Commando Courageous: A Boer's Diary

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Extracts

Author's Introduction

This is a diary I have kept during the Boers' guerrilla war with England. In it I have faithfully, and to the best of my skill, dealt with the vicissitudes and trials of those of us who chose to follow to the end our country's fortunes. The events were recorded at the time, many of the notes being made in the saddle, and they have now slumbered in manuscript for nearly fifty years.

It is an intimate narrative, speaking much of myself and my immediate friends, written between my twentieth and twenty-second years. Much of the incident is personal and much of the war is incidental.

It is written, not from the point of view of marshals and generals, but from that of one who fought and suffered with private burghers, who shared their mirth and sorrow in the field, and their unexpurgated talk around the campfires. But within these limits, save where I am obviously jesting, it is the whole truth. I have registered our villainies as well as our good deeds, and so, I hope, have simplified the task of the Recording Angel.

In the panting times of the last days my book, and indeed all my dearest chattels, were fastened to my person. For, as the days grew grimmer, and when all animate nature seemed to rise against us, we had time and again to leave our belongings on the stricken field.

In this way that part of my diary carrying events to November, 1900 were lost. But, possessing notes of the incidents, which were moreover vividly impressed on my memory, I had no difficulty in rewriting it immediately after. For the eighteen months prior to the declaration of peace, however, the chronicle is uninterrupted.

If I have not always spoken of the enemy with loving kindness, I have never shown the bitterness which is so common among non-combatants, but so rare among soldiers who have fought hand to hand and confronted one another at the parapet. We were beaten, but not conquered, and, silhouetted against our setting sun, we defile for a moment on the horizon of history.

I dedicate this to my companions who fell, and trust that if the eye of posterity does not fall upon them, the corroding years will not deal harshly with their memory.

Prelude to the First Boer War

John Roland, my father, had married Barbara Magdalena Daly, and the reader may picture her seated on the stoep of our dwelling at Potchefstroom, the capital of the Transvaal, suckling her first born, myself. The stoep overlooks the Kerk Plein on which there is much commotion. The Transvaal has newly been annexed by Britain, and there has been much dissatisfaction among the inhabitants. Piet Bezuidenhout, fond of combining patriotism with pleasure, has, it is said, refused to pay taxes to the new Government, and his wagon from his farm some miles out has been brought to the square before our house to be sold in execution. It is the morning of 11th November, 1880.

Moquette, the Sheriff, mounts the wagon before the throng and calls for a bid. Two young Boers advance and pull him down, and his fall thus precipitates the war of independence.

Bezuidenhout addresses the crowd from the wagon, and within a week soldiers enter the town. The Boers now commenced what might be called mobilizing, by preparing new pugarees for their hats, rubbing grease into their boots, trimming their beards, cutting their toe nails, rubbing cocoa-nut oil into their hair, and laying in a store of biltong and biscuits.

Mobilisation at the beginning of the Second Boer War

The English newspapers, not out to comfort us, each day told how the border bristled with bayonets, was guarded by armoured trains which no projectile, however powerful, could penetrate, and was armed with guns that threw shells filled with a potent explosive, called lyddite, which according to report could blow away a hill and kill every living thing within a mile radius. We soon found out, however, that the shells on which they relied principally were filled with bluff.

These things were disturbing. But we had already hardened our hearts and stiffened our stomachs for war. I confess I saw very little hope of - for us – a successful issue. But why need there be hope? And who of so little spirit as to regard the odds, when so much was at stake? I speak for such only as have the instinct of human freedom.

On the afternoon of the 4th October, 1899, booted and spurred with a Mauser rifle, and a shining belt stuffed with cartridges, I sat in a railway carriage at Braamfontein, Johannesburg, waiting to be carried to the Natal front. There were there to say farewell my mother, sisters, and sweethearts, who laughed and sobbed in turn. There were also bearded and fierce looking men from the jungles of Fordsburg, some arrayed in braver trappings than would have been theirs had these been purchased instead of commandeered. Some accustomed only to the humblest apparel, were now resplendent, so that neighbour sometimes did not know neighbour, and there was creaking of new leather, much friendly banter, and a deal of merriment, for the Boer went to war with confidence and optimism.

I was nineteen years old, of a quiet, almost sorrowful outside. Yet, while music was going, I felt so much fire within that I imagined I would not take an affront from the angel Michael, or the eternal devil. I was only a fair horseman with a very confused idea of war. But I was a deadly and quick shot. This last accomplishment, however, meant very little, I knew, unless one also possessed nerve and stamina.

Eight days later, on 12th October, 1899, the day after our ultimatum expired, my horse stood pawing and foaming at the frontier. A small body of us was impatient to enter the territory of the Queen.

Foreigners join the Boers

We had, standing near us, a small body of Irishmen and Irish Americans. They were lively boys, and the finest of company.

