

Newsletter

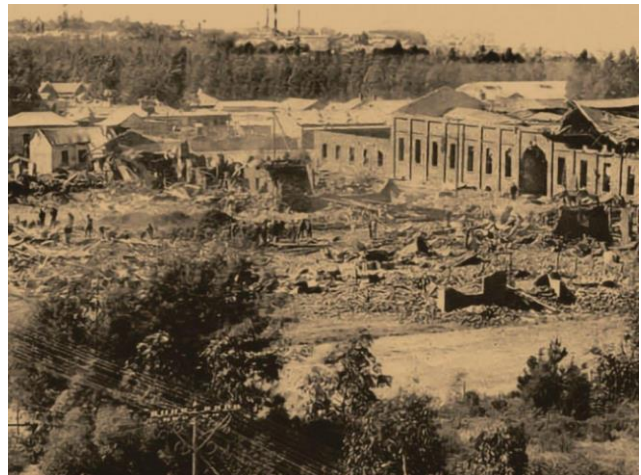
April 2025

The major battles that took place during the months of April 1900, 1901, and 1902 in the Boer War (1899-1902) have been covered in previous newsletters. This newsletter will record other interesting aspects of the war, together with other notable 'April' events.

April 1900: An incident which occurred in Johannesburg on 24 April had huge ramifications for the 'foreign' Europeans in the community – the incident occurred at Thomas Begbie & Son which was an engineering works that at the time up to the occupation of Johannesburg manufactured munitions for the Boers. Most of the staff working for the company had either Italian or French connections due to the French Creusot company having supplied guns to the Boers and the Italians travelling to the town for work. In the mid 1890's, there was a dynamite factory at a town west of Turin in Italy, which was experiencing financial difficulties – and at the same time the Modderfontein Dynamite Factory was being established on the outskirts of Johannesburg and skilled workers were being sought – so – many Italians relocated to South Africa to work in Modderfontein at the Dynamite Factory and other related industries.

In some factories such as the Begbie factory, three quarters of the 200 or so workforce was Italian.

At the explosion in the plant on 24 April 1900 all those killed were Italian (a total of 12 men), and of the 56 injured, 36 were Italians.



Picture: The Thomas Begbie & Son Factory

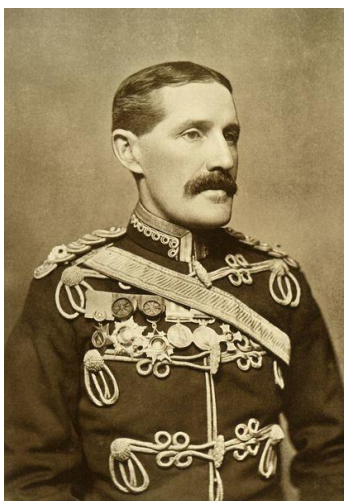
The 'Times History of the War' records (pages 150 & 151) – *"The explosion was immediately put down to the agency of English conspirators, although there is not the slightest evidence of this. Excited public meetings were held by the foreign workmen in the factory, who called for the immediate expulsion of the remaining British citizens, for the dismissal of Commandant Schutte, who was thought to have taken insufficient precautions, and for the formation of a special guard for the government workmen. All three demands were agreed to by the government, the guard was enrolled under Commandant Ricciardi, an Italian volunteer, Schutte was replaced by Dr. Krause, and on 30th April all the remaining British subjects in the Transvaal, with very few exceptions, were summarily expelled."*

Johannesburg was occupied by the British just over a month later.

April 1900 also saw Baden-Powell, besieged in Mafeking, issue his 'leave here or starve' policy in respect of the Baralong people, who had fled to Mafeking after their kraals had been destroyed by the Boers, and the mine workers who had recently 'returned' from working on the gold mines. One needs to remember that the siege had already lasted for six months, so food supplies were at a premium. The book 'The Boer War' by Thomas Pakenham records (page 408) – *"In effect, Baden-Powell's ingenious solution to the problem of conserving food supplies in a beleaguered town was to say to the part of the garrison that was militarily (and politically) expendable: leave here or starve here. There was to be no other choice. Using one method or the other, he would reduce the garrison by a quarter. Two thousand 'refugee and foreign natives' were, in fact, mainly Baralongs who had taken refuge in the town after their kraals had been looted and burnt by the Boers, and the Shangaan mine workers from the Rand who had now completed digging Baden-Powell's defence works for him. Baden-Powell closed the grain store to these two thousand outsiders and banned all employment for them."*

Fortunately, Mafeking was relieved in the middle of the following month.

