



The South African Military History Society

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

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NEWSLETTER - FEBRUARY 2019

The Curtain Raiser was presented by chairman, Hamish Paterson and was entitled "**Kings Mountain 7 October 1780 - with comparisons to Majuba 27 February 1881**".

The talk was presented in two parts. The first part focused on the advances, and clear superiority in both instances, in weapons on the side of the backwoodsmen at Kings Mountain and the Boers at Majuba. Kings Mountain and Majuba were hugely significant, in that they marked a significant step to a rebel or patriot victory in the American War of Independence, and the restoration of the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek a hundred years later. Interestingly, the advanced weapons technology was not in the hands of the regular army of the day.

Hamish now set about to explain the problems with rifles of the day, from the lengthy loading process to ramming an oversized ball down a barrel. Dickert, a German, started making quality rifles in Pennsylvania around 1740. By reducing the caliber of rifles and lengthening the barrels, thus saving gunpowder and increasing accuracy and increasing the range, this became a most useful weapon in the hands of skilled riflemen. The British still fought with the Brown Bess musket, which had a third of the range but could be loaded faster.

The hundred years between Kings Mountain and Majuba saw a revolution in rifle design. Although the only similarity was the use of gunpowder to propel the bullet, the invention of the percussion cap by a Scottish minister took nearly thirty years for the British to adopt in their percussion muskets. The invention of a breech loading needle gun by von Dreyse in the 1830's and the invention of the Minie ball and rifle in 1846 and 1849 respectively revolutionised warfare, and resulted in weapons being fired from the prone position, instead of standing up. The next step would be the design of a rifle which could withstand the hygroscopic effects of gunpowder. Its bullet and powder charge had a greased wad, which could provide a gas seal at the back, with the Westley-Richards monkeytail rifles the Boers could manufacture their own ammunition and never run out.

While the Boer Commandos were very proficient with their weapons, there was very little in the way of British weapons training on the Martini Henry rifles and carbines during the 1870 and 1880s. British troops were also not being helped by the nature of the light in Africa, which makes distance judging very difficult for unacclimatized eyes.

The second part of Hamish's talk focused on the events leading up to and including Kings Mountain itself.

The road to Kings Mountain began in what is known in the United States as the French and Indian

War (1754-1763) and in rest of the world as the Seven Years War (1756-1763). The British won the war and gained Canada. This raised the issue of who was going to pay for the war? Seeing as much of the war had been fought in North America, the British decided that the American colonists would do the paying. Together with the ongoing expansion into Red Indian territory by the colonists and the resulting conflicts, there was a need for a large and expensive garrison in North America to protect the colonists.

The British employed several means, all unpopular, to raise money. The Stamp Act (1765), and customs duties were both implemented (Townsend Acts) but repealed, in what can be seen as the British colonies acting in concert for the first time. The importation of tea threatened vested interests in the American colonies, and resulted in the famous Boston Tea Party, when 342 chests of tea were dumped in Boston harbour.

The British now decided to use the big stick approach. The closure of Boston via the Coercive Act in 1774 and a British garrison to enforce the closure resulted in the colonial response of the First Continental Congress in 1774. An ugly partisan war now resulted with a number of skirmishes fought, resulting in victories for both parties. In a strategic blunder General Howe went south to Pennsylvania instead of joining up with British forces from Canada, resulting in the British defeat at Saratoga. The French now made an alliance with the American rebels. In May 1778 Henry Clinton assumed command in America and decided on a southern campaign. He besieged and captured Charleston in 1780. Partisan activities become so problematic for the British that they set up their own militia, hoping to protect the flanks of their own forces. Lt Col Patrick Ferguson was appointed Inspector of Militia. He had a force of loyalist regulars.

However Ferguson overreached himself. In what was an early attempt at psychological warfare he sent a dire threat to the Overmountain Men to desist from their opposition to the British Army. The message was not well received by men who in most cases were from Scotch-Irish descent, who now decided to attack Ferguson's force before he could attack them.

At Sycamore Shoals men gathered from different regions under different commanders. William Campbell was elected overall leader of a force numbering some 900 men. Leaving Sycamore Shoals to confront Ferguson they found their quarry gone. Ferguson's force had reached Kings Mountain on 6 October 1780. The rebels then rode to Kings Mountain in the pouring rain, reaching their objective early that afternoon. Incredibly Ferguson (like Colley a century later) had failed to construct fortifications. Just short of the mountain they dismounted and divided into groups under their commanders. Here again the parallel with a Boer commando was uncanny. They attacked the Loyalist forces from all directions, instructions being "See what you shoot and shoot what you see". The second was "Shoot like hell and fight like devils".