This party adapted themselves to our conditions sooner and more easily than any of the foreigners with us. Where the German and Hollander, nearer to us in blood, perhaps, felt and looked out of place, you could not pick Patrick out of a herd of the wildest Boers. There were fieldcornets bearing the names of Kelly and O'Brien. This little band of men could curse like heretics, and their profanity was at times quite picturesque. Uncle Toby's troops in Flanders could not have done better. At Elandslaagte many Hollanders and Germans were present at the taking of an enemy train loaded with much liquor. A portion of them, among others, was soon drunk and lying broadcast on the veld and around the station.

Two Hollanders woke on the morning after the incident, of which, in their drunken state, they knew nothing. Seeing guns, wagons, dead horses, and corpses strewn about, one remarked to the other. "Zij schynen hier gevochten te hebben". (They appear to have fought here.)

It was said of another Hollander that, during the battle, he laid his gun upon the boulder behind which he was crouching, and without aiming or exposing himself, pulled off shot after shot, remarking each time, "God geeft dat 't moge treffen." (God grant that it strike something.

Of the men of our mess, many were new, and not well known to me. but of those of us who were companions in the Natal days, us few, us band of brothers, I must give more particular introduction.

Barn Greef, the rarest of devils, was a man of headstrong passion and eager. He would never think of halting at any danger. He brimmed over, to a fault, with enthusiasm and energy. He was restive as a colt, and kind-hearted as a child. He gave away most of his loot and rations, and did considerably more than his share of duty. He was ever abroad, seeking necessaries for the mess. He volunteered for every dangerous job, and would have fetched the devil himself out of hell. He was in every fight, and in the thickest part, but was far too reckless, and of too little judgement ever to be placed in command. Whenever any of our mess got into a dispute, Barn would push forward and take over the quarrel. At times he was as full of humours as the sea. He had auburn hair, and there was much of the ancient Spaniard in him. At the same time, he could have been an Irishman. To his horse he was more attentive than any Bedouin.

George, his brother, was less spirited and more balanced, yet no less brave when occasion called. He was not so forward and impulsive. Useful in camp, reliable in field, he was much less concerned for his horse than Barn. Jack Rocher, when in action, would do his share, but was never keen for strife. He was very fond of riding about and visiting the farms lying in and about our way, and always brought news and often foodstuffs. He disliked cooking and camp duties. Having no belief in the dignity of labour he would, in order to avoid work, go to ten times the trouble the work involved. He was, however, a good, easy-going, cheerful and comforting companion. Though thoughtful for his horse, he never went to great pains on its account.

Sidney, his brother, a fellow by the hand of nature framed to be a farmer, had no relish for battle, but was a genius at domestic administration, very provident, and in a degree, resourceful. Always anticipating the wants of the larder, he was forever repairing the harness and saddles, cutting "riempies" and "voorslags" (whiplashes), making whips, and so forth. An excellent and a careful man to whom to entrust the team and wagon and almost too considerate of his horse which seemed to be a chronic invalid.

The Boers face defeat

Buller's army, via Botha's Pass and Alleman's Nek, sweeping aside the small and dispirited commandos in its path, although not without loss to itself, arrived from Natal almost in a straight line through Wakkerstroom, Ermelo, and Carolina. Joined at right angles by Roberts, French, and others set free by Prinsloo's surrender in the Free State, they appeared before us. We commenced immediately to fortify the line of broken and disjointed hills, running more or less at right angles across the railway line to a tangled maze northward.

Our line was nearly fifty miles long, and we could not have had more than 4,000 fighting men in all, or about eighty men to the mile. This gave the enemy, who has not less than 40,000, and these under the best English generals, a wide choice of weak points. On our extreme right, there were only two inlets northward, one along the Steelpoort stream, which ran parallel with the eastern side of Botha's berg. This approach was guarded by a "Long Tom" on Suikerboskop. The other inlet was the road from Belfast, running north to Dullstroom.

About two thousand yards behind us, on an eminence alongside of the road to Machadodorp, we had another "Long Tom", and behind that again a gun of smaller calibre. A Vickers Maxim stood in a slight excavation on Monument Hill, and at our call were two ordinary Maxims, one on wheels and one on a tripod.

As the burghers on our left had, for some days been engaged by the enemy, we had now, continually, to keep our horses at hand and remain in readiness. When the enemy seized Belfast and Monument Hill, we had, all the time, to be in the positions allotted to us. These positions were about a mile to the west of our camping ground.

Early on the morning of the 26th August, 1900, the enemy became unusually active, and every man of us was at his post. The positions allotted to our Fieldcornet, Lessing, (who, since our arrival here, had taken the place of the intrepid Poplap, now suffering from a wound), possessed excellent boulders, but, to my mind had, owing to its forward slope, no safe retreat. Immediately to our left (south) was the Krugersdorp Commando, and farther along at the railway line, in a low, stony ridge, lay the Johannesburg Police with a Vickers Maxim. Beyond them, was stationed the Germiston Commando.

