

Newsletter

December 2023

Since my first Newsletter in February 2020, I have tried not to repeat myself, and in this regard, I started quoting from the Editor's Comments in the book 'The War Reporter – The Anglo-Boer War through the eyes of the Burghers', by J.E.H. Grobler. My newsletters have now completed one year of these quotes, and as such, a new approach is needed. So, what I am going to do, is summarise what happened in the relevant months of the war, without going into too much detail, as in previous newsletters I have gone into some detail, to generate interest in battles, engagements and skirmishes.

December 1899: 17 December 1899 saw the end of 'Black Week', which refers to the week of Sunday 10 December to Sunday 17 December. The British Army suffered three devastating defeats by the Boer Republican Forces, at the Battles of Stormberg (Sunday 10), Magersfontein (Monday 11), and Colenso (Friday 15). British losses were (approximately) – 700 killed, 3 000 wounded and 2 000 taken prisoner.



General Buller had also sent messages to Britain in his panicked state and on 18 December 1899 the British Cabinet met and 'fired' Buller as the Commander in Chief.

Lord Roberts was appointed in his place and the Army Reserve was mobilised. This created a surge of patriotism in Britain and many men volunteered for service – the birth of the Imperial Yeomanry.

Picture: Lord Roberts

Less than a month after being captured in the well-known train incident near Frere (15 November 1899) in Natal, Churchill escaped from the StaatsModel Skool in Pretoria – 12 December 1899.

December 1900: The little-known Battle of Grootvlei took place on 26 December 1900. Part of a British force, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Colville of the Rifle Brigade, who were based at the mine, left early that morning on a 'farm-clearing' exercise. Not long after leaving camp, a force of 450 Boers attacked the base camp. British losses that day were 13 officers and men killed, 44 wounded, and 19 taken prisoner.

The most significant battle in the Magaliesberg, the Battle of Nooitgedacht was fought on 13 December 1900. British losses were 66 killed in action, 14 died from wounds received, 173 wounded, and 315 taken prisoner.

Kitchener took over overall command of all forces in South Africa, from Lord Roberts, on 29 November 1900. During the month of December, three major defeats led him to take action against Major Cotton, who commanded the garrison at Helvetia. These defeats, or maybe they should be called embarrassments were Buffelspoort, Nooitgedacht and Helvetia.

| Battle | KiA | DoW | Wounded | PoW | Total |
|------------------|------------|------------|----------------|------------|--------------|
| Buffelspoort (*) | 18 | | 46 | 54 | 118 |
| Nooitgedacht | 66 | 14 | 173 | 315 | 568 |
| Helvetia | 11 | 2 | 29 | 232 | 274 |
| Total | 95 | 16 | 248 | 601 | 960 |

(*) – Additionally, 138 supply Wagons, captured/destroyed

... and the above doesn't take into account what was happening in the Free State, and in the Eastern and Northern Transvaal. Not a good start for Kitchener.

December 1901: On 7 December 1901 the National Scouts Corps was officially constituted. This was Lord Kitchener's policy – to procure the services of the opposing force as could be persuaded, for material considerations, to take up arms against their fellow countrymen.

Uncharacteristically, as the Boers were loath to take up arms on Sundays (their Sabbath), General de Wet and his men attacked a British position of the Imperial Yeomanry, under the command of Major Williams, on Christmas Day. The 'battle' is known as the Battle of Groenkop or Tweefontein and British losses were high – 68 killed, 77 wounded and 206 captured.

December – General:

- My personality of the month is Jan Kemp, a Boer General, who was very involved in the 1914 Rebellion, where many Boers, who had fought against the British in the South African War (1899-1902), were totally against fighting alongside British troops against the Germans. This resulted in the 1914 Rebellion, or as it was 'nick-named' the Manie Maritz Rebellion.

20 December 1914:

- The day Jopie Fourie was executed for his involvement in the Rebellion.
- Fourie was educated at Grey College, Bloemfontein. During the South African War (1899-1902) he served as a scout and dispatch rider. He was wounded and captured in a skirmish with Colonial Forces north of Pretoria. In 1910 the Union of South Africa was established and by 1914, he had been commissioned into the Active Citizens Force as an officer of the Union Defence Force.
- The execution of Fourie, 'approved' by Jan Smuts, turned out to be a divisive event in white politics. To staunch Afrikaners, who believed in republicanism, Fourie was a martyr, and Jan Smuts became the traitor. Smuts is reported as saying the execution of Fourie, was his greatest regret.



*Picture:
Jopie Fourie*

20 December 1946:

- Also on 20 December, but this time in 1946, the leader of the Rebellion, Manie Maritz, died.
- Maritz was with the Boksburg Commando in October 1899 and fought in Natal at the beginning of the South African War (1899-1902). He later joined Daniel Theron's Scouts before becoming part of the Boer invasion of the Cape. Near the end of the war Maritz ordered the killing of 35 local people – the Leliefontein Massacre. Gideon Scheepers and Breaker Morant were court-martialled and shot for similar crimes.
- Maritz was my personality of the month in July 2021. It appears he was saved from 'execution' twice.



