

## Newsletter

May 2022

**May 1900** saw the fall of Johannesburg. Lord Roberts, having occupied Bloemfontein on 13 March, remained in Bloemfontein to regroup and re-equip his forces after having relieved Kimberley. He also had the outbreak of Enteric Fever amongst his men which didn't help with his plans for an advance on the Transvaal. On 3 May Roberts' force of over 25 000 men, in excess of 10 000 horses, and 65 guns left Bloemfontein to advance on Johannesburg and Pretoria. Most people think that the battle for Johannesburg was the Battle of Doornkop where the Gordon Highlanders excelled, however, Roberts had a central column, and a right and left flank, which were engaged in actions from 20 May, culminating in the Battle of Doornkop on 29 May. The right flank approached Johannesburg from the east of Germiston, with the left flank approaching the town near Roodepoort – a distance of about 35 km apart. The central column was engaged in actions in their advance on Johannesburg from as early as 26 May, with engagements with the Boers 50 km south of the town. This was the realistic size of the battlefield. The plan for the left and right flanks was for them to meet north of Johannesburg, in the vicinity of the present N1 off-ramp to Rivonia Road.

With Johannesburg almost surrounded, the British demanded an unconditional surrender of the town. Commandant Krause agreed to these terms on condition that the British allowed a 24 hour 'truce'.

This would enable the Boers sufficient time to evacuate with the necessary supplies and arms to continue 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.



*Picture: Johannesburg during the South African War*

General Buller was making progress from Natal towards a meeting with Lord Roberts east of Pretoria. Buller, on his approach to Vryheid, engaged a Boer force at Scheepers Nek. The casualties were 31 British soldiers killed, 25 wounded and 11 taken prisoner. Buller's force comprised over 45 000 men, upwards of 11 500 horses, 110 field guns and 4 naval guns. Opposing him were less than 10 000 Boers to try and prevent/delay his progress.

Mafeking was finally relieved on 17 May 1900, following a siege which had lasted 217 days. Colonel Plumer's Rhodesian Force from the north and Colonel Mahon's Relief Column, which had set out from Kimberley earlier in the month, engaged the Boers in the final battle for Mafeking at a place called Israel's Farm on 16 May. After this engagement the Boers evacuated all positions surrounding Mafeking.

**May 1901** was confined to Boer guerrilla actions against British convoys, as this was their only access to supplies and ammunition. The Battle of Vlakfontein, now named Derby after the regiment's heroic action in saving the guns, was fought on 29 May, where the British casualties were 47 killed and 127 wounded (Battle of the Month – [www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)).



*Picture: The Derbyshires re-taking the guns*

May 1901 also saw a meeting of the senior Boer leaders of the Transvaal to discuss peace negotiations with Britain. *"The outcome of the conference was a letter to President Steyn (of the Orange Free State) saying that the time had arrived for surrender. The outcome of the letter to Steyn was a reply from him of contempt, wrath and an injunction to go on."* – General Smuts, by Sarah Gertrude Milne, page 141.

**May 1902:** 4 May 1902 saw the end of the siege of Okiep which had commenced on 4 April. On 6 May, Zulu Chief Sikhobobo, with over 300 armed warriors, attacked the sleeping commando of Field-Cornet Potgieter, to recover cattle allegedly taken by the Boers earlier. 56 of the 70 Boers were killed. This incident is said to have had an influence on the Boers signing the peace treaty, as had the Zulus entered the war, the Boers would then be fighting against two formidable forces.

On 31 May 1902 the South African War (1899-1902) came to an end with the signing of the Vereeniging Peace Treaty at Melrose House in Pretoria.

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 of 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.

The signatories to the Peace Treaty were – Sir Alfred Milner and 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 and W.C.J. Brebner from the Orange Free State.

Notably, Jan Smuts, not being a delegate, did not sign the Treaty.



*Picture: Melrose House*

Other worldly events that happened in the month of April:

- Cor van Gogh, the brother of the artist Vincent, was born on 17 May 1867 in the Netherlands. He moved to the Transvaal early in the 1890's. During the South African War (1899-1902) he was a member of General Blignaut's commando and was injured in a skirmish near Brandfort.

During two of the 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	King's 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

## Victoria Cross of the Month

### Lieutenant G.H.B. Coulson – King's Own Scottish Borderers



Gustavus Hamilton Blenkinsopp Coulson was born at Wimbledon, Surrey on 1 April 1879. He was the grandson of Colonel Blenkinsopp Coulson of Blenkinsopp Castle in Northumberland.

He joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Yorkshire Regiment, but transferred to the King's Own Scottish Borderers in July 1899. Coulson went on active service to South Africa in January 1900 and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in July.

