

Newsletter

April 2021

April 1900 – with the capital of the Free State Republic, Bloemfontein, in the hands of the British, Boer forces under Generals Botha and de la Rey were conducting battles to try and delay the inevitable – the British march on the Transvaal. The gold mines and the capital of the Transvaal, Pretoria, were now firmly on the British radar.

The Battle of Boshof was fought on 5 April 1900 and is the 'Battle of the Month' on the website (www.battletoursza.com).

It was at this battle that the French General – Villebois-Mareuil was killed.

He, with his 'foreign' commando were on their way to destroy the railway line south of Kimberley.



Picture: French General Villebois-Mareuil

Boer General de Wet was active in the south east of the Free State and on 9 April 1900, General de Wet commenced with the Siege of Wepener, a town 100 km south east of Bloemfontein. The siege was to last for 16 days.

In General de Wet's book "Three Years War" he states (page 111) – *"On April 25 1900, we arrived at Alexandrië, six miles from Thaba'Nchu. The latter place was already occupied by English outposts. General Philip Botha now joined me; he had been engaging the enemy in the triangle formed by Brandfort, Bloemfontein and Thaba'Nchu. My commandos numbered some four thousand men, and I decided that it was time to concentrate my forces."*

He carries on, on the following page – *"I was very anxious to prevent the 'granary' of the Orange Free State from falling into the hands of the English; with this object in view, I left behind me at Korannaberg General De Villiers, with Commandants de Villiers, of Ficksburg, Crowther, of Ladybrand, Roux, of Wepener, and Potgieter, of Smithfield, and ordered the General to carry on operations in the south-eastern districts of the Free State."*

It is reported that 1900, in the Free State, had been an especially rich harvest which supplied corn not only to the Free State, but to a large part of the Transvaal.

On 30 April at the Battle of Houtnek/Tobaberg, Captain Ernest Towse, of the Gordon Highlanders, earned his second citation for the Victoria Cross. In this action he was shot through the head and lost the sight in both eyes. In July 1900 at the ceremony where he refused help in receiving the V.C. at Windsor Castle, it is said that Queen Victoria shed tears when pinning on his decoration.

April 1901 saw many minor skirmishes in the Orange Free State, the old Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo) and the old Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga). In the Western Transvaal (now North West), the Boers attacked a British convoy near Klerksdorp, but failed to capture either the guns or the wagons. On the last day of the month a column under Lieutenant-Colonel Pilcher destroyed the town of Reitz in the Free State.



By **April 1902** the War was nearing an end.

The Orange Free State and ZAR governments, together with the two 'Republics' most influential military leaders were meeting to discuss the possibility of peace.

Picture: The signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging

On 4 April Jan Smuts surrounded the town of O'Kiep in the Northern Cape and demanded its surrender. With this request being rejected, the siege of O'Kiep commenced. In the Western Transvaal, on the farm Rooiwal (more commonly referred to in British publications as Roodewal), the last set piece battle of the war was fought on 11 April. With General de la Rey being at the peace talks, General Kemp led the attack against a far superior force, under estimating a weakness in the British defence position – which the British had 'corrected' overnight. When Kemp realised his 'mistake' it was too late to change plans and the resulting cavalry charge by the Boers ended disastrously.

During one of the three April months of the South African War (1900), three V.C.'s were awarded:

Lieut. W.H.S. Nickerson	Royal Army Medical Corp	Wakkerstroom
Cpl. H.C. Beet	1 Batt. Derbyshire Regt.	Wakkerstroom
Capt. E.B. Towse	1 Batt. Gordon Highlanders	Thaba/Tobo Mountain

Anniversary of the birth of Denys Reitz - 1 April 1882

Deneys Reitz was born on 1 April 1882 and wasn't yet 18 when the South African War (1899-1902) broke out. He was one of five boys who grew up in Bloemfontein, whose father was President of the Free State Republic in 1887. Young Reitz remembered the comings and goings of men like President Paul Kruger, Commandant-General Piet Joubert, Cecil Rhodes and others in the late 1890's, but didn't realise the significance of these visits. His father, through reasons of health, had resigned his position of President of the Free State, and after a short stay in the Cape, moved to Pretoria where he became Secretary of State under Paul Kruger. After the Jameson Raid, things between the Transvaal and Great Britain had become tense, and in his book, 'Commando', Reitz says (page 14) – *"By July (1899) the situation had become so serious that my father ordered us up to Pretoria, as war with England seemed inevitable. We said good-bye to Bloemfontein, the town where we had been born and bred and where we had spent such happy days, and journeyed north, leaving behind us the peace of boyhood, to face years of hardship, danger, and ultimate exile."*

Denys was too young to enlist, but through the intervention of President Kruger, he was issued with a Mauser, and when the call came for the Pretoria Commando to leave for the front, he and his brother Joubert were amongst the first batch to leave Pretoria.

Their commando was active during the Siege of Ladysmith with their major involvement being at the Battle of Surprise Hill where the Long Tom was damaged.

