

Newsletter

May 2023

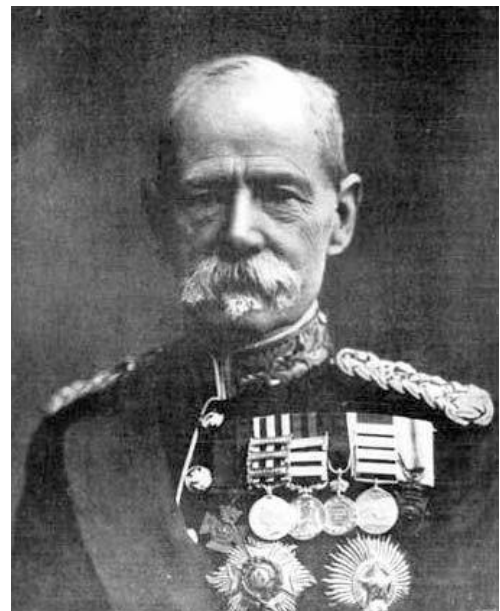
As I have done for the past few months, and because of the positive feedback I have received, I am going to quote selected headlines from the book 'The War Reporter – The Anglo-Boer War through the eyes of the Burghers', by J.E.H. Grobler. I have been asked where this book can be bought, and it looks like Second Hand-Book Shops are the answer.

May 1900 – from the Editor's Comments (page 63) – *"Bad news from the front north of Bloemfontein: all indications are that the British are resuming their offensive. What is needed now is for our military officers to remain calm and confront the enemy with the greatest degree of solidarity that is humanly possible. That seems to be our only hope, since there is no natural obstacle between Bloemfontein and Pretoria such as a mountain range, to serve as a defensive position.*

Lack of co-operation is not the only weakness crippling the Boers. There are without doubt a few thousand burghers who simply evade their duty and take 'leave' without permission. They seem to feel: let the other men do the dirty work: I will merely save my own skin. The pursuit of selfish interests is the surest way to defeat. Return to the front burghers – the enemy threatens to overwhelm us. Be loyal to our motto – Unity is Strength."

The British force under Roberts was making huge headway through the Orange Free State and occupied the key town of Kroonstad without much opposition.

To quote the Editor's Comments again (page 67) – *"In addition to the fall of Kroonstad, the saddest news of the week is that fact that the British have managed to relieve the besieged garrison of Mafeking. This siege was a catastrophe for the Republican cause, from beginning to end. The implications are much greater than simply that a small town has been relieved. Mafeking has become a symbol of British determination and Boer incompetence, and the opportunity to turn this perception around, has now finally disappeared."*



Picture: Lord Roberts

And the last report of the month was no more encouraging to the Boer effort (page 71) – *"The Republican prospects in this war become more gloomy by the day. We are in the grip of a paralysing uncertainty about our future. President Kruger has left his capital. The enemy has occupied Johannesburg. Lord Roberts claims to have annexed the Orange Free State. The*

Transvaal government has decided not to defend Pretoria if it should come to that. It is clear that we will have to adapt to completely changed circumstances."

May 1901: from the Editor's Comments (page 115) – *"Only a few battles were fought with no noteworthy victory or defeat. The British forces are involved in two main activities, namely destruction of Boer farms and large-scale attempts to drive the Boer commandos into the blockhouse lines. With the first they are highly efficient, but their drives have so far produced virtually nothing. The only big battle took place towards the end of May at Vlakkfontein in the Western Transvaal."*

The War Reporter carries on, alluding to the fate of the Boer's Long Tom guns, which is a very interesting story in itself. The four Long Toms, which were purchased for the defence of Pretoria, after the Jameson Raid had indicated forthcoming military action, were placed in the four Forts erected on the perimeter of Pretoria – Schanskop, Klapperkop, Wonderboom, and Dasspoort.

