

## Newsletter

May 2021

**May 1900** : After regrouping and re-equipping his forces, General Roberts started his advance to the Transvaal. He had been forced to spend time in Bloemfontein as an outbreak of dysentery and enteric fever had severely affected the health of his troops. Also, Lieutenant-General French's cavalry division was in dire need of horses. The Boers, having suffered the ignominy of Cronje's capture, and a number of reversals, such as the Relief of both Ladysmith and Kimberley, were making the British progress as difficult as possible – bridges and railway infrastructure were destroyed as part of this strategy. In the Free State the Battle of Lindley (the battle of the month on the website – [www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)), was a huge embarrassment to the British, and Major-General Colville was criticised for his performance, and relieved of his command.



*Picture: Garden of Remembrance to the Battle of Lindley*

On the Natal front, General Buller, had also regrouped and re-equipped his force that had been through many challenges in relieving Ladysmith, and was making his way towards the Eastern Transvaal – now Mpumalanga. During the course of the month of May they made steady progress and occupied Newcastle and Vryheid. However, on their way to occupy Vryheid, Bethune's Mounted Infantry, consisting of 356 British Soldiers and two artillery guns were attacked by the Boers at Scheeper's Nek. 31 British soldiers were killed in action, 25 were wounded and 11 taken prisoner.

Mafeking was finally relieved on 17 May 1900, following a siege which had lasted 217 days. Colonel Plumer's Rhodesian Force and Colonel Mahon's Relief Column suffered over 150 casualties in the relief operation. During the siege, Baden-Powell had 65 of his men killed in the defence of the town.

The last day of May 1900 saw the fall of Johannesburg after the Battle of Doornkop. With Johannesburg surrounded, the British demanded unconditional surrender of the town. Commandant Krause agreed to these terms on condition that the British allowed a 24 hour truce which would afford the Boers time to evacuate with the necessary supplies and arms to carry on fighting. This was granted – it is said that General Roberts was worried that if he didn't agree to the terms, the Gold mines would have been dynamited.

**May 1901** was full out guerrilla activity in both the then Eastern and Western Transvaals with many engagements and skirmishes taking place. The most significant battle was the Battle of Vlakfontein, near the current town of Derby, in the North West Province. In a battle which raged the whole day, with fluctuating fortunes, the British force under the command of Brigadier-General Dixon, of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, which was twice the size of the Boers who were under the command of Commandant Kemp, eventually managed to get the upper hand. The British losses were over 50 killed and 120 wounded.

**May 1902** saw the end of the South African War (1899-1902) with the signing of the Vereeniging Peace Treaty at Melrose House in Pretoria on 31 May.

On 27 May 1902, the British Cabinet met to discuss the final terms of the treaty and on 28 May the Boers were presented with the terms and given three days to make a decision, the answer required was either yes or no. 60 Boer delegates met in Vereeniging to debate the terms of the treaty. Discussions were heated with the Free State delegates being in favour on carrying on with the war. At around 2 pm on 31 May a vote was called and 54 delegates voted yes to the terms of the treaty and six voted no. On the same day, just before midnight, the Boer leaders returned to Kitchener at Melrose House in Pretoria, and the peace treaty was signed.



*Picture: Melrose House – the venue for the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging*



The signatories to the Peace Treaty were – Sir Alfred Milner, Lord Kitchener (from the U.K.); Schalk Burger, Francis Reitz, Louis Botha, Koos de la Rey, Lucas Meyer, and Johannes Krogh (all from the Transvaal); and Christiaan de Wet, J. B. M. Hertzog, C. H. Olivier, W. C. J. Brebner (all from the Orange Free State).

