

Newsletter

May 2025

The major battles that took place during the months of May 1900, 1901, and 1902 in the Boer War (1899-1902) have been covered in previous newsletters. This newsletter will record other interesting aspects of the War, together with other notable 'May' events.

May 1900: After the death of George de Villebois Mareuil on 6 April 1900, General Botha formed an 'International Legion' comprised of Hollanders, Russians, Germans, Frenchmen and Americans, under the command of Yevgeny Maximov. Maximov and de Villebois Mareuil were the only two volunteer foreigners who were given the rank of General in the Boer forces during the War. This group of 150 volunteers attacked a group of General Hamilton's large force at Tobaberg, and it was during this action, on 1 May 1900, that Captain Towse of the Gordon Highlanders was again acknowledged for displaying extraordinary acts of bravery – the first being at the Battle of Magersfontein.



Picture: Captain Towse

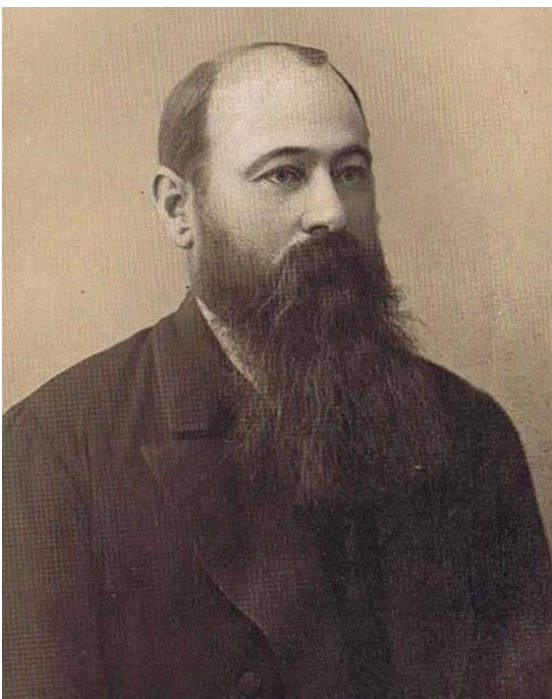
The London Gazette, 6 July 1900, recorded – "*Captain Towse, with twelve men, took up a position on the top of Mount Thaba, far away from support. A force of about 150 Boers attempted to seize the same plateau, neither party appearing to see the other until they were but 100 yards apart. Some of the Boers then got within 40 yards of Captain Towse and his party and called on him to surrender. He at once caused his men to open fire and remained firing himself until severely wounded (both eyes shattered), succeeding in driving off the Boers. The gallantry of this Officer in vigorously attacking the enemy (for he not only fired, but charged forward) saved the situation, notwithstanding the numerical superiority of the Boers.*"

I have often thought about Towse and Mackay, especially when on tour – we visit the site of the first double V.C. recipient, Martin-Leake – on our Val Tour. Two citations for bravery – should Captain Towse have been the first double award of the Victoria Cross? It is quite ironic that the month of May 1900 saw two men, Towse and Mackay receiving second recommendations for bravery, and both could have (or should have) been awarded the V.C. and bar – AND – both were Gordon Highlanders. Lance-Corporal Mackay is mentioned later in this newsletter.

May 1901: In March 1901 Generals Botha and Kitchener met in Middelburg to discuss peace. The offer tabled by Great Britain was refused, but in May 1901, the ZAR (Transvaal) Government met to discuss the future of the War. The book 'General Smuts' by Sarah Gertrude Millin records (page 140) – *"In May 1901, at a farmhouse in the Eastern Transvaal, there met a council of war to reconsider the matter. Members of the wandering government were present and also Botha and Smuts and other soldiers. Earlier in the year Smuts had attacked and taken the Modderfontein ridge and held it against the English. But, generally speaking, there was little to show on the credit side. The story was one of surrender, demoralisation and loss of hope. Homes were being burnt down; men in the field had faith neither in their leaders nor in their fugitive Government, the foreign powers were, more certainly than ever now, not intervening. When Kruger approached Germany for help, he was threatened with arrest should he cross the frontier."*

