person who was charged with Morant and Handcock, but who survived execution and was given a prison sentence. He records (page 39) – *"About this time I made the acquaintance of Major Lenehan, officer commanding the Bushveld Carbineers, and had a conversation with him regarding a commission in his corps. He told me that he was about to get a gun section attached to it, and if I could raise a detachment of men he would give me a command. I recruited a number of time-expired Australians, and several Imperial Royal Horse Artillerymen. On several occasions I applied for my discharge to enable me to take up my commission, but this was not permitted until my regiment returned home for disbandment."*



*In June 1901 I received a temporary discharge from the Victorian Imperial Bushmen. I received a telegraph message from the O.C.B.V.C., Pietersburg, informing me that my appointment as lieutenant had been confirmed, and directing me to proceed to Pietersburg with any men I could get together there."*

Wikipedia records the following – *"Lieutenants Harry 'Breaker' Morant and Peter Handcock were serving with the Bushveld Carbineers when they were court martialled. They were executed on 27 February 1902 by a firing squad of Cameron Highlanders, having been convicted by the British army of murdering a civilian, and Boer prisoners of war. Morant claimed that the BVC had been ordered not to take prisoners. Lieutenant George Witton, who had been sentenced to death by the same court-martial but whose sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment, was released following a public outcry; he had served 32 months."*



*Picture: The communal grave of Lieutenants Morant and Handcock – recently restored by the Australian Government*

All of the above, and much, much more was enough to spark an interest in what really happened, and where – hence the upcoming tour!

I have just completed a recce – our base hotel, with its museum cannot be faulted as a starting point. Those joining **BattleToursZA** in August are going to be suitably enlightened – this will be our first of many such tours to this under-appreciated chapter in the war which took place 125 years ago.

**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) for regular updates and news.

**Allan Gordon**