

## Newsletter

March 2024

The first 'March' of the war, for there were to be two more, ended with a huge question for the Boers – do we carry on, or count our losses and negotiate 'peace'? Two of the three sieges had ended, and the capital of the Free State had fallen into British hands. Many Boers had decided 'enough is enough' and had gone back to their farms. President Steyn of the Free State was having nothing of these negative thoughts and having supported President Kruger in his 'quest for Afrikaner freedom' accused the Transvaal Boers of cowardice.

**March 1900:** One of the lesser 'reported on' battles by the Boers, in trying and 'save' Bloemfontein, the Free State capital, was the Battle of Driefontein on 10 March 1900. Driefontein was a farm in the Orange Free State just south of the Modder River and comprised a series of koppies which were ideal for a defensive position.

Commandants de Wet and de la Rey commanded the Boers with Lieutenant-General Kelly-Kenny in command of the British Forces.

*Picture: Lieutenant-General Kelly-Kenny*



Although the Boer positions on the flanks of the line were not threatened, de Wet was totally outnumbered in the centre and ordered the Boers to retreat. British losses were 80 killed and over 300 wounded. Boer losses were over 100 either killed or wounded.

On 17 March the Boer leaders from both the Free State and the Transvaal met in Kroonstad and decided, amongst other decisions made, that large wagon convoys and laagers would be abolished, and that smaller, more mobile units of Boers would be established to deal with attacks planned against the enemy.

George de Villebois-Mareuil, a former Colonel in the French Infantry, fought and died on the side of the Boers during the South African War (1899-1902). He was the first of only two foreign volunteers to be given the rank of Major-General in the armed forces of the Boer Republics, becoming Commander of all Foreign Volunteers on 17 March 1900.

Another battle which deserves more credit than it is given is the Battle at Karee Siding, a station on the Bloemfontein-Kroonstad railway line, 30 km north of the Free State capital of Bloemfontein. General de la Rey and his commandos occupied the hills through which the railway line passed from Bloemfontein to Brandfort. Roberts in the meantime, having rested his troops after their taking Bloemfontein, had planned his move northwards, and decided to use Karee Siding as a supply base. Roberts began concentrating troops at the Glen Siding, a point 11 km south of Karee

Siding where the railway crossed the Modder River and where the Boers had recently destroyed the bridge.



*Picture: Lieutenant-General  
Charles Tucker*

On the morning of 29 March, the British set off for Karee Siding. Initially the British advance met no resistance. The flanking movements encountered no opposition, and Tucker's infantry set off to take the first of the ridges on the far east of the three. By 1.30 p.m. the second ridge was taken, with the leading troops attracting sporadic fire from the Boers. Approaching the hill closest to the railway line the Boers disclosed their presence in strength, opening with heavy fire from positions concealed in the natural cover on the hillside. For about an hour a fire fight took place on this front, with the British retreating to a nearby ditch for cover. On the left the British line also encountered the Boers on the Houtenbeck plateau. British artillery was brought up to deal with the Boers on both sides of the railway, and shortly after 4 p.m. a bayonet charge against the Houtenbeck trenches found the Boers already in flight.

On the eastern side of the railway line the Boers were holding a far superior force at bay. However, as the battle progressed, the Boers realised that there was a chance of their retreat being cut off by the British, and they retreated. In this operation the British sustained 189 casualties – 19 men killed and 170 injured. The Boer casualties in the battle were three killed and 18 wounded. The victory was important in opening the way for Roberts to resume his advance to the Transvaal.

**March 1901:** As I have recorded before, nothing much happened during this month, other than General de la Rey's biggest defeat in the war – the Battle of Wildfontein (or as the Afrikaners call it – Stompies). Lieutenant J.R. Macdonald of Coleraine, Tasmania, who was serving with the 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Contingent in South Africa, wrote a graphic account of the incident. The book, 'The War with Johnny Boer' by Max Chamberlain and Robin Droogleever records from his letter home (page 408) – *"So it went on for three or four miles along that straggling line of wagons, guns and carts (Boer convoy), the Australians coming in at a gallop from the right shortly after we swooped on the left. As we rode back with our capture, Colonel Shekleton himself and his officers were most enthusiastic in their congratulations. The Imperial Light Horse and the composite regiment were coming along in support somewhere behind us, but we left them and our guns out of sight and out of mind.*