Millin carries on (page 141) – *"The outcome of the conference was a letter to Steyn (President Steyn of the Free State) saying that the time had arrived for surrender. The outcome of a letter to Steyn was a reply from him of contempt, wrath and an injunction to go on. From Kruger too, when the British allowed Smuts, for the Boers, to communicate with him, came instructions to go on."*

The decision was to carry on with the War – carrying on with the Guerrilla tactics which were becoming a huge thorn in the side of the British force. Millin further records (page 142) – *"It was a manner of fighting that could only be pursued with small, agile bodies of men in a big, wild country – a gnat-like affair of harrying an enemy, buzzing away and coming back to harry him in another place. It was an affair of raids – often brilliant and dangerous – on convoys and garrisoned posts, of attacks on isolated bodies, of wrecking trains, bridges and telegraph wires, of endlessly disturbing and distracting."*



To put things into perspective, President Steyn was rightfully of the opinion that the Free State had lost everything in the British pursuit of the Transvaal and the gold mines. They had carried the brunt of Roberts' march from Cape Town, had lost their capital (Bloemfontein), General de Wet was almost a lone figure, together with loyal burghers, trying to divide the British force by keeping many columns busy in the Free State, whilst Botha, de Wet, Viljoen, Beyers, Smuts and others were doing their bit in the Transvaal. Yes – the Transvaal had lost Johannesburg and Pretoria, but the effects of the concentration camps and the 'scorched earth' policy were just starting to take effect in the Transvaal, hence the thought about negotiating for peace.

Picture: President Steyn

May 1902: There are many versions of the cost of the War to Britain, but having read Thomas Pakenham's book 'The Boer War', I think his description is the most plausible. He records (page 572) – *"In money and lives, no British war since 1815 had been so prodigal. That 'tea-time' war, Milner's little Armageddon, which was supposed to be over by Christmas 1899, had cost the British taxpayer more than 200 million pounds. The cost in blood was equally high. The War Office reckoned that 400, 346 horses, mules and donkeys were expended in the war. There were over a hundred thousand casualties of all kinds among the 365,693 imperial and 82,742 colonial soldiers who had fought in the war. Twenty-two thousand of them found a grave in South Africa: 5,774 were killed by enemy action (or accident) and shovelled into the veld where they fell; 16,168 died of wounds or were killed by the action of disease (or the inaction of army doctors)."*

On a more 'humane' note General de la Rey's brother (Adriaanus) was captured on 11 May, but because of the peace negotiations taking place, he was treated with a certain amount of respect. Could this have been because of the treatment afforded to Methuen a month earlier by General de la Rey (just a thought)? 'Jan Smuts – Memoirs of the Boer War' records (page 180) – *"He (Adriaanus) was captured by British forces near Vryburg on 11th May 1902, but as peace negotiations were under way he was allowed to join his wife in the concentration camp at Merebank in Natal. During the war four of de la Rey's thirteen children died in the concentration camp at Klerksdorp."*

Other 'related' events during the month of May:

- **24 May 1870** – birth of Jan Smuts, near Malmesbury in the Cape Colony.
- **29 May 1900** – President Kruger left Pretoria – never to return.
- **6 May 1902** – the Battle of Holkrans – referenced by many Boer leaders when discussing peace.
- **25 May 1902** – Jack Hindon surrendered to the British, near Balmoral.
- **8 May 1945** – the death of Frank Bourne – the last survivor of Rorke's Drift.
- **29 May 1985** – 39 football fans lost their lives at the Heysel Stadium during a European Cup match between Liverpool and Juventus – yes – I am a Liverpool supporter.



Picture: Jan Smuts

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

1900

L/Cpl J.F. Mackay	1 Batt Gordon Highlanders	Doornkop
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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

The three V.C.s awarded during the Boer War (1899-1902), have been featured in previous Newsletters:

- L/Cpl J.F. Mackay Newsletter May 2023
- Lieut. F.W. Bell Newsletter May 2024
- Lieut. G.H.B. Coulson Newsletter May 2022

However, a post on Facebook, relating the events at Doornkop on 29 May 1900 is worth repeating:



General Ian Hamilton thanking the Gordon Highlanders for their near suicidal attack at Doornkop on 29 May 1900.