At Belfast Station, where the enemy seemed to be congregating his forces, we saw clouds of dust raised by the approaching army. From all points ahead, our scouts fell back on to the hill between us and Belfast station. Soon individual outposts deserted the hill and came into our lines. It seemed that the heaviest fighting would take place around our position. We had in all four "Long Toms" (6-inch calibre) and perhaps sixteen more guns, of all shapes and sizes, spread over our long line of defence. We would, therefore, almost passively, have to endure the enemy's artillery fire, until we could engage him with rifles.

The minutes preceding a fight, after the enemy comes into view, and until the strife commences are, for me, full of a nervous excitement. I know it cannot be fear; rather an intense anxiety to begin. Yet, at the same time, no farther from fear than red is from purple, sweet from sour, or tears from laughter. It is one's sense of honour that upholds one, or perhaps, more often, the fear of being called coward. It is not a clean-cut fear of death so much a vague terror in the air. I can understand that a nervous man, to be rid of the trial of suspense would willingly take his own life at such a time. Although the general odds (that is all along the line) were ten to one against us, the particular odds (that is, at the point of attack) would be two or three times heavier.

Of the commandos near us, those to our immediate right were the first to become engaged. The German Corps, under Commandant Schultz, which occupied one of the ridges only thirteen hundred yards from the enemy, were soon subjected to a heavy cannonade. It seemed as if, for the time, the enemy was devoting all his attention to that ridge. I was told there were thirty cannon turned on to them. We knew, however, that if one man would hold to the end, it would be Schultz.

The Battle of Bergendal

The night being quiet, we could hear the talking and the orders of the enemy's sentries, who were also some distance ahead of their positions. A doctor and a few Tommies who had lost themselves walked into our lines, and were taken by the watch adjoining ours. With the first signs of light, we sent our horses farther back behind the next hill to graze, while we returned to our posts.

The enemy commenced the same fierce fire, and we sheltered ourselves as best we could. As the day advanced, he turned his attention to a tiny stony ridge on our left near the railway line at Dalmanutha station, held by the Johannesburg Police, now thinned by many a fight. The bombardment on that slender ridge became so hellish that four or five shells struck it simultaneously. Each shrieking projectile raised a column of dust and smoke of varied tints, that resembled a tall tree, which slowly lost its shape, drifted away, and dissolved. At times these trees seemed to start up in a cluster, and often as many as twenty were seen at the same time. Shrapnel too, burst overhead in white puffs, sowing bullets over the defenders. Against this little ridge, not ninety yards in length and held by about seventy-five men, nearly one hundred cannon were directed, while the English infantry were advancing under fire of their rifles, I thought everything human had perished, even to the lizards and insects in the rent and battered rocks, and felt sick at heart to think that, while we looked idly on, this infernal fury should fall on these few wretches alone. The necessity of reaching or aiding them seemed not to have been considered beforehand. Indeed our cannon, which all through this fight had been unusually silent, seemed almost afraid to speak in the face of such an overwhelming fire. In other circumstances, the Krugersdorp and Germiston Commandos might have helped them. But now no one could go to their aid. The thought of crossing over the swept and exposed area seemed to dismay the stoutest heart. It was not the fear of death so much as of dying in this terrific rage.

While so watching, I saw, to my dismay, the pitiful remnant of the defenders – I could hardly believe there were any left – flying through the lowering clouds of smoke, lyddite, and flame, dazed by the fumes and frenzied by the thunder, which was re-bellowed from the heavens and the hills behind us.

At intervals, from our side, the chattering of a solitary Maxim broke forth. Because of its queer sound, we called it a "katlachter", which is the name of a bird making a noise suggestive of cat-laughter. In this sonorous thunder it sounded strange indeed; like the laughter of a fiend, mocking and scoffing the attempt of right to resist heavy artillery and big battalions.

At last, the few survivors having been put to flight, the enemy occupied the position.*

They were then, to some extent, behind our line. We therefore slowly fell back on to the hill behind us, where, though we were not assailed by much cannon fire, we were still under an accurate rifle aim. We brought our horses, which had been grazing on a confined depression, nearer. Ramkat had all day been in the white blanket, which, with great pains, I had made for him during our halt at Balmoral. He was shivering all over, for a great projectile had exploded within a few yards of him.

* *Seventy-four Police were left to their fate, almost unsupported in the face of the whole of Buller's artillery, and an infantry brigade. Commandant Philip Oosthuizen was severely wounded, Lt. Pohlman killed and some forty others of the seventy-four were killed, wounded or captured.*

Times History

Many years after I visited the spot and on a small monument read the following names of the Britishers that fell there on that day: Captain W. H. W. Steward, Captain G. L. Lysley, Captain E. G. Campbell, Sergeant W. Gunn, Sergeant R. Dickenson, Corporal W. Robbins and nineteen men.

The Boers at bay.

