



# The South African Military History Society

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## Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

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## NEWSLETTER - MAY 2017

As this was the AGM of the Society, the Secretary, Mrs Joan Marsh, presented the financial statement which was accepted. The Chairman, Jan-Willem Hoorweg, presented his report. He reviewed the outings and lunches of the past year which had been very successful. He also mourned the passing of members well known to us all. He outlined our support for the Military History Museum going forward. Two members of the committee, Pat Henning and Peter James Smith, were retiring. Any members wanting copies of Chairman's and treasurer's reports and financial statement please contact [scribe@samilitaryhistory.org](mailto:scribe@samilitaryhistory.org)

Jan-Willem was re-elected Chairman as was the rest of the committee with the addition of Colin Harris who will take over as scribe for the newsletter. Prizes for the best lectures were awarded: the George Barrell Memorial Curtain-Raiser prize was awarded to *Terry Wilson* for **The British Soldier's Dum Dum Bullet**. The Lt Col (Dr) Felix Machanik Memorial Main Lecture prize was presented to *Kevin Garcia* for '**Can History save the World? - The influence of a book on the response to the Cuban Missile Crisis.**'

A further reminder was issued about the South African (Anglo-Boer) War Weekend at Kedar Heritage Lodge will take place from 12 – 14 May 2017. This installment will see military historian, Ret. Maj. John Pennefather unpack the Battle of Elands River. It is a particularly exciting instalment as he will highlight some new developments pertaining to the battlefield itself. Military enthusiast Andre Wedepohl will be the Master of Ceremonies. There will also be a book table on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2017 where a selection of South African war publications will be on sale. If you would like to participate in this weekend of networking, discussing, learning and just having fun, then this is your opportunity! To book and/or review the prices, visit their webpage <http://www.recreationafrica.co.za/Kedar-Anglo-Boer-War-Weekend/>

The only lecture of the evening was given by *Robin Smith*: **Wilmansrust – Disaster for the 5th Victorian Rifles**. The lecture was magnificently illustrated with photographs from the period.

Australian soldiers took a considerable part in the later stages of the Anglo Boer war. There were now no set-piece battles to be fought and no large concentrations of Boer fighters. It was a matter of tracking down small bands of guerrilla fighters and the regrettable necessity of denying them succour in the countryside. The element of surprise, always an important factor in warfare, was a vital consideration in actions on the broad plains, kloofs and hills of southern Africa.

Australia only became a unified nation as the Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January 1901, while the war in South Africa still carried on for another 17 months. All six of the original Australian colonies followed the lead of Queensland which had offered troops to Britain even before the war began. The other Dominions, New Zealand and Canada followed suit although initial army contingents sent to the Cape were little more than a token effort and were not expected to have

any direct military effect. In any case, the expectation was that the war would end soon after the arrival of the British Army Corps under General Redvers Buller.

The initial British setbacks at Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso in December 1899, "Black Week", caused further Australian contingents to be recruited, trained and equipped. Contingents of Bushmen, men from the outback who could ride and shoot as well as subsist in the countryside, were raised and paid for initially by public subscription. Soon the Imperial government paid all the costs and the Royal Navy provided the shipping. By early 1900 there were as many as 3,000 troops from the Australian Colonies fighting in South Africa.

By the end of 1900 the war seemed to have wound down and Lord Roberts proclaimed at a private dinner in Durban in December that the war was "practically over". Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Henry Rawlinson was present and made an entry to this effect in his diary. General Lord Herbert Kitchener took over as GCIC (General Commander-in-Chief) while many of the British troops returned to Britain and some went to join the international expeditionary force to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China. The early Australian Contingents who had signed on for a year now returned home too.

Kitchener needed to create a new army and was very keen on Colonial soldiers, especially those from Australia and New Zealand. At the beginning of 1901 six more contingents arrived from Australia. Colonial horsemen were considered by the British generals to be the "best men for the job in hand." Australians and New Zealanders were better physical specimens than most of the British private soldiers and moreover, they could ride and shoot.

Prolific letter-writer and diarist Lieutenant James Stebbins thought that the men of the 5th Victorian Mounted Rifles were "some of the best that have left Victoria, but I cannot say that of the officers." Stebbins, an *Uitlander*, left Johannesburg in the exodus of 1899 and joined the Protectorate Regiment in Rhodesia.

After an outbreak of bubonic plague in Cape Town, the Australians were landed in Port Elizabeth, their horses in Cape Town and Durban. They reunited at Sunnyside Camp in Pretoria, their horses hardly in the best of condition after a month on the ship and then a train journey of anything up to a week. They were enthusiastic about their dashing commander, Major-General Stuart Beatson. Their first action was at Leeuwfontein, north of the Delagoa Bay railway line in Lieutenant-General Bindon Blood's drive to capture General Ben Viljoen. They captured Boers, horses, wagons and ammunition, returning to Middelburg to rest their exhausted horses.

An intelligence report said that there was a Boer convoy near Momsen's Store, a country store and post office on the farm Boschmansfontein, on the road to Ermelo. The left wing was sent as part of a flying column to intercept them. Major James Morris of the Royal Artillery in command of the flying column which included two Nordenfeldt pom pom machine guns and gunners of the Royal Field Artillery. Morris sent 'H' Company to capture the convoy – they found them and captured some of the cattle but the wily Boers evaded them when darkness fell.