According to Mildred Dooner, in the book 'The Last Post' – *"He was present at the Battle of Paardeberg, where he had his horse shot under him in the charge in which Colonel Hannay fell. He then remained out, shooting Boers who had come to steal saddles, etc. of the fallen. He afterwards took part in the advance on Pretoria, and was subsequently present at the surrender of Prinsloo, at Brandwater Basin, and later in the action near Bothaville, where Lieutenant-Colonel le Gallais fell. Lieutenant Coulson was granted the DSO (Distinguished Service Order) for his gallantry in the campaign of 1900."*

*Picture: Lieutenant Coulson V.C.*

His Distinguished Service Order was gazetted on 27 September 1901. Earlier, on 18 May at Lambrechtfontein, in the Orange Free State, he rallied his men and saved the guns, thereby earning the Victoria Cross.

#### Citation:

This officer, during a rear-guard action near Lambrechtfontein, on the 18<sup>th</sup> May 1901, seeing Corporal Cranmer of the 7<sup>th</sup> Mounted Infantry, dismounted, his horse having been shot, remained behind and took him up on his own horse. He rode a short distance, when his horse was shot, and both Lieutenant Coulson and the corporal were brought to the ground. Lieutenant Coulson told Corporal Cranmer to get along with the wounded horse as best he could, and he would look after himself. Corporal Cranmer got on the horse and rode away to the column. Corporal Shaw (Lincoln's) of the 7<sup>th</sup> Mounted Infantry, seeing Lieutenant Coulson's position of danger, rode back through the rear-guard and took him up on his horse. A few minutes later Corporal Shaw was shot through the body, and there is reason to believe that Lieutenant Coulson was wounded also, as he fell off the horse. Corporal Shaw fell off a few

minutes later. This officer on many occasions throughout the campaign displayed great coolness and gallantry under fire.

*(London Gazette – 8 August 1902)*

According to Sergeant Murray Jackson in 'A Soldier's Diary, South Africa 1899-1901' they were near Bothaville: *"Young Coulson, our adjutant, rode over and had a look at Tony Welch's grave. They had been very good friends. Poor chap! He was buried beside Welch within this week...."*

After rescuing Corporal Cranmer *".....Coulson changed horses with him, and the horse dropping, got left. However, another man went back and got Coulson up behind him; but his horse was shot too, and the man, seeing Coulson lying senseless, thought he was dead (as he may have been), and came away. Coulson's body was found in a mealie patch some paces off, which looks as if he had come round and crawled there for cover."*

Corporal Shaw was promoted to Sergeant and awarded the DCM (Distinguished Conduct Medal) by Lord Kitchener.

Lieutenant Coulson was buried at the scene of the action, on the farm Lambrechtfontein, District Hoopstad. The farm is situated west-south-west of Bothaville.

In doing a little more research, what Ian Uys doesn't describe is that Lieutenant Coulson was part of the rear-guard of the 7<sup>th</sup> Mounted Infantry, and that on their way to re-join the column, Coulson noticed that a Maxim machine gun was about to fall into the hands of the Boers, so he gathered some of his men and mounted a counter attack to rescue the gun. He and his men then became the rear-guard of the rear-guard. Also, Corporal Shaw was rescued by Corporal Fraser of the King's Own Scottish Borderers and Corporal Claxton of the Lincoln's.

Coulson's family later erected a memorial to him in St Peter's Church at Tiverton in Devon.



*Picture: Memorial in St Peter's Church, Tiverton, Devon*

### **Anniversary of the birth of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – 22 May 1859**

Arthur Conan Doyle was born on 22 May 1859 in Edinburgh, Scotland. As a five year old his family split up due to his father's alcoholic tendencies, and Doyle, supported by a wealthy uncle, was sent to a Jesuit school in England. Having completed his schooling in England he went to Austria to further his studies, again at a Jesuit institution. This strict religious upbringing could have been the reason why he rejected the Catholic faith and became an agnostic.

He returned to Scotland and studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh's Medical School and then spent a number of years as a doctor on board various ships. He then opened a practice in Plymouth, but seemed to prefer writing to medicine, He wrote the first of his Sherlock Holmes novels at the age of 27. Doyle was a staunch supporter of compulsory vaccination in a time when the views of anti-vaccinators was prevalent. He also practised in the area of eye tests and later studied ophthalmology in Vienna.



At the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902) Doyle wanted to join a regiment as a soldier, but was considered too old and inadequately qualified.

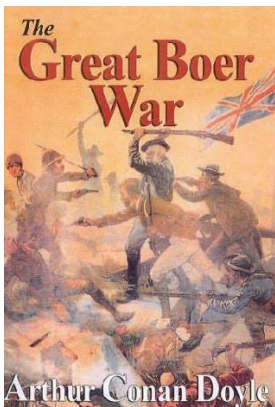
The recently formed Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) was struggling to cope with the huge number of British casualties in the early stages of the war.