On the first night I was awakened by a collision about twenty-five yards away. It transpired that a driver, picked up at one of the stations, had in all this plenty got drunk and had raced full speed against a train standing in the station. The driver's wife was in the carriage immediately behind the engine, and this carriage jumped right over the engine. There were also other women in the train, but none was severely hurt. Nearly all the horses and mules on board, however, were killed. Jack, looking somewhat shaken, arrived by this train, upon which it was said there was much bar gold.

Next morning, after killing two large scorpions in my bed, I went to view the wrecked train. As it was necessary to clear the line for further traffic, we yoked thirty-six oxen to some of the wreckage. They were too weak, however, to move some of the heavier parts. We were obliged, therefore, to harness a locomotive by chains to some of the immense fragments, which commenced rolling and tumbling so soon as steam was applied. The railway employees with us were very useful.

Commandant-General Botha, who had gone northward, was now ill and had again, from Spitzkop, fallen back to the railway line. So also the commandos that had retired to Barberton. With the exception of General Gravett, who was still near Lydenburg, and a few commandos south of the railway line, our whole army was huddled together.

Being driven to within a few miles of our beacons, we were practically at bay. Before us, eastward we were against the Portuguese frontier; south, we had Swaziland and impassable mountains. North, we had desert country, overrun with lions and other wild beasts, and without pasturage and water; while behind us, advancing from three points, the victorious enemy. It seemed the quarrel could be decided here.

The Boers go over to guerrilla warfare

General Viljoen told us that each man could have the choice of two courses: to go to Lourenco Marques, where, if the Portuguese did not imprison him his passage would be paid to any part of the world; or, to negotiate the Thirstland, northward, and endeavour to reach Pietersburg. Those who chose the latter course – and he would influence no man to a choice – would, in this dry season, have to travel a first stretch of about eighty miles, without water and with very little grass. With our exhausted animals this seemed a great undertaking.

About one-half of the men, deciding that they could not continue the struggle, determined to take the first of these alternatives and pursue the less thorny path to Lourenco Marques. Our mess chose the latter course, and thorny indeed our path proved with "katnagel", "wag-'n-bietjie", "kameeldoorn", "hak-en-steek", "soetdoorn", and "dubbeltjie".

Our President Kruger, staunch as ever, but too old to be of service in the changing and difficult conditions, had left us and gone to Holland. Many of the parasites of the state, some of the old regime, now drooping under lyddite fumes, a number of men, brave at the commencement but now weary of war, and many foreigners, were departing for friendlier shores, leaving us to reckon with the triumphant enemy. Although many good men also left us at this juncture, the bulk were misfits. Many, indeed, were of the official type, at one time of some figure in the Republic, who had sponged on the nation for many a year. Some of them, probably, had initiated the war they were now leaving us to finish. It was, to some extent, a purging and a chastening process, which left us only the staunchest and most steadfast men. The still-beating heart of the Republic, all warm and living, was, by a magical operation, being transplanted in a new body, and a new and determined spirit was asserting itself, principally among those who, at the commencement, were averse to the war. Generally speaking, a fuller national consciousness was coming to us.

Into the wilderness

We allowed them to go ahead and do the pioneering in opening a pathway, seeking native guides, disputing the way with savage and beast, and struggling with the primeval forest. After having gone no great distance, we halted and slept beneath some trees, kindling fires to keep the wild beasts away. For the best part of the night we heard roaring and coughing of lions, and the whining of jackals. Owing to the difficulty of transport we found at the roadside clothing and provisions jettisoned by those ahead, but were able to take only a few small tins of sliced ham.

The next morning our caravan continued the journey into Thirstland, the driver alone being allowed to ride on the wagon. The rest of us, on our horses or walking, brought along some lean horses and mules. The trees became smaller and more sparse, and the grass drier and scarcer. The country we had now entered is, in most parts, low-lying, tropical and fever stricken, and is called the Wildstuin (Game Garden) or Reserve. It contains perhaps a greater variety of big wild animals than is to be found in any similar area in the whole world. President Kruger, in his wisdom, knowing that a Boer could not be trusted with game, and fearing that the rare specimens of our fauna might become exterminated, took steps to establish a game sanctuary, and to this end had set aside an immense tract of country.

The extent protected lies between the Limpopo and Krokodil Rivers against the Eastern Transvaal border. Here are elephant, hippopotamus, rhinoceros, giraffe, buffalo, eland, koodoo, zebra, waterbuck, sable and roan antelopes, hartebeest, a variety of wildebeest (gnu), many smaller buck, lion, leopard, crocodile, ostrich and other varieties. Animals that have been extinct in Europe for over 100,000 years still lingered on in our congenial company. It is strange that animals of such immense bulk should exist in such sterile and desert country, and thrive on such scanty vegetation, when the fruitful and luxuriant shores of the Amazon, and the jungles of Brazil support animals so few in number, and so insignificant in size.