It is thought Ian Hamilton was avenging the defeat of the Gordons at Majuba in the Transvaal War of 1880-81; he was a young Lieutenant at the time and took a bullet in the wrist which permanently disabled him – *'remember Majuba!'*

When Hamilton was positioned, French withdrew and Hamilton commenced with his full-frontal attack on Doornkop with two infantry brigades. The Gordon Highlanders were right in front. With the advance of the British, the Boers set fire to the veld.

Picture: General Ian Hamilton

To quote from the regimental history – *"The leading battalion of the 19th Brigade were the Gordons, there was no chance for selection. Their extension and advance were conducted with machine like regularity. The grass in front of them was burnt and burning, and against this dark background the khaki figures showed distinctly. The Boers held their fire until the attack was within 800 yards, and then, louder than the cannonade, the ominous rattle of concentrated rifle-fire burst forth."*

Lachlan Gordon-Duff in his memoirs writes, *"... within 400 yards, the Boers were behind a lot of rocks and had burnt away all the grass. The fire was now very heavy and men were falling and the only thing to do was charge."* He goes on with much more about the battle, but ends with, *"as soon as we noticed they were giving up we rushed at them, this time not being fired on. We got a few prisoners and some dead and wounded, by which time it was getting dark and it was all over."*

Thomas Pakenham records that the Gordons lost 100 men in 10 minutes. The regimental history records that "*Captain Meyrick and 19 men were killed with 78 men wounded*". Gordon-Duff, who was there, records in his memoirs "*... our dead and wounded numbered 97. Later 15 or 16 died of wounds and another four or five died of wounds in hospital.*"

Reports in the Morning Post in the U.K. relating to the battle, and more specifically to the Gordon Highlanders (attributed to Winston Churchill) were, amongst others – "*I think, the finest performance I have seen in the whole campaign*", and "*There is no doubt they are the finest regiment in the world.*"

One Victoria Cross was awarded – to Corporal F. Mackay, for conspicuous bravery in dressing the wounds of comrades and carrying one man some distance under heavy fire.

Acknowledgement – Iain David Hayter

Picture: Corporal Mackay V.C.



Anniversary of the birth of Captain F.H. Connor – May 1862

Captain Frederick Henry Connor, Royal Irish Fusiliers, died of wounds received in action at the Battle of Talana Hill, 20 October 1899. He was the son of Lieutenant-Colonel Connor, was born in May 1862, and educated at Cheltenham College and Wellington (where he was in the Combermere and Lynedoch). He joined the Devonshire Regiment from the Militia in May 1884, being transferred to the Royal Irish Fusiliers in October of the same year and was promoted Captain in August 1891. He served in the Waziristan Expedition under the late Sir William Lochkart in August 1895 as Transport Officer.

He was adjutant from 16 September 1899, of his battalion which landed in Durban on 12 October 1899. He fell while rushing forward and leading some of his men. They had been lining a wall parallel to the main position on Talana Hill. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle thus described it: *"The air was so full of bullets that it seemed impossible to live on the other side of this shelter. Out of the huddled line of crouching men an officer sprang, shouting, and a score of soldiers vaulted over the wall, and followed at his heels. It was Captain Connor, of the Irish Fusiliers, but his personal magnetism carried up with him some of the Rifles, as well as the men of his own command. He and half of his little forlorn hope were struck down, he, alas, to die the same night."*



Captain Connor is buried in Dundee, and a cross has been erected to his memory by his brother officers. His name is inscribed on the Eleanor Cross War Memorial at Cheltenham College.

Picture: Captain Connor's grave

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

Lieutenant-Colonel R.H. Gunning was also a casualty at that first battle of the Boer War (1899-1902). Palmer's book records the following on Gunning (page 290) – *"At Talana, Lieutenant-Colonel Gunning fell while leading his battalion in attack. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in writing of this battle states, 'It was here between the wall and the summit that Colonel Gunning of the Rifles and many other brave men met their end, some by our own bullets and some by those of the enemy' and again 'among the killed were many that the army could well spare. The gallant but optimistic Symons, Gunning of the Rifles, Sherston, Connor, Hambro and many other brave men died that day.'"*

The Battle of Talana was the first battle of the Boer War and British casualties were 41 killed, 185 wounded, and 210 men 'missing'.

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

Allan Gordon