

Newsletter

July 2022

July 1900 saw the start of the disaster in the Brandwater Basin where on the morning of 30 July 1900, General Hunter received the surrender of Generals Prinsloo and Crowther and of the Ficksburg and Ladybrand commandos. Early in July a large British force including Major-Generals Clements and Paget was assembled to 'rid' the Orange Free State of Boers who were making life very difficult for the British, despite their capital (Bloemfontein) being in the hands of the British. After successive unsuccessful engagements near Lindley and Bethlehem, General de Wet retired to Fouriesburg, the last capital of the Orange Free State, to meet up with President Steyn and the Free State government.

Earlier in the month, on 11 July 1900, Boer commandos had attacked a supply convoy at Dwarsvlei and the British Garrisons at Silkaatsnek and Onderstepoort. All three actions were resounding successes and many Boers who had laid down their arms after the fall of Pretoria, re-joined the struggle.

Lord Roberts was forced to halt the initiatives gained east of Pretoria and direct some of his forces to Magaliesberg to counter the renewed Boer activities in the area. Lieutenant-General French was re-directed from east of Pretoria to the west of Pretoria.



Picture: The aftermath of the Battle of Dwarsvlei

This renewed Boer activity happened after the Battle of Diamond Hill, where at the Boer Council of War at Balmoral, the Boer Generals decided to return to their Districts to reorganise the demotivated burghers. The successful engagements south and south-east of Pretoria were attributed to General Ben Viljoen who launched determined attacks on British forces, resulting in the Battle of Witpoort on 16 July 1900 (Battle of the Month – www.battletoursza.com).

In mid-July Lieutenant-General Hunter and Brigadier-General MacDonald arrived in Bethlehem, with the former taking over command of all forces in the Free State. At the same time de Wet was conducting a Council of War with all the Boer leaders who were in the area of the Free State called the Brandwater Basin, explaining to them the danger of being surrounded by the concentration of a far larger British force in the area.

An article in a Military History Society Journal, written by W.H. Kinsey, described the Brandwater Basin as such – *"The country to which the Boers had now retired may be described as a huge horse-shoe formed by the Wittebergen range, which extends round from Commando Nek opposite Ficksburg, by Moolman's Hoek, Nelspoort, and Witnek to Slabbert's and Retief's Neks on the north, and then by the Roodebergen range, which continues from Retief's Nek in a south-easterly direction through Naauwpoort Nek and Golden Gate to Generaal's Kop, a magnificent mountain mass which connects the main Drakensberg ridge with the Roodebergen; the circumference of the horse-shoe measured this way is roughly seventy-five miles (120 km). The base-line of the horse-shoe, about forty miles in length (64 km), is formed by the Caledon River, separating the Free State from Basutoland (now Lesotho)."*

The result of the Council of War was that the Boers were going to split up, each going in different directions with specific objectives, with de Wet and President Steyn leaving first.

This resulted in the first 'de Wet hunt.'

With the departure of de Wet there was a scramble for control amongst the Boers which enabled Hunter, on 30 July 1900, to force the Boers to surrender.

Over 4 000 men were captured, together with a number of guns. Fifteen hundred Boers who were not happy about the surrender managed to escape, together with eight guns.



Picture: General Hunter

The Brandwater Basin is a subject all on its own and many people who think they know all about the South African War (1899-1902), have little or no knowledge and/or understanding of the events in this area, during the month of July 1900. On the same day a train carrying military personnel and supplies was derailed near Frederikstad which resulted in 13 soldiers being killed and 41 injured.

July 1901 was a very quiet month apart from the normal Boer attacks on railway lines, which were becoming more and more difficult due to the introduction of and successful construction of block-houses along the lines of communications. Politically, there was a lot of activity in the U.K. with the appointment of a Ladies Commission which was set up to investigate the concentration camps in South Africa. There was also considerable comment in that country of the scorched earth policy which had a direct correlation to the structure of the concentration camps.

On 11 July 1901 General Broadwood's force captured the complete Free State Government, except for President Steyn, who managed to escape. At the end of the month Colonel Benson was

assigned to the Eastern Transvaal with the specific objective to begin with night and early morning attacks on Boers operating in the area.

An interesting occurrence also in the month of July:

- Pieter (Piet) de Wet, brother of Christiaan, the Commandant-General of the Free State forces, went to see his brother on 19 July 1900 to discuss the purpose of carrying on with the war. The discussion was short, with Christiaan turning his back on his brother and walking away. Piet had already made contact with Lieutenant-General Ian Hamilton and had offered to surrender with about 1 000 men with the provision that they could stay on their farms. However, on 26 July 1900 Piet and some of his commando handed themselves over to the British in Kroonstad – never to be forgiven by his brother.