There was a point ahead in our way, Pretorius Kop, easy of access to the enemy from Nelspruit, and it was reported that he held it. This obliged us to follow tortuous and unblazed routes to avoid him. This place was a sanctuary to every creature but ourselves, and we were hunted principally by creatures in God's image.

By the aid of a native guide, we reached water sooner than we expected. It was so bad, however, and so full of insects, that only the animals drank it. They seemed to smell it a long way off and hurried to reach it.

Charlie, the Zulu, did the cooking while we herded the cattle in turn, and frightened away the wild beasts. Charlie, though he received no pay and though his tribe were our hereditary enemies, despite the fact also, that he could only speak a few words of our language, yet remained with us when all other servants had deserted. He had cooked for us since the triumphant times of Natal. And what a cook he was! He turned all edible stuffs to the greatest account. What he did not know of wild roots and fruits and the useful properties of plants and products of the veld, Nature had not yet disclosed.

It had been our intention to go towards Pilgrim's Rest and at Graskop, NW, from here, ascend the mountain and thence by a direct road proceed to Pietersburg. By so doing we would arrive at elevated and healthy country with good pasturage and all would be well.

President Steyn with a small bodyguard had a few days before accomplished this. But again we were disappointed. General Buller, moving along the mountains from Lydenburg and Spitzkop, was taking possession one after another of the passes leading to our objective. Botha and the Government, with a small commando as escort, were ahead of us and they just managed to slip through the last pass before Buller sealed it up. There was nothing for our commandos to do, therefore, but turn with our wretched train back into the low country.

Treason

June 25th, 1901.

Early in the morning am sent with five men to scout in the direction of Bakenkop, near the farm of Diederick Pretorius. We meet no one from whom to make enquiries, and when near Bakenkop see a few men hastily descend towards us and race away to our right. They are evidently our own men belonging to a local wacht. We continue toward the kop when suddenly about sixty men of the enemy appear on it. We stop and watch them. Some of them set off in pursuit of the few horsemen who have just descended and, immediately after, about two hundred show themselves on our right, some fifty of whom come towards us, stopping at a farm in order to fire the house. We fire at them at long range. They return our fire and we slowly retire.

I presume an army is passing beyond the kop and theses horsemen are merely buzzing around it to keep us away. We offsaddle at a deserted farm-house where we find and boil some pumpkin and potatoes. The enemy swerve off to the right and I send word of their movements to the general. A little later we return and find our commando on the point of leaving for Greyling's farm, where we sleep.

June 26th, 1901.

I rise rather late after a delicious rest. Drosky is to be shot at 10 o'clock. Am pleased I was absent yesterday otherwise I would have had to give two men towards the firing party, an unpleasant favour to ask a friend. We dwell in extremes. One moment after our direst need, everything is in abundance, and we are proud and out of bounds and our joys wanton in fullness. The next moment some fell stroke subdues us to a consciousness of our human condition.

We are informed that we are again surrounded and will therefore have to make preparations to get through the enemy's lines tonight.

A few men appointed to the work commence digging Drosky's grave about sixty yards from our cart (the Australian cart), while the condemned boy calmly sits watching them from beneath a wagon, the while writing a letter to his mother.

In order to avoid the sight of the execution, I set out leisurely to fetch my horses, which had strayed about a mile and a half up a broad, shallow valley. When about five hundred yards from our cart, on my return, I saw a small crowd of people collected around the grave and I heard singing. Shortly after a few rifle shots rang out. As they were fired more or less in my direction, two bullets struck the ground about a hundred yards from me, and I felt they had passed through the unfortunate man's heart. When I reached the spot the grave was already half-filled with earth, and I was told he met death with great courage. He admitted his guilt and repented his treason. He took a leading part in the singing of a hymn at the graveside, and when the rifles were levelled he put up his hands and said: "Wees mij genadig, O, Heiland, en vergeef mijne Zonden!" (Be merciful, O, Saviour, and forgive my sins.") The shots were fired somewhat irregularly, and as his head sank forward his knees gave way, while his body fell backwards against the one side of the grave, on the brink of which he stood. His yet-warm body was immediately covered with earth. He was twenty-three years old.

At about noon General Viljoen calls us together under a bluegum tree and tells us the result of the conference of our leaders, which we already knew; also that Jan Smuts (State Attorney) had been into Standerton to communicate with President Kruger and made our position as dark as possible. Still, the old man begged us to keep courage. The general further gave us scraps of news from the Cape Colony, and further tells us that, as the enemy is converging on us from all quarters, we must tonight force our way over the railway line between Brugspruit Station and Balmoral Station. The line, he warns us, is diligently guarded and numerous blockhouses obstruct our passage. Armoured trains at each station

stand in readiness to race to any point threatened, and every outlet is obstructed by barbed-wire entanglements. He hopes, nevertheless, that we will storm the forts and blockhouses in our hold style. At sunset we will saddle.