Picture: Manie Maritz

20 December 1880:

- And also on 20 December, but this time in 1880, the first 'battle' of the 1st Boer War took place in Bronkhorstspuit.

During the three December months of the South African War (1899, 1900 and 1901), fifteen V.C.'s were awarded:

1899

| | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| Capt. E.B.B. Towse | Gordon Highlanders | Magersfontein |
| Cpl. J.D.F. Shaul | Highland Light Infantry | Magersfontein |
| Lt. H.E.M. Douglas | Royal Army Medical Corp | Magersfontein |
| Capt. H.N. Schofield | Royal Field Artillery | Colenso |
| Capt. W.N. Congreve | Rifle Brigade | Colenso |
| Capt. H.L. Reed | Royal Field Artillery | Colenso |
| Lt. F.S. Roberts | King's Royal Rifle Corp | Colenso |
| Maj. W. Babbie | Royal Army Medical Corp | Colenso |
| Cpl. G.E. Nurse | Royal Field Artillery | Colenso |
| Pvt. G. Ravenhill | Royal Scots Fusiliers | Colenso |
| Sgt. H.R. Martineau | Protectorate Regiment | Mafeking |
| Tpr. H.E. Ramsden | Protectorate Regiment | Mafeking |

1900

| | | |
|------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Sgt. D.D. Farmer | Cameron Highlanders | Nooitgedacht |
|------------------|---------------------|--------------|

1901

| | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Sur.Capt. T.J. Crean | Imperial Light Horse | Tygerskloof (Free State) |
| Shoe.Smth. A.E. Ind | Royal Horse Artillery | Tafelkop (Free State) |

Victoria Cross of the Month

Captain E.B.B. Towse – Gordon Highlanders



Born on 23 April 1864, Ernest Beachcroft Beckwith Towse was educated at Wellington College. He joined the Gordon Highlanders in January 1886. In 1892 he married Gertrude Christie. Towse accompanied the Gordons to India where in 1895 he served with the Chitral Relief Force, at Malakand, on the North-West Frontier and in 1897-8 at Tirah.

In South Africa the Western Campaign under Lord Methuen had seen his army advance despite fighting at Belmont, Graspan and Modder River. After reorganising, he decided on a night advance and dawn attack on the Boer positions at Magersfontein. He was unaware that the Boers had entrenched themselves at the foot of the hill, so sent his troops into a veritable slaughterhouse.

Picture: Captain Towse V.C.

The Highland Brigade walked into a storm of fire at 4 a.m. and lost General Wauchope. After 11 a.m. Lord Methuen ordered forward six companies of the Gordons under Colonel Downman to support the line directly opposite the Magersfontein Kop and Boer trenches. Their attack died away 400 yards from the Boer trenches.

Colonel Downman saw the British right flank retiring at 2 p.m. so assumed incorrectly that a general retreat had been ordered. He ordered a retirement, thereby causing the Highlanders heavy losses as they stood up and walked to the open veld.

According to the Times History, "Downman fell mortally wounded the moment he rose to retire. Captain E.B. Towse, of the Gordons, with conspicuous gallantry, stayed by his colonel's side till Sergeant Nelson and Lance-Corporal Hodgson came and helped to carry him back under the heavy fire."

Citation:

On 11th December 1899, at the action at Magersfontein, Captain Towse was brought to the notice by his commanding officer for his gallantry and devotion in assisting the late Colonel Downman, when mortally wounded, in the retirement, and endeavouring, when close up to the front of the firing-line, to carry Colonel Downman on his back; but finding this not possible, Captain Towse supported him until joined by Colour-Sergeant Nelson and Lance-Corporal Hodgson. On 30th April 1900, Captain Towse, with twelve men, took up a position on the top of Mount Thaba, far away from support. A force of about 150 Boers attempted to seize the same plateau, neither party appearing to see the other until they were but 100 yards apart. Some of

the Boers then got within forty yards of Captain Towse and his party and called on him to surrender. He at once caused his men to open fire and remained firing himself until severely wounded (both eyes shattered), thus succeeding in driving off the Boers. The gallantry of this officer in vigorously attacking the enemy (for he not only fired, but charged forward) saved the situation, notwithstanding the numerical superiority of the Boers.

(London Gazette 6 July 1900)

According to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *"It was in this action, during the fighting on the hill, that Captain Towse, of the Gordons, though shot through the eyes and totally blind, encouraged his men to charge through a group of the enemy who had gathered around them."*

Captain Towse was decorated by Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle in July 1900 and appointed Sergeant-at-Arms. The appointment was confirmed by King Edward in 1902. The following year Towse became one of the Hon Corps of Gentlemen-at-Arms. He became an expert typist and during the Great War he went to the front to type letters for wounded soldiers as Hon Staff Captain for Base Hospitals.