Schanskop Tom was damaged in a night attack, during the Siege of Ladysmith on 7 December 1900, at Gun Hill, and had to be sent to Pretoria for repairs. Part of the barrel had to be removed and this led to it being renamed 'The Jew'.



Picture: A Long Tom Gun

The Editor's Comments (page 115) – *"Strictly speaking, the British can claim one success, namely that they have, through unrelenting pressure, forced the Boers to destroy their only remaining Long Tom gun, the legendary 'Jew'. On the other hand, the Boers can claim that they ensured that the British could not, in spite of their huge advantage in numbers and in armament, and continuous pressure, capture a single Boer gun. The fact that the Boers are now left with virtually only their rifles to fight the British forces, means that there can no longer be any conventional battles."*

May 1902: The Editor's Comments (page 145), describes the end – on the last day of May – *"The war has ended – and so the existence of the Boer Republics. Peace has been declared, and the price is our independence. The loyal burghers were united in their determination to fight to the bitter end – and now the bitter end has arrived. The enemy did not destroy the Republican military power. It was the Republican leaders who decided, enough. We have given our best, but the force against us was too massive. The price we were paying day by day for our independence and the freedom became too high. The destruction of our country by our ruthless enemy was simply too damaging."*



*Picture: Battle of Holkrans
Memorial*

It is widely accepted that the 'tipping point' for the Boers was the massacre at Holkrans, early in May 1902. The Boers had always believed that this war was a 'white man's war', and if the local tribes entered the war on the side of the British, then the game was up – the 'numbers game' made it impossible for the Boers to survive.

Commandos in the area of Northern Natal, desperate for food, began raiding the farms of the Zulus for cattle and crops. One of the Zulu tribes, the abaQulusi threatened to retaliate, but the Boers turned their backs on these threats. In the early hours of 6 May, the Zulus attacked the camp of the Vryheid commando, killing 56 of the 75 Boers, and recovering most of their cattle. The Boers blamed the British for encouraging the attack and arming the locals – but this has never been proven.

During two of the May months of the South African War (1900 and 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

Lance-Corporal J.F. Mackay – 1st Battalion, Gordon Highlanders

John Frederick Mackay was born in Edinburgh on 6 June 1873, and was a university student before joining the 1st Battalion Gordon Highlanders. He saw service on the North-West Frontier of India and in the Tirah Expedition of 1897-8.



Picture: Lance-Corporal Mackay V.C.

In South Africa he was present at Magersfontein and Paardeberg, then, in the advance on Johannesburg, fought close to where the Jameson Raiders had been captured in 1895, south-west of the city.

Citation:

On the 20th May 1900, during the action at Doornkop near Johannesburg, MacKay repeatedly rushed forward, under a withering fire at short range, to attend to wounded comrades, dressing their wounds whilst he himself was without shelter, and in one instance, carrying a wounded man from the open under heavy fire, to the shelter of a boulder.

(London Gazette – 10 August 1900)

MacKay saw further service at Pretoria, Belfast and the Eastern Transvaal. On 11 July 1900, he fought at Wolvekrantz (better known as the Battle of Dwarsvlei), near Krugersdorp, and was again recommended for the V.C.. He was transferred to the King's Own Scottish Borderers for the duration of the war.

He was decorated by Lord Roberts in Pretoria on 25 October 1900. From 1903 he served with the Southern Nigeria Regiment, then in 1907 transferred to the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Lieutenant-Colonel MacKay served in France in 1915-16, then commanded the 2/6th Battalion Highland Light Infantry, until its disbandment. He suffered from the effects of his wounds and went to Nice, France, in October 1929 for treatment, but died there on 9 January 1930, aged 56.

(Acknowledgement – Ian Uys)



Picture: Lance-Corporal Mackay V.C.'s Medals

The book 'With the Gordon Highlanders to the Boer War & beyond' by Lachlan Gordon-Duff (page 116) – *"However, it was absolutely impossible under such fire and lots of them were hit, poor Younger first in the head, which apparently was not very bad, then in the thigh, and badly in the stomach. He was now most gallantly rescued by Corporal Mackay, who was recommended for the VC at Doornkop, so he is certain to get it now."*

What a pity that those two actions couldn't have resulted in a V.C. and bar.