Breaking through the blockade

The wire against which I stood was stretched in a network from the roof and anchored in the ground about two yards from the foundation of the fort. In a space of about ten yards I ran up and down a few times in a distracted manner, trying to get through, while several shots at a range of two yards flashed in my face. Johnnie Kriel had his arm shattered and Oom Jappie Retief was shot through the head. At last I was able to crawl through on my stomach below the wire.

Edging against the stone wall, I stood between the loopholes. Shultz, Durand, Marenkowitz, Lombard, De Jong, and Van Niekerk also contrived to gain the wall. Our position was not to be envied, since some of the soldiers, in an adjoining blockhouse, as well as those of our own men, who, with the first volley, had hidden in the grass, kept shooting at the blockhouse so that the bullets were striking the wall. A few of the enemy who were in an excavation leading to the door of the blockhouse and within the wire enclosure, now rushed for the door. We were not prepared for this, but on some of our number firing quickly, one of them fell dead across the low doorway and the others, though wounded, affected an entry. Because of the barbed wire, however, we could not gain the door, which was three or four feet below us. The place was impregnable, and the occupants need never have surrendered. There was a lull in the firing and things were almost becoming monotonous. But new life was put into the enemy when we applied our guns to the loopholes and fired among them. In one voice, then, they shouted: “For God’s sake stop firing, we surrender!” It was impossible for us to withdraw without being shot, so we had to keep worrying the enemy. Everything became quiet, and it seemed nothing was being done, so I shouted: “Do you surrender?” “Yes, we surrender,” they replied. “Then come out,” we shouted. “Won’t you shoot us?” they enquired, then adding “We are all wounded!” After assuring them they would be safe, they still seemed loath to come out, and we yelled: “Damn it! Are you coming?” At this, one of them shouted, “I hands up!” at the same time putting his face through an opening above us and handing out his rifle, stock first. They then came out one by one. When we had brought them all out a wounded soldier caught me by the arm and shouted: “Water! Water!” I quickly swung round my water bottle taken from the V.M.R., but before I could unscrew the stopper he had dropped to the ground. I held the water to his lips and he soon recovered. I was badly in need of a jacket, having given George the one I took at the Australian camp. These Buffs, however, were so small that I did not see one whose jacket would fit a man of six foot two. I said to one in a short covert coat, not without an effort, however, for it seemed so mean: “Fellow, I have need of thy jerkin.” As it was somewhat chilly he did not seem to understand, and I had to repeat my request before he delivered.

We had now no officer, and fearing we might be surprised, I set out two guards on either side about fifty yards from the blockhouse. Meyburgh, strangely, had asked me to keep order should he be killed. Several men who, during the attack, had remained out of range and at the horses, now came up to loot, and one of these accused a prisoner of shooting a burgher after the surrender, and insisted on the expiation of the deed in kind by shooting the prisoner out of hand. The terrified soldier dodged behind me, and it was all we could do to pacify his pursuer. The prisoners, all of the Buffs, were taken to the ruin where we had left our horses. As they were being taken down, almost prodded by rifles, their corporal seemed in mortal fear, lest the men, to whom bad language was the lingua franca of the blockhouse, might forget themselves, and from force of habit refer to us as “Dutch bastards”. In which event, he feared, that they would lose not only their remaining pants and singlets but also their lives.

His principal concern was probably for his own life. We found that Schalkie Koen and Mike Hanavan had also been killed, and that Douglas Cogill had a gash through the thigh and Japie Olivier a pathway through his scalp.

There being no time to waste, we sent word for the vehicles to come forward and cross over. General Viljoen rode up and handed Danie Burger a wire clipper and we soon opened a way. We found a deep ditch alongside the railway line, however, that would have to be filled up before the wagons, carts and pom-poms could cross. Breaking down a wall of sods, we threw them into the ditch. But this seemed to do little towards filling it that I despaired of ever getting the vehicles over.

George drove our cart on which was loaded our food, clothing, and chattels, the wounded Danie, and also the body of our brave Meyburgh, whose soul was now beyond the Milky Way. The string of vehicles lined up and was waiting to cross, when a distant armoured train to the east threw a shell over and above us which exploded some hundreds of yards away against a hillside, with beautiful effect. This was the signal for us to hurry. I therefore went back to the ruins to fetch my horse and found the prisoners, who by now stood only in their scant underclothing, huddled together against the walls for warmth. Wishing to make sure that I was outside the enemy's corral I asked Goodman to lead my horse across the rails and hold him while I assisted in lifting the carts over.

A searchlight flashed against the hill on which the shell had exploded a few minutes ago. A detachment of our men, on our first arrival, had gone about a mile to our east to attack a blockhouse and to blow up the rails. I therefore expected that the armoured train would never pass them. Five carts had been lifted over the ditch, when suddenly I heard a shrill whistle and a moment later a flood of pale light fell upon us. Everything was lighted up as by the sun, and the armoured train rushed in among us. Some say it ran into a team of mules halfway across the rails, but I did not see this for I was determined not to be trapped in the enemy's kraal, and had rushed across the rails to catch Jas which Goodman told me he would no longer hold.