In 1921 he accompanied Field Marshal Earl Haig to South Africa to form an Empire League of ex-servicemen. Towse was in the Hon Corps of Gentlemen-at-Arms until 1939. He became a Knight of Grace of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and Chairman of the Grand Council of the Comrades of the Great War. Towse was knighted KCVO.

Sir Beachcroft Towse died at Goring-on-Thames, Berkshire, on 21 June 1948, aged 84 years and is buried in the St. Thomas of Canterbury Churchyard, Goring. His medals are in the Regimental Museum at Aldershot.



Picture: Sir Beachcroft Towse V.C.'s grave

Anniversary of the death of Commandant J.C.G. Kemp – 31 December 1946

Jan Christoffel Greyling Kemp was born in the Amersfoort District of the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) on 10 June 1872. His maternal grandfather, Abraham Greyling, was related to the Voortrekker leader, Piet Retief, and was killed with Retief on 6 February 1838. The death of Piet Retief and his party led to the battle of Blood River where less than 500 Boers defeated the Zulu army of over 25 000 warriors.

After completing his education at the Staatsgymnasium (State Gymnasium) in Pretoria, he became a clerk in the Transvaal Education Department in 1889. Before the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902), he had become Chief Clerk in the Mining Commissioner's office in Krugersdorp.



At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902), being resident in Krugersdorp, he joined the Krugersdorp Commando as a burgher. He was part of the commando that was involved in many of the battles in Natal. Late in 1899 he was elected to the position of Assistant Field-Cornet and he distinguished himself at the Battle of Pieter's Hill, on 27 February 1900.

After the Natal campaign he moved to the Northern Transvaal to serve under General Beyers, and in June 1900 he was elected Commandant. His daring was recognised by Beyers and he commanded one of the commandos that took the summit of Nooitgedacht at the battle against Major-General Clements' force on 13 December 1900.

Picture: Commandant Kemp

After Nooitgedacht Kemp served under de la Rey and became one of his most senior officers, and lead in most of the battles and skirmishes in the Western Transvaal – amongst them the Battles of Vlakfontein (29 May 1901), Moedwil (30 September 1901) and Ysterspruit, near Klerksdorp in the Western Transvaal (25 February 1902).

In the Battle of Tweebosch (7 March 1902) he was with de la Rey when Lord Methuen was captured, and subsequently 'set free' in order to get the required medical attention for his injuries. A month later, at the Battle of Roodewal (11 April 1902), in the absence of de la Rey who was with other Boer Military leaders, discussing the Peace conditions, Kemp launched a recklessly, frontal attack on the British force under the command of Major-General Kekewich.

Kemp represented the Krugersdorp Commando at the peace negotiations at Vereeniging, and was one of the six minority votes who advocated the continuation of the war.

At the end of the war all Boer combatants had to sign a pledge that they would abide by the peace terms. Kemp, like many others complied with this.

In 1903 he married and resumed building his life, as most of the Transvaal and Free State burghers had to do after the 'devastation' of the war. Many of the Boers who were against the signing of the Peace Treaty, and the allegiance to Britain believed their time for independence would come again. The former Boer General, Hertzog was quoted as saying – *"the fruit of the three-year struggle by the Boers is that their freedom, in the form of a general South African Republic, will fall into their laps as soon as England is involved in a war with a Continental power."*

This chance came when Britain declared war with Germany in 1914. The South African Government voted in favour of supporting Britain. This led to the 1914 Rebellion in South Africa, where former Boer comrades, now took up arms against one another. This is a subject on its own, but Kemp's involvement, and support of the Rebellion was assured.

Kemp was a Major in the Union Defence Force and had access to a large armoury and to a force of 2 000. Manie Maritz, the proclaimed leader of the Rebellion, announced that a new Republic, being the Transvaal and Orange Free State, had been proclaimed and that Generals Beyers, de Wet, Maritz, Kemp and Bezuidenhout were to be the first leaders of this provisional government. After a number of engagements, where the 'rebels' achieved no successes and a number of their leaders had lost their lives, Kemp led his commando across the Kalahari desert, losing half of his men and most of their horses, in order to join Maritz in German South-West Africa. Realising the consequences, he returned to South Africa and surrendered early in February 1915. He was one of the leaders who was sentenced to seven years imprisonment and a heavy fine. After serving two years he was released from prison, as Louis Botha recognised the value of reconciliation.

He became a farmer, entered politics eventually becoming a member of parliament and a cabinet minister.

Kemp died on 31 December 1946 aged 74 in Piet Retief and is buried in the town's cemetery.

Picture: Commandant Kemp and his wife are buried together in the Piet Retief Cemetery



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

Allan Gordon