April 1901: In mid-April 1901 Smith-Dorrien ended his drive in the South-Eastern Transvaal, which 'The Times History of the War' called *"the first great drive of the guerrilla war"*. 'The Times History of the War' records (page 180) – *"With weak horses and no margin of supplies, he could do no more than make the best of his way to Wonderfontein, which he reached at the end of the month."* 'The Times History of the War' continues (pages 180 & 181) – *"It was reckoned that 1,332 burghers had been removed from combat – 369 by death or wounds (an approximate estimate, certainly too high), 233 by capture, and 730 by voluntary surrender. There fell into British hands 11 guns, 2,300 vehicles, 272,000 rounds of small-arm ammunition, between 7,000 and 8,000 horses and mules, and a quantity of cattle and sheep which it would be profitless to reckon, since through sheer inability to keep or kill them, the greater part escaped."*



Picture: Major-General
Smith-Dorrien

This was the last action for Smith-Dorrien in the Boer War – he left South Africa to take up the appointment of Adjutant-General in India. In his memoirs 'Isandlwana to the Great War', Smith-Dorrien records (page 329) – *"Leaving Wonderfontein on 30th April, I went to Pretoria and stayed with Commander-in-Chief Lord Kitchener, for a week; and a very pleasant week it was, settling up business connected with the war, and concluding with a most cheery dinner, at which I met Sir Bindon Blood, Jimmy Spens, Marker, Hubert Hamilton (both the last two being killed in the first few months of the 1914-18 War), and John Maxwell, then Governor of Pretoria. Our host was in great form, and full of confidence as to the progress of the war, and after a merry game on the billiard-table in which Lord Kitchener took a prominent part, I took my leave and slept in the train, starting for England at daylight next morning."*

April 1902: There has been much speculation and discussion about the size of the 'two armies' fighting against each other. I have consulted many references and table the following with my reference being 'The Times History of the War' (page 562, Vol.V) – *"The situation in the Transvaal, mid-April. In the Transvaal as a whole, at the time of the Pretoria Conference, there were close upon 12,000 Boers in arms; 600 in the far north, 2,100 in the north-east, 3,800 in the east and 5,500 in the west. The last figure, considerably higher than that for any other district in the field of war, showed the comparative immunity de la Rey's men had enjoyed during the last year and a half."* On the following page in the book, there is a record of the military situation as a whole for mid-April – *"Widening our horizon to include the whole theatre of war, we find that in the middle of April 1902 there were in round numbers 23,000 armed Boers and rebels still to be disposed of, about half, that is to say, of the number in existence a year before."*

A reference that I found, relating to the size of the force opposing the Boers, which I found very interesting was in the book 'The Anglo-Boer War – A Chronology' by Pieter G. Cloete (page 319) – *"We are to a certain extent discredited abroad by these constant failures, and the pressure, both financial and otherwise in consequence of the prolongation of the struggle is very great. I suppose no civilian can understand why 200,000 men and a million and a half a week are required to put an end to the resistance of 8,000 farmers who do not possess 10 Pounds apiece."* This was part of a cable sent by Colonial Secretary Chamberlain to Lord Milner, in response to the defeat of Lord Methuen.



Picture: Colonial
Secretary
Chamberlain

Other 'related' events during the month of April:

- **16 April 1746** – The Battle of Culloden is fought between the French-supported Jacobites and the British Hanoverian forces commanded by William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, in Scotland.
- **4 April 1900** – Assassination attempt on Edward, Prince of Wales, soon to be King of England.
- **6 April 1900** – Funeral of de Villebois-Mareuil. French General Count George de Villebois Mareuil was buried with full military honours in Boshof cemetery, with 1 500 men of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment as the guard of honour.
- **14 April 1900** – Cor van Gogh, youngest brother of Vincent, dies in South Africa. When the Boer War broke out, he joined as an ambulance driver. He was captured by the British, fell ill and died in a field hospital in Brandfort.
- **25 April 1902** – General Smuts, who was at O'Kiep, was requested to be in Vereeniging for peace talks.

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

1900

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

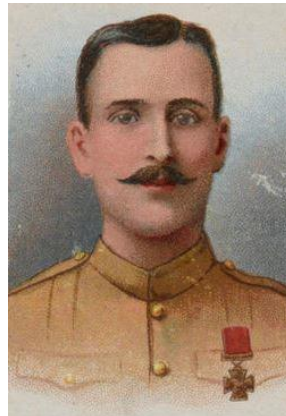
Victoria Cross of the Month

The three V.C.s awarded during the Boer War (1899-1902), have been featured in previous Newsletters:

- Lieutenant W.H.S. Nickerson Newsletter April 2024
- Corporal H.C. Beet Newsletter April 2023
- Captain E.B. Towse Newsletter April 2022



Lieutenant Nickerson V.C.



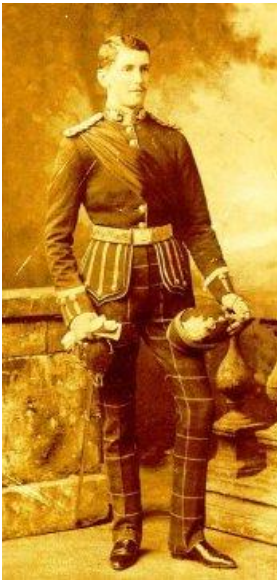
Corporal Beet V.C.