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

**1900**

L/Cpl J.F. Mackay	1 Batt Gordon Highlanders	Doornkop
Cpl. F.H. Kirby	Royal Engineers	Eastern Transvaal
Pvt. C.B. Ward	Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry	Lindley

**1901**

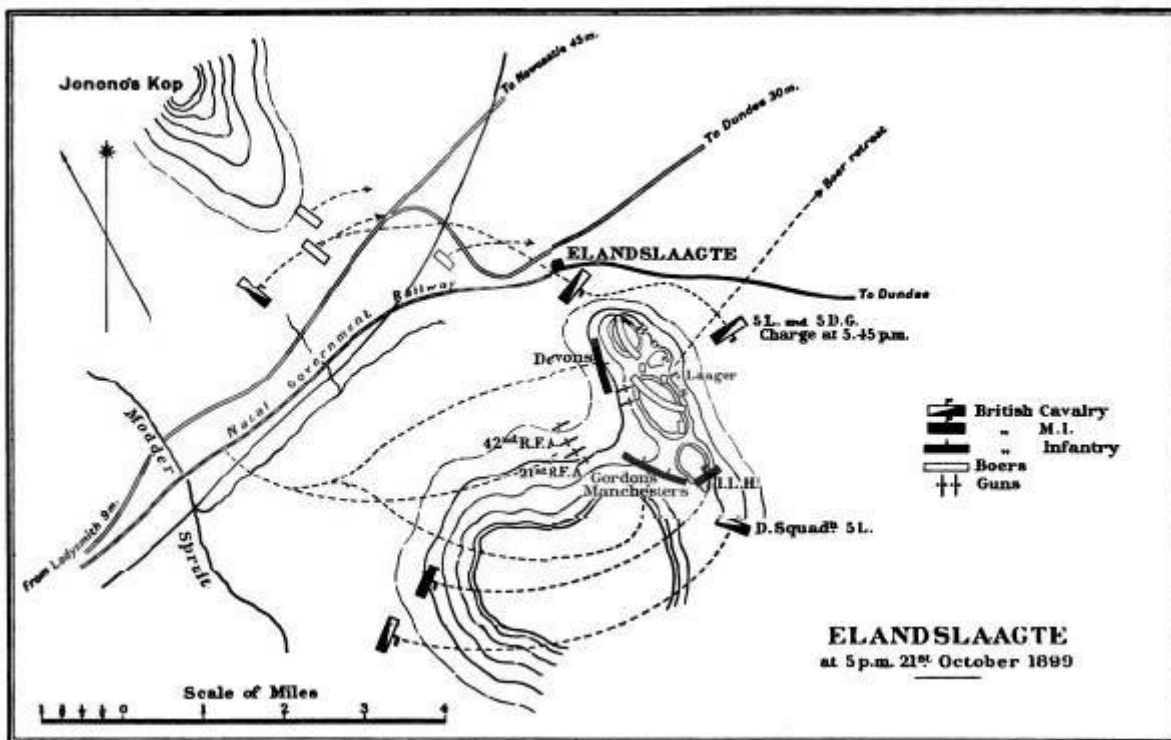
Lieut. F.W. Bell	West Australian Mounted Infantry	Brakpan
Lieut. G.H.B. Coulson	1 Batt. King's Own Scottish Borderers	Lambrechtsfontein

**Anniversary of the death of Field Marshall John Denton Pinkstone French**  
**– 22 May 1925**

Field Marshal John Denton Pinkstone French died on 22 May 1925 at the age of 72. During the South African War (1899-1902) his rank was Lieutenant-General.

He was born in Kent and saw brief service as a midshipman in the Royal Navy, before becoming a cavalry officer in the British army.

He first distinguished himself on the Gordon Relief Expedition in 1884-1885, and became a national hero during the South African War (1899-1902) when the victory of the Battle of Elandsplaagte was attributed to him.



*Picture: The Battle of Elandsplaagte*

It is said that he evaded the Siege of Ladysmith by escaping from the town on the last train to leave, before the Boers destroyed the railway link.

His early career was marred in controversy – he was on half-pay from 1893 to 1895 as a result of a divorce scandal and subsequent affairs with fellow officers' wives. Through the influence of two Generals – Buller and Wood his career was rescued, and early in 1899 he was promoted to temporary Major-General.

French arrived in Ladysmith on 20 October 1899, a day before the Battle of Elandslaagte, and took command of the Cavalry Division. On being 'ordered' out of Natal, he made his way to Cape Town.

