

The Man behind the Medal

Joseph Robinson

Queen South Africa (1 bar – Talana)

Dundee Town Guard

Queen South Africa (4 bars – Tugela Heights; Relief of Ladysmith, Transvaal; Laings Nek)

668 - Imperial Light Infantry

King South Africa (2 bars – South Africa 1901; South Africa 1902)

1517 – Steinaecker's Horse



I bought this group on an Auction due to its double issue of the QSA, and because of the recipient's possible participation in the Battle of Spioen Kop.

Joseph Robinson was born in Leeds, Yorkshire, England on 8 April 1867. His reason for moving to South Africa is unknown, but it is believed that at the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902), he was the local postman in the town of Dundee (South Africa). He signed up for the Dundee Town Guard on its formation and served during the first engagement of the war at Talana Hill. During this battle the General in command of the British forces, Major-General Penn-Symons was wounded, later succumbing to his wounds.

After the Battle, when the British forces evacuated Dundee, the Town Guard was disbanded and Robinson made his way to Pietermaritzburg where the Imperial Light Infantry (I.L.I.) was being formed. He attested for service, with this attestation enabling the second issue of a QSA. This is probably similar to, with the outbreak of World War 1, South Africans enlisting with their local Regiments for active service against the Germans in the then German South West Africa, and once the Germans were defeated, the South Africans went 'home'. Later, when the Allies were experiencing difficulties with the Germans in Europe, South Africa were called on to help, and those wanting to go off to the war in Europe, re-enlisted with the South African Infantry Brigade. No duplication of medals occurred as the WW1 Star had been issued for service in German South West Africa.



The I.L.I. was composed mainly of men who had lost their employment because of the outbreak of the war and were mainly raw recruits. By the end of December 1899 the regiment was ready for active service and was put into General Coke's 10th Brigade. They received comparatively little training and their first active engagement was when they were thrown into combat at the Battle of Spioen Kop. At 10 am on the morning of 24 January 1900, two companies of the I.L.I. were sent onto the hill-top which was under devastating fire. At 2 pm the rest of the regiment was sent to re-enforce the unit and they remained in the firing line for the rest of the action. During the night the British troops were ordered to evacuate the hill, leaving many dead and wounded. However, owing to the confusion in command, the I.L.I., when half way down the hill, were ordered to return to the firing line. They remained there until again ordered to retire. This action, by unseasoned recruits, earned great praise from the Commander-in-Chief.



Memorial to the Imperial Light Infantry on Spioen Kop

After Spioen Kop, four companies under Major Hay were sent to report to General Hart. The four companies then became part of the Irish Brigade and took part in the assault on Hart's Hill on 23 February. The I.L.I., together with men from other regiments were directed by General Hart to assault the left position of the Boers on the hill. The four companies, together with other companies from the Brigade came under heavy fire from the Boers in this engagement and 19 men were killed, 105 wounded, and eight missing – how many from the I.L.I. is not recorded.

After the Relief of Ladysmith the Regiment saw little action and was deployed in Northern Natal. From June to October 1900 the regiment performed garrison duty about Newcastle and Volksrust. Robinson probably didn't like this period of inactivity, and returned to Dundee.



On 4 January 1901, whilst in Dundee, Robinson enlisted with the 1st Scottish Horse, a Regiment which had been sanctioned by Lord Kitchener in November 1900. Lord Tullibardine started recruiting, chiefly in Natal and on 4 February 1901 took to the field with three squadrons. Initially the regiment served in the Western Transvaal in columns commanded by, amongst others, Brigadier-Generals Cunningham and Dixon. They saw very little serious fighting until the Battle of Vlakfontein (near Roodepoort) on 29 May 1901.

Robinson was discharged on 17 August 1901, quite why, I have been unable to research. He then enrolled with Steinaecker's Horse, in Pietermaritzburg, on 17 October 1901.



The Insignia of Steinaecker's Horse

Steinaecker's Horse was a regiment raised in June 1900 by Major F. von Steinaecker to operate in Zululand and on the Swaziland border of the Transvaal. Steinaecker, a Prussian, had been in Southern Africa for 20 years before the outbreak of the war and had a very interesting history as a scout, in the early months of the war, before raising his regiment.

Steinaecker's Horse, with its legendary leader, operated almost on its own in a unique type of guerrilla warfare in the wild low-veld of the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga).

On 16 April 1902, Captain Blaine (Steinaecker's Horse) led his troops into an abandoned Boer Laager just outside the town of Haenertsburg. This was a trap and Blaine's men found themselves ambushed. In the ensuing action, Steinaecker's Horse suffered casualties – four killed, 11 wounded, and 23 taken prisoner, one of whom was Joseph Robinson. Robinson, together with the others captured, was later released. Robinson was discharged at his own request at Komatipoort on 24 September 1902, almost four months after the signing of the Peace Treaty.



In the book, Steinaecker's Horsemen, by William (Bill) Woolmore, the bibliography on Robinson states:

"Barman, age 34, height 5 foot 2 and a half inches, blue eyes, dark brown hair, tattoo on right arm, address: Pietermaritzburg. Next of Kin: brother, 2 Trouberg Terrace, off Deane Street, Pietermaritzburg. His medals were sent to him c/o Vryheid Post Office, Natal.

References:

Steinaeckers Horsemen – William (Bill) Woolmore
The Colonials in South Africa – John Stirling
Notes received with medal purchase
Meurig Jones - Research

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Allan Gordon