Captain Towse V.C.

Anniversary of the birth of Lieutenant G.H.B. Coulson V.C. – April 1879

Lieutenant Gustavus Hamilton Blenkinsopp Coulson, 1st Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers, and Adjutant 7th Battalion Mounted Infantry, was killed in the rear-guard engagement at Lambrechtfontein on 18 May 1901. He was the only son of A.W. Coulson of Newbrough Hall, Northumberland. He was born in April 1879 and educated at Winchester. He entered the King's Own Scottish Borderers from the 4th Battalion, Princess of Wales' Own (Yorkshire Regiment) in July 1899, being promoted Lieutenant in July 1900.



He was present at the Battle of Paardeberg, where he had his horse shot under him in the charge in which Colonel Hannay fell. He then remained on the battlefield, shooting Boers who came to steal the saddles, etc., of the fallen. He afterwards took part in the advance on Pretoria, and was subsequently present at the surrender of Prinsloo, and later at the action near Bothaville, where Lieutenant-Colonel Le Gallais fell.

Lieutenant Coulson was granted the Distinguished Service Order for his gallantry in the campaign in 1900 and was awarded the V.C. for his conspicuous bravery in the action when he fell in rescuing Corporal Cranmer, 7th Mounted Infantry, under heavy fire.

Picture: Lieutenant Coulson V.C.

"On many occasions during the war, Lieutenant Coulson had displayed great coolness and gallantry under fire" – London Gazette, 8 September 1900. He was again mentioned in dispatches, London Gazette, 10 September 1901, also in the dispatch of General Lord Kitchener, 8 December 1901, and it was announced in the London Gazette, 8 August 1902, that His Majesty the King had been graciously pleased to approve of the decoration of the V.C. being delivered to the representatives of Lieutenant Coulson.

(Reference – The Boer War Casualty Roll 1899-1902 by Alexander Palmer)

The book 'Victoria Crosses of the Anglo-Boer War' by Ian Uys records the following (pages 87 & 88) – *"Citation: This Officer, during a rear-guard action near Lambrechtfontein, on 18th May 1901, seeing Corporal Cramner, 7th Mounted Infantry, dismounted, his horse having been shot, remained behind and took him up on his own horse. He rode a short distance, when the horse was shot, and both Lieutenant Coulson and the Corporal were brought to the ground. Lieutenant Coulson told Corporal Cramner to get along with the wounded horse as best he could, and he would look after himself. Corporal Cramner got on the horse and rode away to the column. No. 4792, Corporal Shaw (Lincoln's), 7th Mounted Infantry, seeing Lieutenant Coulson's position of danger, rode back through the rear-guard and took him up on his horse. A few minutes later Corporal Shaw was shot through the body, and there is reason to believe that Lieutenant Coulson was wounded also, as he*

fell off the horse. Corporal Shaw fell off a few minutes later. This Officer, on many occasions throughout the campaign, displayed great coolness and gallantry under fire.

London Gazette, August 8th, 1902

According to Sergeant Murray Jackson, in 'A Soldier's Diary, South Africa 1899-1902' they were near Bothaville: - "Young Coulson, our Adjutant, rode over and had a look at Tony Welch's grave. They had been very good friends. Poor chap! He was buried beside Welch within a week ..."

Jackson carries on – after rescuing Corporal Cramner "... Coulson changed horses with him, and the horse dropping, got left. However, another man went back and got Coulson up behind him; but his horse was shot too, and the man, seeing Coulson lying senseless, thought he was dead (as he may have been), and came away. Coulson's body was found in a mealie patch some paces off, which looks as if he had come round and crawled there for cover." Corporal Shaw was promoted Sergeant and awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal by Lord Kitchener.

Lieutenant Coulson was buried at the scene of the action, on the farm Lambrechtfontein, district Hoopstad. The farm is situated west-south-west of Bothaville.

To complete the loop, I tried to find a Tony Welch who was killed in action, in or near Bothaville, and the only Welch I could find was a Norman Charles Welch – hardly a Tony.

However, it is recorded in the book 'The Boer War Casualty Roll 1899-1902' by Alexander Palmer that "*Brevet-Major Norman Charles Welch 2nd Battalion Hampshire Regiment, died on 10th November 1900, of wounds received in action near Bothaville, four days previously. ...*

He was born in July 1865 and educated at Charterhouse."



Picture: Lieutenant Coulson V.C.'s grave

So, N.C. Welch was 14 years older than Coulson, their Regiments were at opposite ends of England. However, it is recorded that Coulson was educated at Winchester, and Winchester is in Hampshire – is this the connection?

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) for regular articles, updates, etc.

Allan Gordon