

Newsletter

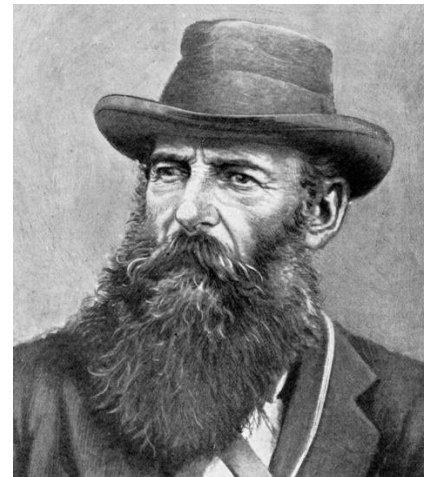
August 2024

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

August 1900: Boer General de Wet was really becoming a thorn in the side of the British. The Free State capital, Bloemfontein, had fallen, so theoretically the Free State Boers had been defeated – but not so. De Wet was making sure that although Roberts was chasing the Boers eastwards after the Battle of Diamond Hill, the British still had to concentrate on their rear, and more importantly, their supply route, the railway line from the Cape, and de Wet was making life in the Free State very challenging for the British.

With the above being a challenge, Roberts tasked Lord Kitchener to take overall control in the chase/hunt for de Wet, who had broken out of the Brandwater Basin. British columns based in Heidelberg and Kroonstad were despatched to try and cut off de Wet's route towards the Vaal River near Parys, an area de Wet knew well.

To make sure that his force was more mobile, de Wet cut the use of wheeled transport by almost 50% for his men and supplies. This helped enable de Wet to avoid the huge columns of Kitchener, Methuen, Smith-Dorrien, Hamilton and Baden-Powell, together with over 10 000 men and to meet up with fellow Boer General Liebenberg near Frederikstad.



Picture: General de Wet

Towards the middle of August Lord Roberts issued Proclamation No. 12 where, amongst other 'threats' he announced – *"all burghers who had not taken the oath (of neutrality) would be regarded as prisoners of war, and transported, or otherwise dealt with as I may determine."*

In his advance from Natal to the Eastern Transvaal, Buller finally made contact with Lord Roberts' force near Carolina in preparation for the eventual battle which took place at Bergendal. This was an essential meeting for the success of the eventual showdown at Bergendal, as Buller, unlike Roberts, had no railway infrastructure from which to obtain essential supplies. Buller's force, when he set out from the borders of Natal comprised 9 000 men (1 900 mounted, ±7 000 odd 'left to walk!') and 42 guns. Colonel Miles, the chief of Buller's staff, had made excellent arrangements for supplies as a result of which the men hardly noticed any change from the manner to which they had become accustomed. Tents were kept to a minimum but 14 days' groceries and biscuits, 7 days' preserved meat and 11 days' forage were provided for the whole force. The transport convoy

consisted of 304 oxen and 451 mule wagons plus ambulances, ammunition carts, Scotch carts and water carts.

Following this meeting to 'resupply', Buller continued his march on the right flank (far east of the Boers) and it is interesting to look at the statistics of casualties inflicted on the British in the immediate build-up to Bergendal. The Boers certainly weren't just sitting waiting for a fight.

British casualties recorded were:

Date	Where	KiA	DoW	Wounded	PoW/MiA	Total
21/8/1900	van Wyk's Vlei	9		43		52
22/8/1900	van Wyk's Vlei	1	1	5	1	8
23/8/1900	Geluk	15	7	61	23	106
24/8/1900	Geluk	3		28	2	33
25 & 26/8/1900	Various	9	4	71	7	91
	TOTAL	37	12	208	33	290

At the end of August, after the defeat of the Boers at the Battle of Bergendal, President Kruger, who had moved from his temporary headquarters at Waterval Onder to Nelspruit, was persuaded by both the ZAR Government and President Steyn, to travel to Europe to try and garner support for the Boer cause against the British. The defeat of the Boers at Bergendal also enabled 2 000 British Prisoners of War being held at Nooitgedacht (east of Waterval Onder) to be released.

On 10 August 1900 a German Officer of the Staats Artillery, Lieutenant Hans Cordua, was arrested for plotting to kidnap Lord Roberts and kill the British Officers with him. He was tried, and together with six others, found guilty. Cordua was taken to the gardens of the Pretoria Jail, seated and blindfolded. He was executed and is buried in the old cemetery in Church Street. The inscription on his tombstone reads – *"Hans Cordua. Born 25 September 1876. Died 24 August 1900."*

August 1901: Boer General Jan Smuts, who was operating in the Orange Free State, reported – quoting from 'The Anglo-Boer War, a Chronology' by Pieter Cloete, (page 258) – *"Dams everywhere full of rotting animals; water undrinkable. Veld covered with slaughtered herds of sheep and goats, cattle and horses. The horror passes description. But the saddest sight of all is the large number of little lambs, staggering from hunger and thirst round the corpses of their dead or mangled mothers. I have never seen anything more heart rendering or heard anything more piteous than their bleating in this war of horrors. Surely such outrages on man and nature must move to certain doom."*

President Steyn of the Free State replied to Kitchener's latest proclamation, by recording, (Cloete, page 259) – *"If it is a crime to struggle in self-defence and if such crime must be punished, His*

Majesty's Government can be satisfied with the destruction of our land, the chastisement of our women and children, and the general wretchedness brought by this war. It is in your Excellency's power, more than in any other power on earth to end this and to return this unfortunate region to its previous happiness, but we are not asking for magnanimity, we demand justice."



Without there being any major engagements during the month, General Benson carried on with his night raids against Boer commandos camped on farms in the Eastern Transvaal.

He was successful in these operations at Koppie Alleen and Tweefontein.