*The afternoon was spent in reckoning up the extent of our catch, and the Provost-Marshall's list finally showed 53 wagons, 24 Cape carts, 1 pom-pom, 2 15-pounders, 6 maxims, 1 ammunition*

*wagon, 100 rounds pom-pom ammunition, hundreds of horses, mules, cattle, trek-oxen and sheep, 8 Boers killed, 6 wounded, and 151 prisoners – we had not a single man hit.”*

‘Official’ records record Boer losses were three killed, seven wounded and 100 prisoners. The British had two killed and seven wounded.

**March 1902:** One cannot just ‘gloss over’ March 1902 without repeated reference to the capture of Lord Methuen – the Boers major ‘prize’ in the whole war. What would have happened if, as many of de la Rey’s senior officers wanted, Methuen had been executed? Could Methuen have been used to negotiate a better peace deal? We will never know – de la Rey did a very humane thing in sending him for medical treatment to the nearest British facility. The build up to Methuen’s defeat at Tweebosch is well articulated in the book ‘The Anglo-Boer War – a Chronology’ by Pieter G. Cloete. Cloete records the following on 1 March 1902 (page 307) – *“Lord Methuen marches from Vryburg with a motley column consisting of whatever troops he can scrape together in that area. His force of about 1 500 men, is scraped from 14 units, and includes irregular Colonial levies, fresh Yeomanry drafts, an armed Coloured Cape Special Police unit and a few National Scouts. Only 800 are mounted men and they are accompanied by 4 guns, two pom-poms and 85 wagons.”* The objective of this column is to meet up with the column of Colonel Grenfell, with the combined force forcing de la Rey back to the Vaal River.

Cloete carries on with an entry covering 5 March (page 308) – *“Lord Methuen’s scratch force is at Baberspan, still about 55 kilometres from his proposed rendezvous with Grenfell at Rooirandjiesfontein.”*

The following day Methuen, having not made as much progress as he would have liked due to Boer activity at the rear of his column, decided to camp on the farm Tweebosch. Early on the morning of 7 March Methuen divided his column into three, with the wagon convoy leaving the camp first. At first light the Boers attacked Methuen’s rear-guard.



*Picture: Lord Methuen*

The catalogue from the City Coin Postal Auction 71 recorded (page 221) – *“Only the British regulars in the column fought stubbornly in the combat which lasted from dawn until 9.30 a.m. The British lost 200 killed and wounded, plus 600 men and all four guns captured. After being wounded twice and suffering a broken leg when his horse fell on him, Methuen was captured. He was the only General taken prisoner by the Boers during the war.”*

*De la Rey sent the wounded Methuen to a British hospital in his own carriage under a flag of truce, despite demands from his own troops to execute him. Upon hearing news of the disaster, a badly shaken Kitchener retired to his bedroom for two days and refused to eat."*

**Other notable events that happened over the years in the month of March:**

- 16 March 1900 – three British PoW's (Captain Haldane, Lieutenant le Mesurier and Sergeant Major Brockie) escaped from the Staats Model School in Pretoria – three months after Churchill's successful escape.
- 17 March 1900 – the official 'start' of the Enteric Fever/Typhoid Epidemic in Bloemfontein, with nearly 400 British soldiers being admitted to various hospitals in the town.
- 23 March 1900 – General Woodgate died after being critically wounded on Spioen Kop on 24 January.
- 26 March 1902 – Cecil John Rhodes died in Muizenberg, Cape Town, aged 49.



