

## Mid-Month Visit – September 2025

In putting together an itinerary for an upcoming tour, I got the idea to write about a battlesite which I still rate as the most memorable, and 'eerie', that I have visited to date – Majuba. Although not a Boer War (1899-1902) battle, if one drives from Mpumalanga Province to KwaZulu Natal to cover battles of the Boer War (1899-1902), one passes the impressive, imposing, Majuba Hill, and Majuba Hill is included in the itinerary I am working on at the moment. Many publications, when talking about Majuba, refer to this being the final battle of the 1<sup>st</sup> Boer War, however, this was the battle that ended the war between Britain and the Transvaal Republic in 1881.



Early in 1877 the British capitalized on the weak financial management of the Transvaal government by informing the Boers that their state was on the brink of bankruptcy. On 12 April 1877, a contingent of Natal Police marched into Pretoria, replaced the Vierkleur with the Union Jack, and read out an annexation proclamation of the Transvaal. The Transvaal Republic therefore no longer existed and was now a British colony. After almost no protest, the Transvaal government and the Boers joined hands to oppose what they saw as British oppression. This conflict is a study all on its own, involving the sieges by the Boers of all British garrisons in the Transvaal, and then the final battles on the Transvaal/Natal border, culminating in the defeat of the British at Majuba. The Transvaal Boers wanted their 'country' back and late in 1880 the conflict started, culminating at the Battle of Majuba on 27 February 1881.

Wikipedia records – *"The Battle of Majuba Hill was the final and decisive battle of the First Boer War that was a resounding victory for the Boers. The British Major General Sir George Pomeroy Colley occupied the summit of the hill on the night of 26–27 February 1881. Colley's motive for occupying Majuba Hill, near Volksrust, may have been anxiety that the Boers would soon occupy it themselves, since he had witnessed their trenches being dug in the direction of the hill. The hill was not considered to be scalable by the Boers for military purposes and so it may have been Colley's attempt to emphasise British power and strike fear into the Boer camp."*



Lady Bellairs in her book 'The Transvaal War 1880-1881' records (page 381) – *"Taking with him a force – 22 officers and 627 men – composed of detachments of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles, 58<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 92<sup>nd</sup> Highlanders, and the Naval Brigade, Sir George Colley left the camp at ten o'clock on the night of 26 February. The vedette post close to the Umquela Hill being reached an hour later, the detachment of the rifles, two companies, was left, with instructions to occupy the top of that mountain with some men. Further on, midway between Umquella and Majuba, a company of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Highlanders was dropped, with orders to entrench itself. Some delay was occasioned by the rear of the column missing its way: but finally, between four and five o'clock in the morning, much exhausted after such toil – the men being heavily weighted – the column, now only about 400 strong, gained the summit."*

As a visitor, once one has paid their entrance into the park area which borders Majuba, the climb to the summit is imposing. One approaches the mountain from the southern slopes – exactly as the Boers had done on the morning of 27 February 1881. When starting out it is easy to see why the British never saw the Boers approaching – there is plenty of cover. Once on the summit the experience is eerie. I have been there a couple of times, and there is always a breeze which is audible, and visible in the grass on the summit. This makes hearing people speak, although they might only be 10/15 metres away, impossible, if they are trying to communicate up wind. Depending on the direction of the wind on 27 February, it is very easy to appreciate the reason why many of the British positions on the summit were unaware of the Boer presence until they were visible. It is also easy to appreciate why Sir George Colley was mortally wounded by a bullet to the head – he was unaware of the Boer presence down wind.

The included map indicates the positions of the British posts and the direction from which the Boers mounted their two attacks. Lady Bellairs carries on (page 381) – *"The general configuration of the plateau was, like that of most of the table-tops of such mountains or hills, so common in South Africa, of a saucer-like shape, though rolling."* Once on the summit, with the help of the map, the battle is easy to follow.