Picture: General Benson

During the two August months of the South African War (1900 & 1901), seven V.C.s were awarded:

1900

Pvt. W. House
Sgt. B.T.T. Lawrence
Sgt. H. Hampton
Cpl. H.J. Knight
Pvt. W.E. Heaton
Pvt. A.E. Durrant

Royal Berkshire Regiment
17th Lancers
Liverpool Regiment
Liverpool Regiment
Liverpool Regiment
The Rifle Brigade

Silkaatsnek
Essenbosch Farm
van Wyk's Vlei
van Wyk's Vlei
Leeukloof Farm
Bergendal

1901

S.Maj. A. Young

Cape Police

Ruiter's Kraal

Victoria Cross of the Month

Private A.E. Durrant – 2nd Battalion, The Rifle Brigade

Alfred Edward Durrant was born in Westminster, London, on 4 November 1864. He enlisted in the Rifle Brigade (Prince Consort's Own) and served in the operations leading to the taking of Pretoria and pursuit of the Boers into the Eastern Transvaal.

The Battle of Bergendal, near Belfast, was to be the last set-piece battle and decisive engagement before the Boers began their guerrilla campaign. After bombarding the Boers' central position, where the ZARPS (ZAR Police) held on doggedly, the Inniskillings and the Rifle Brigade made a frontal assault.



Picture: Alfred Edward Durrant V.C.

Citation:

At Bergendal on 27th August 1900, Acting-Corporal Wellar, having been wounded and being somewhat dazed, got up from his prone position in the firing line, exposing himself still more to the enemy's fire, and commenced to run towards them. Private Durrant rose, and, pulling him down, endeavoured to keep him quiet, but finding this impossible, he took him up and carried him back for 200 yards under a heavy fire to shelter, returning immediately to his place in the line.

(London Gazette 18 October 1901)

The successful taking of this position was the deciding factor in the battle. The Boers then withdrew from their positions. Durrant was promoted Lance-Corporal. It took almost a year and two months before his V.C. award was promulgated. He died at Tottenham, London, on 29 March 1933, aged 68.

I do not have an extensive library of Regimental Histories, but in the book 'Jackets of Green' by Arthur Bryant, a book which he describes as 'A Study of the History, Philosophy, and Character of the Rifle Brigade', the only reference to Durrant's V.C. action records (page 191) – "*In the course of the fighting the Boer commandant was captured, and a Rifleman, A.E. Durrant, won the V.C. for carrying a wounded comrade to safety under intense fire.*" This quote opens up another avenue for research – who was the Boer commandant who was captured? Bergendal has always been known as the last set-piece battle of the war, which commenced with a heavy, multi-hour bombardment by the British artillery on the Boers, followed by a frontal attack. Bryant ends his report on the battle, with the following (page 200) – "*We all felt very pleased and proud of the*

Regiment; at the same time, we were equally depressed at our losses ... Lysley was dead, Bogey Steward mortally wounded, Campbell very seriously hurt. The Colonel, Alexander, Maitland and Basset, all more or less badly wounded, made a terrible gap in our domestic circle. Then there were all those good fellows among our non-commissioned officers and men. Seven officers and seventy-seven non-commissioned officers and men was the total for about fifteen minutes work."



Picture: Alfred Edward Durrant V.C.'s grave

Fifteen minutes?? ... certainly makes one think ... and maybe some more research?

Anniversary of the birth of Lieutenant-Colonel P.W.J. Le Gallais – August 1861



Picture: Lieutenant-Colonel
Le Gallais

Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Walter Jules Le Gallais, 8th Hussars, died on 6 November 1900 of wounds received in action near Bothaville. He was born in August 1861 and educated at Victoria Cottage, Jersey. He entered the 8th Hussars from the 3rd, or South Regiment (Royal Jersey Militia), in April 1881, being promoted Lieutenant in July of the same year. He was promoted Captain in March 1888, Major in April 1897, and brevet Lieutenant-Colonel in November 1898.

He served in the Nile Expedition of 1897, receiving the medal with clasp; also in the Expedition of 1898, when he took part in the cavalry reconnaissance of 4 April, and the Battles of Atbara and Khartoum. He was mentioned in despatches, London Gazette, 24 May and 30 September 1898, and received the brevet of Lieutenant-Colonel, Fourth Class of the Order of Osmanieh, and two clasps to his Egyptian medal.

Following the outbreak of the war in South Africa in October 1899, the regiment sailed in February 1900 and arrived in South Africa in the beginning of March. Along with the 7th Dragoon Guards and the 14th Hussars they formed the 4th Cavalry Brigade and saw action in the Orange Free State and the Eastern Transvaal. The day he was killed Lieutenant-Colonel Le Gallais, ably assisted by Major Lean, had attacked (with about 200 men) a Boer laager under General de Wet over a thousand strong. Le Gallais' force had gained possession of a small shed which was the centre of the Boer fire (one report states that 'the bullets were flying like wasps'), and it was here that he was killed.

Le Gallais' opponent, General de Wet, eulogised the gallant Le Gallais, as "*without doubt one of the bravest English officers he had ever met*". Lieutenant-Colonel Le Gallais, as he expired, said, "*Tell my mother that I died happy as we got the guns.*" In this action six guns, a Pom-Pom, and 114 prisoners were captured from the Boers. Lord Roberts in his despatch on 15 November 1900 (London Gazette, 8 February 1901), reports the death of Lieutenant-Colonel Le Gallais with deep regret; "*a most gallant and capable leader, whose place it will be very difficult to fill.*" Again in his despatch, London Gazette, 16 April 1901, Lord Roberts deeply regrets the death of Lieutenant-Colonel Le Gallais, and adds that "*he rendered brilliant service and gave every promise of rising to the highest rank as a cavalry leader.*"

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Allan Gordon