



The South African Military History Society

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

Founded 1966

P.O. Box 59227
Kengray
2100 South Africa

Tel (+27) 010-237-0676
Fax (+27) 086-617-8002

Email: scribe@samilitaryhistory.org
Web: <http://samilitaryhistory.org>

NEWSLETTER - AUGUST 2010

By pure good fortune and with no planning involved, the July meeting took place on an evening when there was no world Cup Soccer match and when the weather was not cold enough to deter the large number of members who attended.

Ivor Little opened the meeting with the usual notices and then introduced the first speaker of the evening. This was the well-known Vice Chairman and Deputy Journal editor, Marjorie Dean. The subject of her talk was "From the Veld to The Pole and back again."

Marjorie commenced with an historical and social background to the great Polar and Antarctic explorations of the early 20th century when, for reasons of national honour, various nations vied with each other to reach the North Pole, and then the South Pole, before any other. This led to the famous Antarctic expeditions by Roald Amundsen and Robert Scott, both attempting, between 1910 and 1923, to be the first to reach (or to "discover") the South Pole. Amundsen, leading a Norwegian expedition, was already famous as a Polar explorer, and had no illusions about what he was in for. Using an experienced team of skiers, dog teams and Arctic know-how, Amundsen went ruthlessly forward to the South Pole and, getting there first, claimed the honour for Norway.

By contrast, Scott preferred to use ponies; had limited experience compared to his rival and naively believed that a team of men could pull laden sledges as well or better than a dog team. To carry out his attempt, Scott recruited 59 men, among whom was Lawrence Edward Grace Oates. Born in 1880, Oates came from a well-to-do Yorkshire family which had already been involved in a fair amount of African exploration. He was educated at Eton and then on leaving school in 1898, joined the army, just in time to participate in the 2nd Anglo-Boer War.

Starting initially with the 3rd West Yorkshire (Militia) Regiment, he moved to the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons and, at the beginning of 1901, was on active service in South Africa. Coming ashore in January 1901, 2nd Lt L E G Oates was part of a draft moving by rail to join the Regiment at Colesberg. Along the way the draft became involved in the capture of the small town of Aberdeen. The town was duly taken but on 6th February Oates got into a skirmish with a numerically greater number of Boers out on patrol. Oates and his men took cover and hung on for five hours under heavy fire, although being called upon twice to surrender. He was wounded in the leg and thereafter walked with a marked limp..

After a period in the UK on sick leave, he returned to South Africa, serving there until the end of the war

and then subsequently with his regiment in Ireland, Egypt and India, reaching the rank of Captain in 1906.

In 1910, bored with service in the peace time army, he applied for leave to join Scott's expedition. On the grounds of his cavalry experience he was accepted by Scott and put in charge of the expedition's ponies. He impressed Scott and, notwithstanding his disabled leg, was chosen by him to be part of the final five-man party to do the last "dash for the Pole", a distance of 269 kilometres. The South Pole was reached on 18th January 1912; 35 days after Amundsen arrived there.

A bitterly disappointed Scott and his party then faced the return journey to their base camp. One man died after a fall into a crevasse and the combined effects of bad weather, extreme cold and incorrect diet soon led to the party falling behind schedule. Oates, in particular, suffered very badly with his old leg injury playing up under the rigours of the march. By 15th March, his birthday, he realised that he could go no further and was holding up the party. To give them a chance of survival, he decided to sacrifice his own life and with the immortal words "I am just going outside and may be some time" he walked barefoot out of the tent and into the blizzard. His body was never found. The rest of the party died nine days later, only 18 kilometres short of their first food stash.

There are several memorials to Oates but he is best remembered by his epitaph - "A very gallant gentleman".

Continuing with her excellent Power Point presentation, ably managed by her husband Colin, Marjorie then brought us back from Antarctica by introducing Frank Wild, "the forgotten hero", into her talk.

John Robert Frances (Frank) Wild was born into a middle-class family in Yorkshire. One of his ancestors was Captain Cook and it was therefore natural that Frank should enter the merchant navy as a 16-year old apprentice, rising to the rank of second officer. Something must have gone wrong and he enlisted in the Royal Navy as a rating and, in 1901, was a 27-year old Able Seaman, a vast difference from his previous status. In that year he also volunteered for, and was accepted by, the British Polar expedition of 1901-1904 in "HMS Discovery". This was followed by a 20-year stint in British Antarctic expeditions.