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

1900

Sgt. A.H.L. Richardson	Lord Strathcona's Horse	Wolve Spruit (Standerton)
Capt. W.E. Gordon	Gordon Highlanders	Leehoehoek (Krugersdorp)
Capt. D.R. Younger	Gordon Highlanders	Leehoehoek (Krugersdorp)
Capt. N.R. Howse	New South Wales Medical Staff	Vredefort

1901

Lieut. W.J. English	2 nd Scottish Horse	Vlakfontein
Pvt. H.G. Crandon	18 th Hussars	Ermelo

Victoria Cross of the Month

Captain W.E. Gordon – 1st Battalion Gordon Highlanders

Being a Gordon, with family roots in Huntly in Scotland, where the Gordon Highlanders were raised by Jean, Duchess of Gordon, in 1794, this month's choice for my V.C. of the month was a 'no brainer'.



Captain William Eagleson Gordon was born at Bridge of Allan, Stirlingshire, Scotland on 4 May 1866 and joined the Gordon Highlanders at Malta in June 1888.

He served in the Chitral Relief Expedition of 1895.

He was promoted to Captain in June 1897, and then served on the North-West Frontier and the Tirah Expedition.

He was adjutant to the 1st Battalion in South Africa and was dangerously wounded at Magersfontein. Gordon was attended to on the battlefield by Lieutenant Douglas, who earned the V.C. for so doing.

He also served at Paardeberg, operations in the Orange Free State, Eastern Transvaal and the west of Pretoria from July 1900.

Picture: Captain Gordon V.C.

On 11 July 1900 General Smith-Dorrien left for the north from Krugersdorp with the Gordons, Shrophires, two guns of the 78th Battery and half the 50th Company Imperial Yeomanry. At Dwarsvlei, approximately nine miles (15 km) north-west of Krugersdorp on the Hekpoort road, they found Boers holding a ridge, the Witwatersberg. They were exposed to deadly fire and, despite displaying great gallantry the gunners were soon put out of action. Several attempts were made by the Gordons to bring the guns back under cover. The force covered a front of 4 000 yards and was attacked on the right flank and right rear as well as in front.

Citation:

On the 11th July 1900, during the action near Leekoehoek (or Doornboschfontein or Dwarsvlei, near Krugersdorp), a party of men, accompanied by Captain Younger and Allan, having succeeded in dragging an artillery wagon under cover when its horses were unable to do so by reason of the heavy and accurate fire of the enemy, Captain Gordon called for volunteers to go

out with him to try and bring in one of the guns. He went out alone to the nearest gun under heavy fire, and with the greatest coolness fastened the drag-rope to the gun, and then beckoned to the men, who immediately doubled out to join him, in accordance with his previous instructions. While moving the gun Captain Younger and three men were hit. Seeing that further attempts would only result in further casualties, Captain Gordon ordered the remainder of the party under cover of the kopje again, and, having seen the wounded safely away, himself retired. Captain Gordon's conduct under a particularly heavy and most accurate fire at only 600 yards range was most admirable, and his manner in handling his men, most masterly; his devotion on every occasion that his battalion has been under fire has been remarkable.

(London Gazette – 28 September 1900)

Captain Gordon was presented with his V.C. by Lord Kitchener in Pretoria in June 1902.

Gordon married and had a son. He was promoted to Major in January 1907. From April 1908 he was DAA and QMG of the Highland Division, and from 1913 ADC to the King. Colonel Gordon served in France until taken prisoner. He was released by exchange, and from September 1917-20 commanded No. 1 (Midland) District, Scottish Command. He was later awarded 500 Pounds damage after suing the 'People's Journal' for slander. They had erroneously reported him as ordering the Gordons to surrender when hard-pressed during the retreat from Mons.



Picture: Captain Gordon's Tombstone

During World War 2 Gordon was injured during an enemy air raid in November 1940. He and his wife were rescued from their bombed bedroom in London. He died in London on 10 March 1941, aged 74 years, as a result of his injuries.

Anniversary of the birth (17 July 1843) of Major-General William Penn Symons



Major-General William Penn Symons was born in Cornwall on 17 July 1843.

After completing his education at Crediton and Sandhurst he was commissioned into the 24th Regiment of Foot, achieving the rank of Lieutenant in 1863.