*Picture: General Woodgate*

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

**1900**

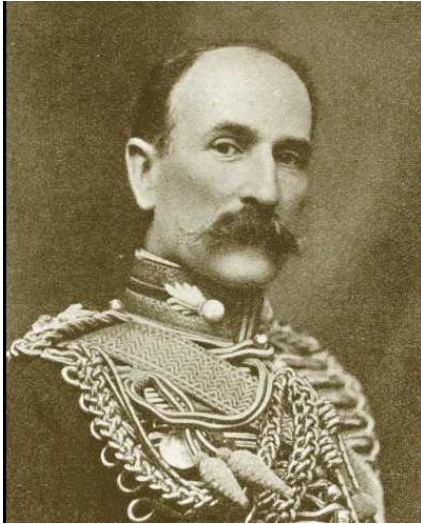
Sgt. H.W. Engleheart	10 <sup>th</sup> Royal Hussars	Bloemfontein
Major E.J. Phipps-Hornby	Royal Horse Artillery	Koornspruit/Sannah's Post
Sgt. C.E.H. Parker	Royal Horse Artillery	Koornspruit/Sannah's Post
Gunner I. Lodge	Royal Horse Artillery	Koornspruit/Sannah's Post
Driver H.H. Glascock	Royal Horse Artillery	Koornspruit/Sannah's Post
Lieut. F.A. Maxwell	Indian Staff Corp	Koornspruit/Sannah's Post

**1901**

Lieut. F.B. Dugdale	5 <sup>th</sup> Lancers	Derby (Tvl)
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## Victoria Cross of the Month

### Major E.J. Phipps-Hornby – 'Q' Battery, Royal Horse Artillery



Major Edmund John Phipps-Hornby was born on 31 December 1857 at Lordington, Emsworth, Hampshire, and was the second son of Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Geoffrey Phipps-Hornby. After his education at a private school and Woolwich he entered the Royal Artillery in May 1878. He served in Warren's Bechuanaland Expedition of 1884-5 and was promoted Captain the following year.

In January 1895 he married Anna Jay of Bexley, Kent, and they had two daughters. That year he was promoted Major.

*Picture: Major Phipps-Hornby V.C.*

After the surrender of Cronje at Paardeberg and the loss of Bloemfontein to Lord Roberts, General de Wet let his men take leave. On their return he launched a surprise attack on General Broadwood's column at Koornspruit (Sannaspos) east of Bloemfontein. He concealed his men in a donga, which the column was crossing, and managed to kill or capture over 1 000 men.

#### Citation:

Edmund John Phipps-Hornby, Major, Q Battery, Royal Horse Artillery. Date of Act of Bravery: 31 March 1900.

On the occasion of the action at Korn Spruit on the 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1900, a British force, including two batteries of the Royal Horse Artillery, was retiring from Thabanchu towards Bloemfontein. The enemy had formed an ambush at Korn Spruit, and before their presence was discovered by the main body had captured the greater portion of the baggage column and five out of the six guns of the leading battery. When the alarm was given Q Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, was within 300 yards of the Spruit. Major Phipps-Hornby, who commanded it, at once wheeled about and moved off at a gallop under a very heavy fire. One gun upset when a wheel horse was shot, and had to be abandoned, together with a waggon, the horses of which were killed. The remainder of the battery reached a position close to some unfinished railway buildings and came into action 1 150 yards from the Spruit, remaining in action until ordered to retire. When the order to retire was received Major Phipps-Hornby ordered the guns and their limbers to be run back by hand to where the teams of uninjured horses stood behind the unfinished buildings. The few remaining gunners, assisted by a number of Officers and men of a party of Mounted Infantry, and directed by Major Phipps-Hornby and Captain Humphreys, the only remaining Officers of the battery, succeeded in running back four of the guns under shelter. One or two of the limbers were similarly withdrawn by hand, but the work was most severe and

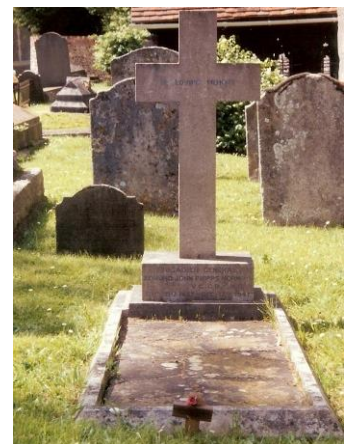
the distance considerable. In consequence all concerned were so exhausted that they were unable to drag in the remaining limbers or the fifth gun. It now became necessary to risk the horses, and volunteers were called for from among the drivers, who readily responded. Several horses were killed and men wounded, but at length only one gun and one limber were left exposed. Four separate attempts were made to rescue these, but when no more hordes were available the attempt had to be given up and the gun and limber were abandoned. Meanwhile the other guns had been sent on, one at a time, and after passing within 700 or 800 yards of the enemy, in rounding the head of a donga and crossing two spruits they eventually reached a place of safety, where the battery was re-formed. After full consideration of the circumstances of the case the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief in South Africa formed the opinion that the conduct of all ranks of Q Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, were conspicuously gallant and daring, but that all were equally brave and devoted in their behaviour. He therefore decided to treat the case of the battery as one of collective gallantry under Rule 13 of the Victoria Cross Warrant and directed that one Officer should be selected for the decoration of the Victoria Cross by the Officers, one non-commissioned officer by the non-commissioned officers, and two gunners or drivers by the gunners and drivers. A difficulty arose with regard to the Officer because there were only two unwounded Officers – Major Phipps-Hornby and Captain Humphreys – available for the work of saving the guns, and both of these had been conspicuous by their gallantry and by the fearless manner in which they exposed themselves, and each of them nominated the other for the decoration. It was ultimately decided in favour of Major Phipps-Hornby as having been the senior concerned. Sergeant C. Parker was elected by the non-commissioned officers, as described above. Gunner I. Lodge and Driver H.H. Glascock were elected by the gunners and drivers, as described above.