The disadvantages of the defenders were revealed. They were firing over the attackers' heads. The end was fast approaching and after being driven from the summit, Ferguson, realising his fate were he to be captured, attempted to escape, but was killed. Thereafter his men surrendered.

Kings Mountain, like Majuba, had important long term effects. In the case of Kings Mountain the end result was a year and twelve days away, after the British surrender at Yorktown, where the colonies won their independence.

Jan-Willem Hoorweg
(Acting assistant scribe; unpaid)

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The Main Lecture was given by Errol Back-Cunningham who, although originally from South Africa, now lives in the USA and was able to address us on his latest visit. His interest in military history has travelled with him and his lecture “**Brit, Boer and Spy: The British view of strategic risks, threats, espionage and sabotage in the Union of South Africa during WW2**” was the result of having delved deeply into recently declassified wartime documents in the British public records offices in Kew, London. These revealed some very interesting assessments, often in startling detail, about the various role players and their involvement in the Second World War in South Africa.

South Africa became of interest because of the sea route from the oil fields to the UK around the Cape once the Suez Canal was threatened. Errol revealed the British overview of the strategic situation, risks and threats; how South Africa featured in the Allied and Axis plans, and how things were complicated by relationships like that with Portugal - nominally neutral but known to be sending information to Berlin through the embassy staff in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) in Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique).

British intelligence (MI5 and MI6) coupled with their code-breaking prowess (ULTRA) allowed very little to escape their notice and analysis. Patient accumulation of evidence led to the entire pro-Axis diplomatic staff being arrested in LM and shipped via Durban and Cape Town to Gibraltar, There they were interviewed and, to their relief and as promised, released.

Certainly at least one high-ranking Axis agent was discredited and rendered useless by counter-activities prompted by the British.

There was even a graphic of the locations of the transmitting equipment which was used in sending signals to Germany. One of these points was on a farm where several murders connected to clandestine activities occurred ... just who sold out whom being unclear.

Considering the potential value of shipping information, had it been transmitted timeously to the waiting U-boats, instead of getting to Berlin too late to be of practical use, it is reassuring that so much was apparent and to the benefit of the Allies.

The lecture indicated several enticing subjects for further lectures based on this previously secret material ...

Committee member Kevin Garcia thanked both speakers and presented them with the usual gift.

*Joan Marsh
(Acting assistant scribe; unpaid)*

SPECIAL OFFER ON NEW BOOK ABOUT RORKE'S DRIFT AND ISANDLWANA

Oxford University Press has paid for the insertion of their flyer about this new book from Prof Ian F W Beckett, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and retired Professor of Military History at the University of Kent, Canterbury.

People receiving snail-mail have received a physical flyer which offers a special discount to Society members.

For the first time a Zulu perspective has been included in this story.

View the flyer at <http://rapidttp.co.za/milhist/rorkes.pdf>

FORTHCOMING LECTURES

CR = curtain raiser ML = main lecture
DDH = Darrell Dickon Hall Memorial lecture MS = member's slot

Johannesburg:

Ditsong Museum next to Zoo at 8pm

Thursday 14th February

CR: Kevin Garcia: **“The day George Washington quit the Army”**

ML: David Holmes: **“Lt-Col John (Jack) Sherwood Kelly VC CMG DSO”**

Thursday 14th March

CR: Adina Bregman: **“A Journey into the Second World War: The Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow”**

ML: Johan Raath: **“Blood Money - the world's most dangerous job in the world's most dangerous country”**

KZN in Durban:

Thursday 14th February

DH: Phil Everitt **“Wood to steel, sails to steam, & broadsides to turrets”**

ML: Prof Donal McCracken **“Scum of the scum - Irish POWs in the ABW”**

Cape Town:

Thursday 14th February

Gabriel Athiros **“1922 - a Greek Family, the Hellenic community and refugees in a new Society”**

SAMHSEC:

Eastern Cape Veteran Car Club in Conyngham Road, Port Elizabeth

Monday 11th January

MS: Andre Crozier **“The Enigma machine”**

CR: Ken Munro **“The role of my Aunt in World War II”**

ML Ian Copley **“Enigma”**