In October 1866 he was promoted to Captain and after his experience in South Africa during the Anglo-Zulu War (1879) achieved the rank of Major in 1881.

Picture: Major-General Penn Symons

The publication 'Cornwall Yesteryear' records the following on Penn Symons' involvement during the Regiment's action at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift – *"In January 1879 British forces under Lord Chelmsford invaded Zululand. Before the month was out the 24th was to experience disaster and triumph within a few days. Firstly a force of 1 500 men, consisting mainly of 6 companies of the regiment, was annihilated by an impi of 20 000 Zulus at Isandlwana. Penn Symons escaped almost certain death as a member of a detachment that left the camp early that morning to aid a scouting party in trouble. Mercifully, when they returned to the battlefield it was dark, so the men were spared the horrifying sight of the mutilated dead. Just when Lord Chelmsford thought that the situation could not get any worse, flames and heavy firing were reported from the direction of Rorke's Drift. The mission station there, with its tiny garrison, was obviously under attack. The column moved off wearily to attempt a relief, fearing the worst. Reaching the beleaguered post the following morning they were overjoyed that the 100 or so men, mostly of the 24th's 'B' Company, had repulsed 4 000 Zulus in an epic defence. Penn Symons was one of the first horsemen to ride into the stockade and helped the commander, Lt. John Chard, R.E., to write his report of the action."*

I have verified his involvement in the war – page 253 of the book 'Forgotten Heroes – Zulu & Basuto Wars' by Roy Dutton, where he lists Penn Symons as 'Captain Symons W.P.', and indicates that he was awarded the South African General Service medal with the bar 1877-8-9.

After the above experience Penn Symons saw service in Burma, China and India.

Having achieved the rank of Brigadier-General early in 1899, he was sent to Natal in May of that year to take precautionary measures as war with the Boer Republics seemed highly likely. In mid-September British authorities realised that war was inevitable, and Lieutenant-General George White, together with troops from the British Colonies, was sent to South Africa. White arrived in Cape Town on 3 October 1899 and immediately travelled to Natal to take command of the garrison there which was based at Ladysmith. The then commander, Penn Symons, decided to split the force in Natal and together with a brigade, proceeded to Dundee.

Alan Chalmers in his book 'Bombardment of Ladysmith Anticipated' records (page 14) – *"General Penn Symons had moved north from Ladysmith with the majority of his force. He was determined to remain in Dundee and inflict a major blow to the invading Boers. General White, on the other hand, was of the opinion that the troops should be withdrawn from so far north in Natal, but as he had only just arrived in the country, and with the Natal Governor, Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson's compelling argument that a British withdrawal would not only leave the loyal settlers of Northern Natal undefended, but also may significantly diminish British military prestige in the eyes of neighbouring Zululand, White acquiesced to Symons."*

President Kruger's ultimatum to Britain expired at 5 p.m. on 11 October 1899. Boer forces made their way to Natal with the objective of defeating the British in that colony and hopefully preventing the landing of a significant number of troops that were already at sea.

On 19 October the Boers captured the Elandslaagte Station and cut communications between Dundee and Ladysmith.

The Boer plan was to surround the garrison at Dundee, mounting a full on attack in the early hours of the following morning.

Picture: Elandslaagte Station



Although the British must have been aware of the Boer presence, they were caught by surprise when the Boers opened fire with their artillery at first light on 20 October. Penn Symons ordered a frontal attack on the Boer position on Talana Hill, which commenced at 7 a.m..

At the base of the hill there was a plantation of trees and a low wall, both being part of the existing farm, to which the British advanced under heavy Boer rifle fire.

Again quoting from Alan Chalmers (page 17) – *"Rather than waiting for the artillery, Symons ordered the assault to begin. When this failed to happen, he rode forward himself to see what was causing the delay. Ignoring the heavy fire Symons walked through the gum trees ordering the sheltering troops to get ready for the assault. As he stepped over the wall to look at the Boer positions for himself, he was hit."*

Symons was shot in the abdomen and died three days later.

He is buried in the graveyard at St. James Church in Dundee and a large marble cross now marks his grave.

There is also a stone cairn at the foot of Talana Hill where Symons received his wound.



Picture: Major-General Penn Symons' grave

Every year, on a weekend, as close to 20 October as possible, the Talana Museum have a re-enactment of the Battle of Talana, and for those who are able, and interested, both the re-enactment and the Museum are well worth a visit.

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

Allan Gordon