

## Newsletter

January 2024

**January 1900:** The first of three January months during the South African War (1899-1902) and following the Boer strategy of besieging the main British Garrison in the country, a successful tactic used during the 1<sup>st</sup> Boer War 20 years previously, most of the activity, from the British side, was to relieve these garrisons – Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking. Many reinforcements had arrived from the east and from the U.K., and the Boers were starting to feel the 'heat'. In Natal there were many battles/engagements during the month, but the two major ones were the Battle of Platrand and the Battle of Spioenkop – the former a victory for the British, and the latter definitely a 'stale mate', with neither side 'hanging around' to claim victory.

From a Spioenkop perspective, having successfully taken Twin Peaks, had the British continued to Spioenkop, the Boers would definitely have retreated as they would have had the British both in front of them and behind them.

However, probably because of the chaos that was happening on Spioenkop, the troops on Twin Peaks were recalled.



*Picture: Twin Peaks alongside Spioenkop*

Spioenkop is a study all on its own – one only has to read Owen Coetzer's book, 'The Road to Infamy' to see that not only was there confusion on top of Spioenkop with who was in command, but there was a question as to who was running the show down below.

The Sieges of Kimberley and Mafeking were going according to plan – the Boers were waiting for the garrisons to surrender ... and the garrisons were waiting for help to arrive. Both Kimberley and Mafeking were well informed about fresh British troops arriving every day – it was just a question of whether they could survive 'starvation' before they were relieved.

In Kimberley, the answer to the Boers' Long Tom guns – the Long Cecil, fired its first test shot on 19 January 1900.

On 10 January Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener arrived in Cape Town to take over command of all British Forces in South Africa. No sooner had they arrived when Roberts received a message from Cecil Rhodes who was besieged in Kimberley – "*There is no fear of us surrendering, but we are*

*getting anxious about the state of the British Army. It is high time you did something. Roberts did not need this advice."* A quote from 'Queen Victoria's Little Wars' by Byron Farwell (page 349).

**January 1901:** The war was well and truly into the guerrilla phase. De la Rey was keeping the British on their toes in the Western Transvaal with sporadic attacks on convoys in order to replenish dwindling supplies. In the Eastern Transvaal Ben Viljoen was doing likewise, with the night attack on Belfast being the most prominent.



For the British, probably the most important event of the month was the death of Queen Victoria.

The book 'Queen Victoria's Little Wars' records (page 353) – *"On 2 January 1901 the Queen, although ill, welcomed home Lord Roberts. He was created an earl and given the Order of the Garter. Less than three weeks later, at 6.30 p.m. on Tuesday 22 January, Queen Victoria died. She had lived for 81 years, 7 months and 2 days. Fittingly, she who so dearly loved her Army was given a military funeral."*

*Picture: Queen Victoria*

**January 1902:** With less than six months of hostilities remaining in the war, the Boers were not letting up. At the Battle of Onverwacht (or Bankop to some, including 'The Times History' – named after a range of hills), the British lost 20 killed, 45 wounded, and two guns. Onverwacht was a farm east of Ermelo in the Eastern Transvaal. In the Western Transvaal, in an action against General de la Rey near Lichtenburg, the British suffered 80 casualties – killed, wounded, and missing.

The Boers, mainly in the Eastern Transvaal, were being hindered with the lack of 'financial collateral', which was needed to transact with those who had the needed supplies. A decision was taken to melt down existing gold bars, and to use gold mined in the district of Pilgrim's Rest, to mint coins. These coins were called Veld Pond. A description of the coin, taken from Wikipedia, records – *"Toward the end of the war, some fighters for the South African Republic had fled into the countryside to a place called Pilgrim's Rest. They melted down gold bars and gold nuggets and minted their own coins to assert their independence from the British. The fighters used old farm machinery and accessible chemicals to melt the gold down and make it pliable enough to shape into coins. Their hand-chiselled dies produced 968 coins, which are often referred to as 'veldpond' because they were made in the South African veld (the Afrikaans word for field) and their denomination is one pound."*