(London Gazette 26 June 1900)

Phipps-Hornby was decorated with the V.C. by Lord Roberts at Pretoria in October 1900. He was ADC to Lord Roberts from 1901-03, when he was promoted Lieutenant-Colonel. He was given command of the 4<sup>th</sup> RHA Brigade at Woolwich until 1908 when he was promoted Colonel. From 1909-13 as a Brigadier-General he commanded the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, during which time he was created a CB. His brother, meanwhile, had become an admiral in the Royal Navy.

At the outbreak of the World War, Brigadier-General Phipps-Hornby commanded the Artillery III Corps in France. In 1916 he was created a CMG and commanded the artillery of the Southern Army in England until the end of the war, when he retired.

General Phipps-Hornby died in Sonning-on-Thames, Berkshire, on 13 December 1947, 18 days short of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. His medals are in the Woolwich Mess of the Royal Artillery.



*Picture: General Phipps-Hornby V.C.'s Grave*

## Anniversary of the death of Lieutenant Harry Lawrence Low – 10 March 1902

Lieutenant Low, Royal Irish Rifles (Mounted Infantry), was killed at Vaal Bosh Pan, about 40 miles from Hoopstad, on 10 March 1902. This officer was first reported as missing, but it was afterwards discovered that he had been killed.



He was the younger son of Mrs. G. Hamilton Low, Montrose, Camberley, and the late George Hamilton Low, Esq., Royal Canadian Rifles, and was born in June 1874. Lieutenant Low entered the Royal Irish Rifles in January 1895 from the Royal Military College, passing out with honours and gaining the prize for Topography; being promoted Lieutenant in April 1897. At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902), he was serving with the depot of his regiment, but volunteering for active service, was sent to South Africa in February 1900, and joined the mounted infantry of his battalion.

*Picture: Royal Irish Rifles Badge*

He took part in the operations in the Ventersburg district and the Relief of Wepener, and afterwards served in the Transvaal and Cape Colony. In a letter from him dated 14 September 1900, describing one of the actions he was in, when some Boers were captured, he recorded – *"now comes the best news of all, a wire congratulating us on our prompt action – from Lord Roberts."* In another reference, a brother officer wrote, concerning Lieutenant Low – *"it will be many a long day before the regiment will forget how, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1901, with fifty Irish Riflemen, he attacked and singly defeated over 200 Boers."*

Lieutenant Low lost his life under very tragic circumstances. Seeing two horsemen advancing towards him dressed in khaki, he mistook them for British soldiers. On reaching one another all three dismounted, the two Boers keeping their rifles in their hands whilst Lieutenant Low left his in the bucket of his saddle. The Boers then called on him to surrender, but thinking they were on his side, he replied that he was one of their officers. He very quickly realised his mistake and tried to get closer to one of the Boers (a man named Lombard). The other Boer (named Kempens) shot Lieutenant Low dead. After peace was declared his body was found and buried at Vaal Bosh Pan. However, in December 1902, some of his battalion were at Modder River and were anxious that his remains should rest there where so many brave officers and men killed in the war are buried. His body was disinterred and moved to Modder River – about 100 miles. A marble cross was erected over his grave by his brother officers.

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

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**Allan Gordon**