There was a confused scramble for horses, and many raced back into the corral, but not I. Taking one shot at the blinding light at a few yards and without delaying to admire the fireworks, I fled. A clatter of rifle and Maxim burst forth; also shrapnel and grapeshot it seemed.

A preacher leads his flock

August 12th, 1901. (Sunday). I had searched high and low in the bush for my horses which had been hobbled, and was about to return with the idea that they were lost, when a horseman in a cloud of dust came racing towards us shouting: "Opsaal! Opsaal!" I hurried back, with the intention, if the enemy was very close, of hiding in the bush with my saddle and chattels and escaping after dark. On nearing our saddles I was delighted to see that George had found and brought my horses.

A local preacher was engaged in holding service, and his flock around him was bent in prayer when the horseman brought the alarm. The preacher, being in a standing attitude, and having the advantage over the congregation of looking in the direction from which the horseman came, was the first to know of the danger.

With hardly a word of warning, and like a champion hurdler, he leapt over his crouching flock, and had almost reached his saddle before those in the praying posture knew what was happening. At his horse, I am told, a youth said to him, "Dominee, you forgot to say Amen.' If he had said it, he would not have had the same good start or such an undisputed walk-over, for these days had bred some practised sprinters in his flock.

I again possess two horses and a mule, all chestnuts, and this is very agreeable to my mess who make me carry all the cooking utensils.

Not being able to find anyone who will relieve me of a pack-horse I am obliged to retreat with the impedimenta. After having taken a wrong road, and wandered about for a long time, we offsaddle only three miles from our last halting place. At nine o'clock we again saddle, travel in the dark for two hours and lie down to sleep. We feel our affinity with the earth from which we are made. A spot of earth, be it where it will, a man must always have to yearn for and call home. The spot upon which the saddle rests for the time, however bleak, becomes so blest and part of us.

The bitter end

March 2nd, 1902.

I find Colonel Blake (who had come from General Muller, operating around Steenkampsberg), seated on a mound adjoining the cottage occupied by Joe Wade, Jerry O'Leary, Dick Hunt, Sidney Blake, Chris, Butch and McGlue, the obstinate residue of Irish-Americans. The colonel seems pleased now to find himself in such a peaceful and profane atmosphere. He tells us our commandos round about Steenkampsberg are very far out of courage and are being pursued day and night.

There are so many "National Scouts" and natives serving the enemy that the wandering bands of horsemen are becoming distrustful even of each other. In order to avoid surprises the poor fellows saddle after dark each evening and ride a few miles before going to sleep. At daylight they are all ready, with horses saddled, and prepared for any emergency.

Things have come to such a pass in many parts that, after dark, the men wander away in fours and fives, deceiving each other as to where they will sleep. In honour of the colonel's visit the Irishmen steal one of Mrs. Johnson's sucking pigs and stoutly deny the charge when she taxes them with the theft. With tearful fury she says the foreigners had joined us only to steal. Having found in our cottage a bottle containing some gaudily coloured lizards in spirits, I handed it to the Irishmen. They gave me a smile which seemed to say: "Not the gift so much but the spirit in which it is sent." Later one accused his companions of being drunk, because, as he said, he could see them only dimly. One went out after dark carrying a milk can which he imagines is a lantern.

Brother against brother

March 29th, 1902.

"National Scout" is the name given in bad taste by our enemy to such of our men as have defected and are now fighting for him. Blinded in these matters, he considers noble the vilest man that sides with him, and base the noblest man that opposes him, and reason is nowhere. The bulk of the English seem content to allow their ideas to run along the conduits set for them, and few will see any good in a proclaimed enemy. Yet those rare non-conformists unflinchingly exist, and I here salute them. As I have observed him, an English navvy will take a lot of beating as such. So will an English gentleman. Each is the extreme in his type.

The other day some men belonging to a local wacht related to me the circumstances of a fight to the death with some National Scouts who had stolen out from the enemy to visit their wives and sweethearts. In most instances the womenfolk and relations refused to see their erring husbands and connections, and in some they see the delinquent only at the dead of night, but hurry him away before dawn.

The men of the wacht learned that some Scouts had passed through the lines during the night. They followed their tracks and at sunrise four National Scouts were at bay in a deserted house. They knew the mortal nature of the quarrel and did not even offer to surrender. The besiegers directed their fire to windows and doors, and approached behind cover of a garden wall. The wretches responded to every challenge with bullets. They did not seem to have the steady aim of conviction, but possessed all the determination of despair, and that calm courage which comes only when there is no hope and no escape. Even when the besiegers gained the walls of the house, the inmates showed no intention of surrendering. There were among them a father and two sons, and they kept up their fire even after the thatch had been lighted and the whole house was full of smoke.

When the roof fell in, the wretches, stifled and scorched, plunged through the windows only to be riddled with bullets. Their bodies were left to be disposed of by their widows and relations and such friends as were indifferent to the stigma attached to such an undertaking.