### January – General:

- **1879 – 20<sup>th</sup>** British troops establish their camp on the slopes of a hill called Isandlwana.
- **1879 – 22<sup>nd</sup>** Battle of Isandlwana where 1 329 British soldiers lost their lives.
- **1881 – 28<sup>th</sup>** British troops, advancing on the Transvaal, to relieve besieged garrisons during the 1<sup>st</sup> Boer War, were defeated at the Battle of Laing's Nek.
- **1885 – 26<sup>th</sup>** The ten-month Siege of Khartoum ended as the Mahdist forces entered the town – General Charles Gordon (no relation), together with 7 000 Egyptian soldiers were killed.
- **1918 – 28<sup>th</sup>** Death of Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae – the author of 'In Flanders Fields'.

During the three January months of the South African War (1900, 1901 and 1902), eight V.C.s were awarded:

#### 1900

Lt. J.P. Milbanke	10 <sup>th</sup> Hussars	Colesburg (Cape)
Lt. R.J. Digbey-Jones	Royal Engineers	Wagon Hill
Tpr. H. Albrechts	Imperial Light Horse	Wagon Hill
Lt. J.E.I. Masterson	1 <sup>st</sup> Devonshires	Wagon Hill
Pvt. R. Scott	1 <sup>st</sup> Manchesters	Caesar's Camp
Pvt. J. Pitts	1 <sup>st</sup> Manchesters	Caesar's Camp

#### 1901

Pvt. J. Barry	1 <sup>st</sup> Royal Irish	Monument Hill
Farr. Sgt. W.J. Hardham	4 <sup>th</sup> New Zealand Cont.	Naauwpoort

## Victoria Cross of the Month

### Farrier-Sergeant-Major W. J. Hardham – 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Contingent



William James Hardham was born in Wellington, New Zealand, on 31 July 1876, although his parents had come from Surrey, England. Hardham joined the Cadets in 1891 and served in the Petone Naval Artillery Volunteers from 1894. From 1897 he represented Wellington Province at rugby.

Hardham then came to South Africa with the New Zealand Contingent. His service was almost totally in the Transvaal, except for the engagement at Naauwpoort, south of Colesburg.

*Picture: Farrier-Sergeant-Major Hardham V.C.*

#### Citation:

On 28 January 1901, near Naaupoort, this non-commissioned officer was with a section which was extended and hotly engaged with a party of about twenty Boers. Just before the force commenced to retire Trooper McCrae was wounded and his horse killed. Farrier-Major Hardham at once went under a heavy fire to his assistance, dismounted, and placed him on his own horse, and ran alongside until he had guided him to a place of safety.

(London Gazette 4 October 1901)

Hardham was decorated by the Prince of Wales in London on 1 July 1902, together with Bell, English and Clements. He was the first New Zealand born man to win the Victoria Cross. Abbott & Tamplin refer to him in error as Hardman. They record that he was issued with an unnamed V.C. in 1902, which he subsequently had incorrectly engraved with his name behind the cross and the date behind the clasp.

He continued playing rugby for Wellington, often as the Captain, until 1910. In 1904 he played against England. Captain Hardham served with the New Zealand Mounted Rifles at Gallipoli and was wounded in May 1915, then invalided to New Zealand. He later became Commandant of the Queen Mary Hospital for sick and wounded returned soldiers in New Zealand. In March 1916 Hardham married Constance Parsontown. He returned to Europe with reinforcements in February 1918. Major Hardham joined the Reserve of Officers in October 1919. He died at Wellington on 13 April 1928, aged 51, and is buried in the Soldiers' Cemetery, Karori, Wellington. His name is on a commemorative plaque outside the (Army) HQ, Dunedin, New Zealand.

## Anniversary of the death of Major R. C. Bowen – 6 January 1900

Major Robert Scarlett Bowen, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps, was killed in action at Wagon Hill, Ladysmith on 6 January 1900.