Anniversary of the birth of Commandant Danie Theron – 9 May 1872

Daniël Johannes Stephanus 'Danie' Theron was born on 9 May 1872 in Tulbagh, Cape Colony. As a young boy his family moved to Bethlehem in the Orange Free State. After completing his schooling, he qualified as a schoolteacher. He then studied law and started his own legal practice in Krugersdorp. As a member of the Krugersdorp Commando he was responsible for training scouts for reconnaissance duties.

Before the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902), Theron and a friend, Koos Jooste, who was a cycling champion, asked the Transvaal Government if they could raise a cycling corps – bicycles had first been used by the U.S. army in the Spanish War. It was Theron's opinion that using bicycles for dispatch riding and reconnaissance would save horses for use in combat.

In order to gain the necessary permission Theron and Jooste had to convince the highly sceptical burghers that bicycles were as good, if not better, than horses. In the end, it took a 75 km race, in which Jooste, on a bicycle, beat an experienced horse rider, to convince Commandant-General Piet Joubert and President Paul Kruger that the idea was sound.



Picture: Commandant Danie Theron

Each of the 108 recruits to the newly founded corp. was supplied with a bicycle, shorts, a revolver and, on special occasion, a light carbine. Later they received binoculars, tents, tarpaulins and wire cutters. At the outbreak of the war Theron's Corp. was in action in Natal, before moving to the forces around Kimberley.

On 25 February 1900, during the Battle of Paardeberg, Theron crossed the British lines and entered Cronje's laager in an effort to co-ordinate a breakout. The following day, Theron sneaked back to de Wet at Poplar Grove and informed him that the council had rejected the breakout. Cronje and his laager were captured days later.

On 2 March 1900 a Council of War at Poplar Grove gave Theron permission to form a Scout Corps, consisting of about 100 men, to be called the 'Theron se Verkenningskorps' better known by the initials TVK. Curiously, Theron and his new corp. now preferred the use of horses, and command of the Cycle Corp. was given to Jooste.

The TVK were responsible for destroying railway bridges and capturing several British officers. As a result of his endeavours a newspaper article dated 7 April 1900, reported that Lord Roberts

labelled him 'the chief thorn in the side of the British' and put a bounty on his head of £1 000, dead or alive. By July Theron was considered such an important target that the TVK were attacked by General Broadwood and 4 000 troops. A running battle ensued during which the TVK lost eight scouts killed, and the British lost five killed and fifteen wounded. Theron continued with his activities – trains were captured, railway tracks dynamited and prisoners freed from a British jail. Through these activities, he earned the respect of his men and his superiors.

Theron's Last Battle

On 4 September 1900 in the Gatsrand, near Fochville, Commandant Danie Theron was planning an attack with General Liebenberg's Commando on General Hart's column. Whilst out scouting to discover why Liebenberg was not at the agreed position, Theron ran into seven members of Marshall's Horse. During the resultant fire fight Theron killed three and wounded the other four. The column's escort was alerted by the firing and immediately charged up the hill, but Theron managed to avoid capture. Finally the column's artillery, six field guns and a 4.7 inch navel gun, were unhitched and the hill bombarded. Theron was killed in an inferno of lyddite and shrapnel.



He was buried on a nearby farm by farmers who identified his body.

On 15 September 1900, the men of the TVK exhumed the body of their Commandant and reburied him in the family cemetery of the Pienaar family near Fochville.

Picture: Danie Theron Memorial in Fochville

On 10 March 1903, Theron's last will was carried out and his body was once again exhumed to be reburied next to that of his late fiancée Hannie Neethling on her father's farm Eikenhof.

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

Allan Gordon