When Doyle heard that a former medical colleague, John Langman, was staffing and equipping a private field hospital to be rushed out to South Africa, Doyle volunteered his services.

On 28 February 1900, 50 volunteers embarked for South Africa and immediately Doyle was inoculated with the recently developed vaccine against typhoid/enteric fever. A month later, having arrived in East London, the 'mobile' hospital started on their journey to Bloemfontein. Lord Roberts had occupied the town on 13 March and the British were about to become involved in the Battle of Sanna's Post, which was at the water works outside Bloemfontein. The Boers had seized control of the waterworks that provided the town with clean water and men were now drinking contaminated water from old abandoned wells and nearby rivers. The Battle of Sanna's Post was fought on 31 March 1900 and according to Steve Watt, there were 29 casualties – killed in action or died of wounds. The same publication, 'In Memoriam', records that in the first three weeks of April, there were over 200 deaths in Bloemfontein due to disease.

Sarah LeFanu in her book 'Something of Themselves: Kipling, Kingsley, Conan Doyle and the Anglo-Boer War', records – *"Within days the Langman hospital tents, erected on the cricket pitch of the Ramblers Club in the centre of Bloemfontein, were filling with cases of typhoid. 'The outbreak was a terrible one', wrote Conan Doyle, 'we lived in the midst of death – and death in its vilest and filthiest form.' At the beginning of the third week in April violent thunderstorms broke over the town. The tents stood in a swamp of mud and faeces."*

Conan Doyle left South Africa in July 1900 once Lord Roberts' force had commenced with their advance on Johannesburg and Pretoria. In addition to many of his fictional works, of which Sherlock Holmes enjoys the most fame, he wrote a book on the South African War (1899-1902) called 'The Great Boer War'. In the preface he states – *"This book was begun in England and continued on board a steamer, but the greater part was written in a hospital tent in the intervals of duty during the epidemic in Bloemfontein. Often the only documents which I had to consult were the convalescent officers and men who were under our care. Under these circumstances some errors may have crept in, but on the other hand I have had the inestimable advantage of visiting the scene of this great drama, of meeting many of the chief actors in it, and of seeing with my own eyes something of the actual operations."*



The book is a good read and contains excellent records of many of the earlier battles in the conflict. He doesn't make any reference to the guerrilla phase of the war.

The final chapter, 'Some Military Lessons of the War' makes interesting reading – especially when one understands that he was a doctor and not a military man. Is this attributable to common sense?

*Picture: The cover of 'The Great Boer War'*

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle opens the book with the following description of the Boers – *"Take a community of Dutchmen of the type of those who defended themselves for fifty years against all the power of Spain at a time when Spain was the greatest power in the world. Intermix with them a strain of those inflexible French Huguenots who gave up home and fortune and left their country for ever at the time of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The product must obviously be one of the most rugged, virile, unconquerable races ever seen upon earth. Take this formidable people and train them for seven generations in constant warfare against savage men and ferocious beasts, in circumstances under which no weakling could survive, place them so that they acquire exceptional skill with weapons and in horsemanship, give them a country which is eminently suited to the tactics of the huntsman, the marksman, and the rider. Then, finally, put a finer temper upon their military qualities by a dour fatalistic Old Testament religion and an ardent and consuming patriotism. Combine all these qualities and all these impulses in one individual, and you have the modern Boer – the most formidable antagonist who ever crossed the path of Imperial Britain. Our military history has largely consisted in our conflicts with France, but Napoleon and all his veterans*

*have never treated us so roughly as these hard-bitten farmers with their ancient theology and their inconveniently modern rifles."*

Doyle believed it was because of his works on the South African War (1899-1902) that he was knighted by King Edward VII on 24 October 1902. However there has been a lot of work done on Doyle's investigation on the Battle of Helvetia, where Major Cotton took the blame, was relieved of his duties and sent home. I am busy trying to tie many knots from a number of loose ends, so let's leave it like that. However, a South African historian, with a huge interest in the Battle of Helvetia, Peter Goodship, was writing a book on the battle, and 'investigating' Doyle's involvement in Kitchener's action against Cotton, but Peter has passed on, and the mystery remains.

Doyle's later life was very interesting in that in addition to writing many novels, including the Sherlock Holmes books, he busied himself with his belief in spiritualism, architectural activities, and in legal matters where he believed that an injustice had been done. It is believed that through his work, on a number of cases where the judgement was overturned, that the Court of Criminal Appeal was established in the U.K..

In my research on the man, I believe that there could be a link with the Major Cotton case, as after being sentenced, and 'relieved of his duties', Major Cotton went on to receive a military pension. It is a great pity that Peter Goodship never completed his book.

Doyle died of a heart attack at the age of 71, on 7 July 1930 at his home in Sussex.



*Picture: The wording at the base of the headstone where Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his wife Jean Conan Doyle are buried*

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

**Allan Gordon**