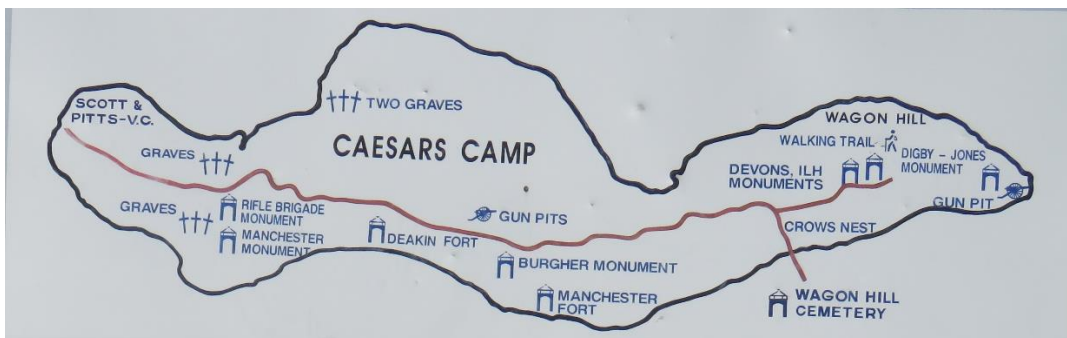
He was born in 1862, educated at Cheltenham College, and entered the 28<sup>th</sup> Foot in 1880, being transferred to the 60<sup>th</sup> Foot (King's Royal Rifle Corps) the same year. He was promoted Lieutenant in 1881, captain in 1890, and Major in April 1899.

At Wagon Hill, Major Bowen, calling for volunteers, dashed with eight men across a fire swept space at a strong position held by the enemy. They were all killed. (The Last Outpost – page 34).



*Picture: 2<sup>nd</sup> King's Royal Rifle Corps*

Wagon Hill was part of the defence of Ladysmith on Platrand, which is a two-and-a-half-mile long ridge that dominated the south side of the town. It had been occupied by the British from the start of the siege in November 1899 and was seen by many as the key to the defences of Ladysmith. Its loss would certainly have made Lieutenant-General Sir George White's task much harder – White being the commander of all forces in Ladysmith at the time.



*Picture: Map of Platrand*

The British recognised the tactical importance of the Platrand and had fortified the hills at each end. At Caesar's Camp which was on the eastern end of the ridge they had positioned 400 men from the Manchester Regiment, the Natal Naval Volunteers, and one 12-pounder gun. On Wagon Hill which was on the west end of the ridge there were the King's Royal Rifle Corps, the Imperial Light Horse, the Royal Engineers and a 3-pounder gun manned by the Natal Volunteers. The British commander on the Platrand, Colonel Ian Hamilton, had around 1 000 men to defend the two-and-a-half-mile long position.

The Boers had twice that number of men and commenced with their attack on the British position at first light. A fierce battle lasted the whole day, but late in the day, a fierce thunderstorm and a bayonet charge by the Devonshire Regiment, managed to force a major portion of the Boer forces

from the ridge. British losses during this final attack were significant. As darkness fell the remaining Boers retreated.

British losses were high. 168 men were killed, out of a total of 417 casualties. Five Victoria Crosses were won (two posthumously). The failure of the attack on the Platrand demoralised the Boers and proved to be their last attempt to capture Ladysmith.



*Picture: Major Bowen's Grave in the Wagon Hill Cemetery*

Referring again to the 'The Last Post' – Major Bowen is buried in a grave with four other officers on a plateau half-way up the neck between Wagon Hill and Caesar's Camp, close to where he fell. The officers lie in the order given from the left, and a marble cross and pedestal with their names inscribed has been erected. It bears this inscription, "*In token of affection and regard by their brother officers.*" Major Bowen was mentioned in despatches in the London Gazette on 8 February 1901 for his gallant services. His name is inscribed on the Eleanor Cross War Memorial at Cheltenham College.

**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) – for regular articles, updates, etc.

**Allan Gordon**