With the surname of Gordon, I was particularly interested in finding Gordon's Knoll, the position of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Highlanders, and MacDonald Kopjie. On a visit to the Gordon Highlander Museum in Aberdeen I had been told about Hector MacDonald and was happy to stand where he and his men fought. He served as a subaltern in the war, and at Majuba Hill, where he was made prisoner, his bravery was so conspicuous that General Joubert gave him back his sword.

It took me years to source a book by Trevor Royle, 'Fighting Mac', and the review of the book records – *"Major-General Sir Hector MacDonald, known as Fighting Mac to an adoring public, was one of Britain's greatest military heroes. He covered himself with glory during a long and successful military career."*



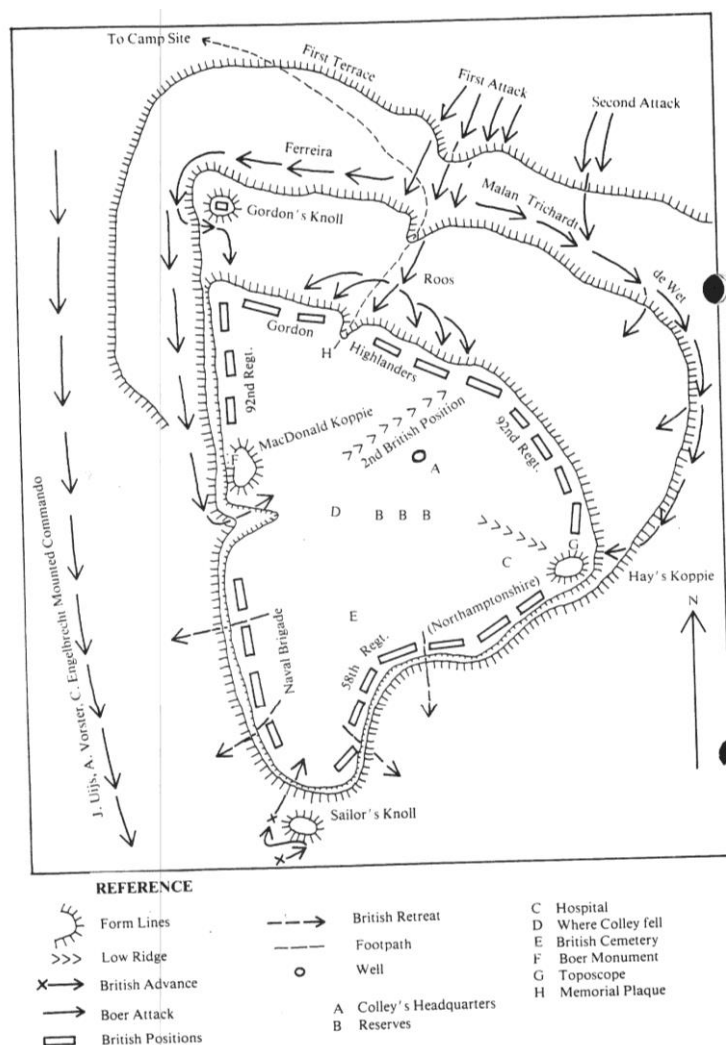
Picture: Major-General Sir Hector MacDonald



Everything lay at his feet – a knighthood, honours, the respect of fellow generals such as Roberts and Kitchener – but MacDonald's career came to a shocking end when he stood accused of sexual immorality involving younger men and was ordered to face a court martial. Unable to come to terms with the disgrace, he took his own life in a hotel room in Paris in 1903. A few days later he was buried hastily in an Edinburgh cemetery.

In the aftermath of his death came a national scandal that would reverberate long after those dramatic events, and it is now clear that the official files dealing with his case, have been destroyed. At the time, rumours that MacDonald had faked his death and adopted an alternative identity as a Prussian officer were widespread."

Unfortunately, time on this tour does not permit a climb to the summit, but hopefully, sometime in the future there will be a request to spend time exploring Majuba.



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**Allan Gordon**