On his arrival in Cape Town he was requested to assemble the Cavalry Division and to take command of forces covering the Colesberg area, filling the gap between the British divisions operating on the advance on Kimberley, and Lieutenant-General Gatacre's Division at Stormberg. He was also responsible for making sure that the rail link to Port Elizabeth didn't fall into the hands of the Boers.

In the period between the appointment of General Roberts as Commander-in-Chief on 17 December 1899, and his subsequent arrival in Cape Town on 10 January 1900, French was the only senior British Commander to conduct active operations in the theatre of war. Early in February 1900, French was given the command of forces to relieve Kimberley, which he did on 16 February, receiving accolades from both Roberts and Queen Victoria.



*Picture: Field-Marshal French*

After the Relief of Kimberley, French was involved in operations at Poplar Grove, Thabanchu and Karee Siding before taking time off to re-equip the Cavalry Division with horses recently arrived from Argentina. After the fall of Bloemfontein, French's Divisions were part of the left flank of the British army's advance on Pretoria.

His force engaged the Boers under General Botha around Kroonstad, a town 220 km north-east of Bloemfontein, before again becoming the left flank of General Robert's advance on Johannesburg.

After Johannesburg, and then Pretoria, had been occupied, French played a leading role in the defeat of the Boers who were under the command of General Botha, at the Battle of Diamond Hill.

At the Battle of Belfast (Dalmanutha), French was ordered to attack the Boers on their right flank on Zuikerboschkop and then to proceed to Machadodorp in order to cut off the Boer retreat.

However, by the time French arrived in Machadadorp, after the success of the British at the last set piece battle of the war, the Boers had evacuated the town, and made their way to Barberton and Lydenburg.

French pursued the Boers to Barberton and entered the town early in September 1900 where he captured a number of engines, wagons and supplies. With President Kruger having left the country for exile, the British believed the war to be nearing its end, and French was put in command of the Johannesburg area.



*Picture: Field-Marshal French*

In June 1901 Kitchener, who had succeeded General Roberts as Commander in Chief, ordered French to take command in the Cape Colony, and he was ordered to use severity against captured Boer Cape Rebels who were conducting 'hit and run' tactics against British units in the Colony. Although being warned not to treat every Cape Boer as a rebel, French, who had lost several friends during the war, didn't believe in sympathy.

In July 1901 he showed no sympathy to a deputation who sought clemency for some rebels sentenced to execution, and he even forced the inhabitants of the town to witness a hanging. French remained in the Cape for the duration of the war and was involved in the capture of Boer Rebels Lotter and Kritzinger.

On 22 August 1902 French was promoted to permanent rank of Lieutenant-General for distinguished service in the field of operation during the war.

He was involved in World War 1 and much has been written about conflict with fellow Commanders, and for those who are interested, his involvement in that war is worth a read.

Wikipedia reports his death as follows – *"French died from cancer of the bladder at Deal Castle on 22 May 1925.*

*On 25 May, his body was taken by motor hearse from Deal to London for cremation. The ashes then remained overnight in the Guards Chapel, Wellington Barracks until the funeral service at Westminster Abbey in the evening of 26 May.*

*After the service, the ashes were escorted by a military procession to Victoria Station by six battalions of infantry, one battery of artillery, eight squadrons of cavalry and a detachment from the Royal Navy.*

*Their burial at Ripple was conducted as a private service.*

*The procedure of burying ashes in an urn was still unfamiliar at the time, and it was transported in a coffin during the funeral ceremonies.*



*Picture: St. Mary the Virgin Church at Ripple*

*An estimated 7 000 people, including many veterans of the retreat from Mons, filed past the coffin during the first two hours it lay in state before the funeral.*

*Haig, Robertson, Hamilton and Smith-Dorrien (who had travelled from France to pay his respects to a man with whom he had clashed badly) were pall bearers at the funeral at Westminster Abbey – the first of a major First World War leader.*

*The ashes were buried in the graveyard of St. Mary the Virgin Church at Ripple, in the county of Kent, five days after his death.”*

**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) - our blog has regular posts on Anniversaries / Battles / Activities / Births & Deaths / etc.

**Allan Gordon**