

Mid Month Visit – November 2022

Towards the end of March this year I received an email from Catz Tours asking if I would be interested in helping put together a tour of battlefields in the North West Province. They had received an enquiry from a family in England wanting to retrace their Grandfather's footsteps during the Anglo Boer War. I was asked to look at the suggested itinerary and the notes that the family had of their Grandfather's, and put together something where the family could visit some of the sites that he had mentioned. With my interest in medals, the people who had been here during the war, and in the Tours that we have put together, I naturally accepted.

As some background, the soldier who had been out here had served with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, and had seen service in Natal (the Relief of Ladysmith), had travelled up to Kimberley from Cape Town, been part of the Relief of Mafeking, and then spent the rest of the war in the Western Transvaal. The family were going to spend a couple of days retracing his footsteps around Ladysmith, and would then travel to Johannesburg and meet up with me for the next four days. To do the 'Kimberley to Mafeking experience' would have taken at least three of those days, so my suggestion was to concentrate on the Western Transvaal (now North West Province) experience. Most of their Grandfather's time had been spent in the Ventersdorp, Klerksdorp, Potchefstroom district. As I had done very little in those areas, my first 'port of call' was Peet Coetzee, the guru of the Western Transvaal battlefields.



On explaining to Peet what I was doing and what I was after, and without mentioning the family's name, Peet said he would look amongst the files he had to see if he had anything that could help in my research. He sent me a picture of hundreds of files, saying that what he was looking for, was 'somewhere in there'. A week or so later he sent me a copy of the file he had – it was a copy of the letters that the Royal Welsh Fusiliers regiment had on file, of the Grandfather of the family who were coming out to South Africa. What a bonus. That is when my 'PT' started.

I don't know how many trips I made to Ventersdorp, Klerksdorp or Potchefstroom to find places mentioned in the diary. And not only to find the places, but to measure distances so that each day would be interesting, with the least 'travel time' on the bus between stops as possible. Stops had to be planned for coffee and comfort breaks, and for lunches. For me it was a very interesting exercise as many of the sites referred to in the Boer War Diary related to farm names, and not towns, as 120 years ago very few towns existed, and those farms are now private farms and 'no go' areas. Some of the sites don't exist anymore, and after 120 years there is no indication of what happened in the area. Most of the graves have been relocated to 'central' sites due to development and vandalism. Certainly, the cemetery in Potchefstroom was an embarrassment,



with the huge cemetery in Klerksdorp, only a little better. Our guests mentioned the cemetery in Chieverly (Ladysmith) in passing, I was there a few months ago, and it is a disgrace. Unless something is done, visitors to this country, in not too many years to come, are going to find these cemeteries a thing of the past.

The first afternoon, after a very long lunch, we visited Zwartkop, Dwarsvlei and Maanhaarrand before making our way to our overnight stay at Kedar Heritage Lodge. The party of thirteen were 'blown away' with what Kedar Lodge had on display which related to the War, and the experience and purpose of their visit.

On the second day we visited Olifantsnek, Middelfontein, Vlakfontein, Syferfontein, Nooitgedacht and Silkaatsnek. Our man, who was part of Babington's column, had been at three of those engagements, with the Regiment being part of the Mounted Infantry at another. After lunch, just to break the battlefield 'overload' we stopped at Chameleon Village to do some curio shopping, before making our way back to Kedar Lodge.

Day three we headed for Ventersdorp and then on to Klerksdorp. Our man had been involved in convoy escort when Babington's column were pursuing General de la Rey in the triangle formed by Klerksdorp, Ventersdorp and Coligny, but no-one that I have come across can pin-point exact locations. The closest reference I have received is that the Boers called it – 'Stompies'. It is significant that the book by Meintjies, on de la Rey, mentions the action in a couple of sentences, whereas the Times History goes into quite a bit of detail, building up to (page 226 Vol VI) – *"By this time all the fighting Boers had abandoned the artillery and transport, so there was scarcely any resistance."* Showing our guests their Grandfather's involvement in this action was therefore not possible. Before stopping off at the Klerksdorp Museum, we stopped at the grave of Boer General Piet Cronje.

At Kleksdorp we had lunch at the museum, toured the museum, visited the cemetery, and then made our way to Hartebeestfontein where the Regiment spent a night before the pursuit of de la Rey – mentioned above. We then made our way to Potchefstroom and our overnight stay, after a long day in the bus.

We spent time on day four walking the battlefields of Frederikstad and Tygerfontein – both engagements where our man was directly involved in the fighting, rather than on convoy escort.

In his diary he had mentioned the railway station in Frederikstad and the post office in Potchefstroom, which we visited before making our way to the cemetery.



Picture: Frederikstad Station



In his diary he also mentioned the Mooi River – *"It was a very jolly place, just by the River Mooi which is pretty deep, about 5 ft., and as clear as crystal. I bathed several times."*

This is also the Mooi River referred to in the song Sarie Marais.

After a full day it was back to the lodge, before starting off early the following day as booking had been made for other excursions.



Picture: The Mooi River – picture taken on the tour

On our way back to Johannesburg on day five we stopped at the Danie Theron Monument and the battle-site of Modderfontein where the regiment was not involved. However, another Welsh regiment, the South Wales Borderers were.

For those who are interested in medals, the Grandfather of the party who visited South Africa, is one of 26 of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers who received the clasps 'Relief of Ladysmith' and 'Relief of Mafeking'.

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

Allan Gordon