Reitz was also at the Battle of Spioen Kop.

After the Relief of Ladysmith, Reitz and his brother left the Pretoria Commando to join up with forces in the Free State. Once there they joined up with the Afrikaner Cavalry Corps (A.C.C.), who together with other commandos under General de Wet were deployed to try and halt the advance of the British.



Picture: Deneys Reitz

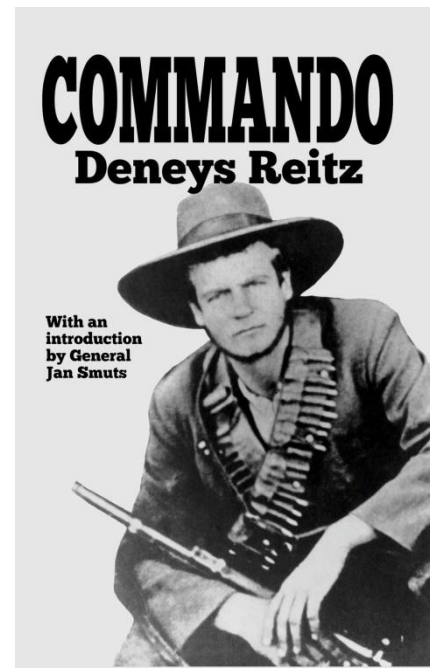
Bloemfontein had fallen and the British were making their way to the Transvaal. Many 'delaying' skirmishes were fought and in his book, Reitz describes a typical scene (page 96) – *"As soon as it grew light we were astir, anxiously scanning the ground before us, and soon we made out dense masses of English infantry on the plain. First came a screen of horsemen, and behind a multitude of infantry, guns, and wagons throwing up a huge cloud of dust. We looked in dismay at the*

advancing host, for there were thirty thousand men approaching, whilst on our meagre front there may have been between three and four thousand Boer horseman, strung out in a ragged line."

After the fall of Pretoria, Reitz re-joined his Pretoria Commando and fought at the Battles of Diamond Hill and Belfast/Dalmanutha, before retreating with most of the Boer Commandos to a location near the Portuguese border. Here General Botha organised the Boers into 'guerrilla commandos' and they made their way to the Lydenburg District. From there Reitz moved to Warmbaths to be part of General Beyers' force. This force moved to the Magaliesberg.

Reitz records in his book (page 130) – *"here there was evidence that General de la Rey had lately been in the vicinity, for we found a burning convoy of fifty or sixty English supply wagons, and one of his men who came riding by told us that they had ambushed the wagons in a stiff fight and had taken many prisoners."* This was the Battle of Buffelspoort – 3 December 1900.

Further on (page 131) Reitz goes on to record – *"As we were preparing our supper General de la Rey came riding amongst us on his famous little white-faced pony, and word went round that we were to attack an English force camped at the foot of the mountain not far away."* This was the Battle of Nooitgedacht – 13 December 1900.



Reitz at this stage was back with the A.A.C. but soon after Nooitgedacht the A.C.C. was disbanded. Reitz heard about a commando which was active in the Northern Cape and was determined to join this unit. Together with a number of like-minded Boers they made their way south on an epic journey – which is worth reading about.

On reaching the Cape, they joined up with General Smuts, becoming his scouts. In the book "General Smuts and his long ride" by Taffy and David Shearing they state (page 260) *"Among the ragged stragglers was a youngster who stood head and shoulders above the others. He was young Deneys Reitz. He was a tough young chap, with drive and energy. He had been sidelined for months – no shoes, no horse and a broken leg. Wanting to get started again, he had done his best to persuade chance companions to venture into the Cape Colony with him to re-equip themselves."* Reitz accompanied Smuts to the signing of the Peace Treaty, but on refusing to sign the oath of allegiance, was deported, electing to go to Madagascar and start a new life.

In 1906 he was convinced to return to South Africa by Jan Smuts. Whilst in Madagascar malaria had so severely affected his health that when he arrived at the Smuts homestead outside Pretoria, he collapsed and lost consciousness. He was nursed back to health by Jan Smuts' wife, Isie.

Once recovered, he completed his studies and in 1908 began his successful career as a lawyer. In 1914 he helped Smuts suppress the Maritz Rebellion and then served on Smuts' army staff in German South-West Africa. He subsequently served in German East Africa where he commanded a mounted regiment. Later in World War 1 he commanded the First Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers and led his men to the Rhine after the Armistice.

After World War 1 he spent some time in politics, serving in Jan Smuts' South African Party. In 1943 he was appointed as South African High Commissioner to London.

He died on 19 October 1944 in London, aged 66 and is buried south of Mariepskop, approximately 10 km east of the Blyde River Canyon in Mpumalanga.

Picture: The gravestone paying tribute to Deneys Reitz



REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) - our blog has regular posts on Anniversaries / Battles / Activities / Births & Deaths / etc.

Allan Gordon