Although they saw Boers on the skyline all around them, they were unable to do more than just head for Van Dyk's Drift and the rest of Beatson's column. After several days in the field and with only a couple of Cape carts to carry their supplies they were understandably on short rations and very hungry. They made their way back in the direction of the column. Morris looked for a high point to get in touch with Beatson and found a point on the farm Wilmansrust where his heliograph message got a reply from Van Dyk's Drift, 16 kilometres away. He was told that supplies were on the way and that his men should camp where they were. It was 12 June 1901.

They found a flat area near the Wilmansrust farmhouse owned by Johannes du Toit whose wife was still living there. They laid the camp out very neatly, according to regulations, with the officers'

tents in the farmyard next to some outbuildings. Further away were the four companies, E, F, G and H with their horses and the two pom poms just outside the lines, covered with a tarpaulin. They placed four pickets around the camp apparently about 500 yards from their perimeter, one of them on a rocky outcrop 1,300 metres to the west.

Not far away to the south at Vaalkop a number of Boer commandos were gathered under Vecht-Generaal Chris Muller. Beatson's column and the 5VMR had been particularly successful in the area in capturing horse and livestock and a number of farms had been burnt. Local people pressed Muller to take some action. They watched the Australians and tried to get them to chase some Boers under Commandant Nick Groenewald who came close to the camp but Morris only fired some pom pom shells at them. So they made a decision to attack the camp and its more than 300 soldiers.

The Australians noticed a few Boers that, at the time of the arrival of the supply wagons, "were in great numbers on the skyline in front of us". Nevertheless, they did not expect trouble, and made large fires (it is very cold on the Highveld in June). They settled down to feed their horses, read their letters and newspapers and hungrily eat the rations that had just arrived.

In the darkness Nick Groenewald and some local guides led 120 Boers up the bed of a dry spruit until they surrounded the camp on two sides. Roland Schikkerling of the Johannesburg commando said that the camp looked like a very ambitious target but surprise was the vital ingredient. When Groenewald gave the signal they opened a heavy fire on the unsuspecting Australians silhouetted by the flames of the fires they had made. The Boers charged into the camp, their adversaries were unable to offer much resistance and it was all over in a few minutes. About 100 of the Australians were taken prisoner, many of them escaping into the darkness. The Boers collected together the unwounded horses, what rations there were, rifles, ammunition and the two pom poms. One Boer, to the amusement of an Australian, thought the army biscuits would be a nice change from mielie bread. Boots, bandoliers and even tunics were taken from the prisoners and even in some cases from the dead men.

The prisoners were marched a short distance and then released. A Boer officer, it could have been General Chris Muller told them "Our turn tonight, yours maybe next time". Some of the Australians made it back to Van Dyk's Drift during the night. Relief arrived the next morning. The doctor had been killed in the attack but Veterinary-Lieutenant Sherlock did good work in succouring the wounded. Eighteen Victorians had died, many were wounded and nearly 120 horses lay dead in the camp.

It took some months for them to overcome the recriminations arising from this disaster. Joining the column of Colonel William Pulteney the next month, he told them "You've had some bad luck. Put your shoulder to it and wipe it out!" Which they did under his firm leadership with Lieutenant L.C. Maygar becoming the sixth Australian to be decorated with the Victoria Cross at Geelhoutboom north of Wakkerstroom in November 1901.

They were warmly welcomed back home in Melbourne in May 1902. A newspaper said that "Victoria is proud that, in spite of everything and in the teeth of much abuse, the Fifth have brought a fine reputation back with them." One of their veterans, wounded in France in December 1916, contrasted the campaign in South Africa with the Western Front: "The game was the same old game with the same old shells and bullets to keep one moving. Though the hardships were assuredly great in any campaign, France was a picnic to South Africa."

*Pat Henning*

*Scribe*

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# FORTHCOMING LECTURES

Johannesburg

## Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> May

CR: Colin Harris: **Striving for Recognition - The Confederacy's Dilemma**

ML: Nick Cowley: **Songs of World War II**

## Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> June

CR: Nicky von der Heyde: **The Turbulent Cape Frontier**

ML: Gil Jacobs: **The Hydrogen Bomb - Peace or Annihilation?**

KZN in Durban:

## Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2017

DDH: Dr. Mark Coghlan **Moscow Tram Stop: a South African Twist**

ML: Robin Smith **“The Kaalhoek/Geelhoutboom Skirmish” otherwise known as “The 5<sup>th</sup> Victorian Mounted Rifles; Disaster at Wilmansrust – Redemption at Geelhoutboom”**

## Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> June

DDH: Major Mark Levin **Reg Walker; Durban's first Olympic hero and WW1 veteran**

ML: Prof Donal McCracken **Ireland remembers and disremembers the Anglo Boer War**

**Cape Town:**

## Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> May

Capt. Peter Rodgers, SM, MMM (SAN Retd.). **The Fall of Singapore, February 1942**

**SAMHSEC in PE:**

## Monday 8<sup>th</sup> April

CR: Anne Irwin

ML: Graham Wood

and: Pat Irwin

**Jemima Nicholas and the Battle of Fishguard**

**My unscheduled visit to Goose Bay**

**The Carron Iron Works and the making of cannon**

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