The enemy, I may say, are indifferent to these domestic conflicts, and probably say with Iago: "Now whether he kill Cassio, or Cassio him, or each do kill the other, each way makes my game."

After dark we leave one man at the hovel and the rest of us go on brandwacht and return before sunrise.

Going home

June 16th, 1902. We start off, passing sundry blockhouses at which the Khakis are very friendly towards us. Some tried to sell us trinkets and curios they had made in the long days of their confinement. We outspanned for the night near a blockhouse adjoining the road and occupied by a few of the 3rd King's Royal Rifles. The half-dozen occupants were kinder than I am able to describe. They questioned me and listened with great deference, treating me like a long lost brother. They walked up and down with me in the cool evening air and would hardly let me go. Two came with me down to the stream, H.T. Dell and John Cornish, and on parting, asked, of all things, for my card. This guerrilla etiquette is overpowering.

June 17th, 1902. We drive into Machadodorp and learn that a mail train to Johannesburg will pass at four o'clock tomorrow morning and that we can board it. We are singularly fortunate in being able to catch these opportunities; the other men in Lydenburg may have to wait for weeks. Here again the officers and men are very kind, inviting me to have meals with them and taking me to a football match. The many cameras turned on me is embarrassing.

June 18th, 1902. We leave early by the train, and at all stations the cameras worry us, the people looking upon us as wild men. One of a party of Australians in the next compartment peeped at me several times and then turned to his companions saying "He looks like Jesus Christ."

We passed through Pretoria, where some men alighted, and at about eight o'clock in the evening we arrived at Park Station, Johannesburg. No one being there to meet me, or expecting me, I shouldered my pack of blankets and a leather wallet I had made myself, and wandered into the town. I knew the street wherein my people resided, but not the house, and went into a corner shop to enquire. When the poor shopkeeper and his customers recovered from their surprise they gave me some idea of where the house was.

Coming to a likely place, I stopped before the dark gate, and, with some circumspection and less assurance than I would have shown in assailing a blockhouse, I advanced nervously to the front door, dropping my pack in a flower bed.

I knocked with many misgivings, fearing the people would set the dogs on me. My spirit was quite gone and excuses rode on my lips. A lady came to the door and recoiled from the apparition in the shadow. It was my sister.

The author

Other than what he tells us in the book, literary and military historians appear to know very little about Roland William Schikkerling. When **Igwababa.com** began researching his background we soon discovered that his subsequent life and career was a closed book. To quote one eminent historian and academic, 'Schikkerling literally disappeared.'

There are, however, a few tantalising clues embedded in the footnotes he added to the manuscript some considerable time after he had initially completed it.

What do these footnotes tell us?

- In 1913 he was practising as a lawyer in Johannesburg
- He was still alive in the mid-1930's, revisiting some of the battlefields
- He was probably still alive in May 1939. A footnote quotes the Johannesburg Star of 8th May 1939 reporting on the opening of the Vryheid Museum.

Apart from these few glimpses – nothing.

Igwababa.com, however, dug a bit deeper and located Schikkerling's death certificate and Will, together with a few other documents of interest.

To summarise:

- Roland William Schikkerling died in the Joubert Park Nursing Home, Johannesburg on 18th July, 1944. Cause of death not stated.
- His occupation is given as 'Retired Solicitor' and his age at death as being sixty-four years and seven months. His place of birth is noted as 'Potchefstroom'.
- He was a widower. His wife, Edith Maud, died two days before him on the 16th July 1944. The number of children is recorded as 'None'.
- His handwritten Will leaves his estate to his four siblings in equal parts. The only date that appears on the Will, which was accepted as genuine by the authorities, is the 29th July, 1944 – eleven days after Schikkerling's death.

There is some documentary evidence that he was involved in the property market, other than as a lawyer or agent, selling property in the Vaal Triangle in the 1930's.

Our researcher found one document to be particularly satisfying. It is a letter written by Schikkerling in 1910 and shows traces of the youth who wrote **Commando Courageous** eight years earlier. In it he requests permission from the Registrar of Asiatics in the Transvaal to bring an Indian youth up to Johannesburg from Waschbank in Natal.

Although not directly connected, it is an intriguing post script to an incident he relates in the book concerning a Boer farmer's daughter who, during the panic at the time of the Transvaal's invasion of Natal, found an Indian baby girl abandoned on the banks of a stream near Waschbank. In a manner reminiscent of Pharoah's daughter, the young girl tended and reared the baby who subsequently became her servant. The farmer's daughter later married Schikkerling's brother, Charles.

Unfortunately, at this time that is all we have on the life of a man who we believe was a very interesting individual. The fact of his death, coming so soon after that of his wife, is intriguing as are certain issues surrounding one of his sisters, her husband and son. If nothing else, they contain the basic ingredients of a mystery novel, so we will continue digging. Watch this space!