Frank was short, athletic, outspoken and had a propensity for leadership. This came to the attention of Ernest Shackleton, at that time a Sub-Lieutenant with the expedition. Shackleton found that he could rely on Wild. He thus chose him for his 1907 expedition and in 1911 Wild went south again with Douglas Mawson's Australian expedition. He was also first choice as second-in-command to Shackleton in the 1914 "HMS Endurance" expedition. The story of that expedition is well-known. The "Endurance" became crushed in the ice and had to be abandoned. Her crew struggled in three small boats to Elephant Island - a barren rock in the fierce Antarctic Ocean. From there Shackleton took a small party in an open boat to South Georgia, crossed the mountainous island and organised the rescue of those left behind on Elephant Island.

There were 22 men under the command of Frank Wild, who proved a magnificent leader. Using his power of command, Wild kept his party alive and functioning for the 138 days it took Shackleton to get back with a rescue party. He organised shelter, found a water supply, assisted the doctor and kept up morale.

After the rescue, the Polar expedition returned to the UK via Chile, arriving back in England in 1917. Being in the middle of a world war, nobody was interested in their polar exploits and many of the party joined the Armed Forces. Wild was made a temporary Sub-Lieutenant, rising to the rank of Commander by the end of the war.

After the war Wild farmed cotton in the then Nyasaland until Shackleton invited him to join yet another Antarctic expedition in 1921. Wild jumped at the chance and returned south for the fifth time. The expedition was a failure. Shackleton died suddenly and Wild took over command of the "Quest". Lacking Shackleton, there were no real goals to achieve and the voyage was cut short, returning to England in 1922.

Although made a "Freeman of the City of London", Wild returned to Africa and started farming in Zululand. The venture was a failure. He then briefly did some contractual work for the SA Railways and, in desperation, ended up as a barman in a Zululand hotel. He drifted from job to job and town to town. He had started drinking on the "Quest" expedition and by now was an alcoholic with serious health problems. He died in 1939 and his ashes were buried in Brixton cemetery in Johannesburg.

Forgotten at the time, Wild is now being recognised for the polar hero he was. There is a plaque to his memory in St John the Baptist Church in Eversholt, England, and a bronze memorial in the church at Grytvikin in South Georgia, fitting tributes to "the forgotten hero".

* * * * *

After a brief question period, Ivor introduced the next speaker, the well-known former National Committee Member, John Murray, who has spoken to the Society on numerous previous occasions. The subject of John's talk was "Some Irish Victoria Cross Winners of the Second Anglo-Boer War".

Ably supported by Hamish Paterson manning the overhead projector, John started off by giving a brief background of the Irish forces which formed part of the Victorian army and also a brief history of the Victoria Cross up to 1900. There were 78 Victoria Crosses (VCs) awarded during the Second Anglo-Boer War and 14 of these were earned by Irish recipients. Obviously John did not have time to deal with all 14 of these but instead he chose a representative four.

His first example was Captain Charles ("Fitz") FitzClarence. This brilliant, fearless soldier was born in Bishop's Court, County Kildare, on 8th May 1865. His family was descended - on the wrong side of the blanket - directly from King William IV and formed part of the Irish nobility. Thus, Charles was educated at Eton and Wellington, before joining the British Army as a lieutenant in the Royal Fusiliers. After promotion to Captain, he was posted to South Africa and, on 14th October 1900, was in command of a squadron from the Protectorate Regiment. In going to the assistance of an armoured train outside Mafeking, his squadron was surrounded by a superior Boer force. Under FitzClarence' leadership the squadron freed the train and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy.

Thirteen days later he was back in action in a successful sortie from Mafeking which inflicted a heavy blow on the besieging Boer Forces. He distinguished himself again in the action at Game Tree, despite being shot through both legs. By now, he was being called "The Demon of Mafeking" or simply "The Demon", a nick-name which stuck to him until his death.

For the above three actions he was awarded the VC. He continued in military service, rising through the ranks to Brigadier General in the Irish Guards, leading by example and with great personal bravery until he was killed in action in November 1914.

John's next two recipients were two Irish international rugby players, Robert Johnston and Tom Crean.

Johnston came from a good family and was well-educated. He played rugby for Wanderers in both Dublin and Johannesburg; for Transvaal as well as the British Isles tourists of 1896. He remained in South Africa after this tour and, with the outbreak of the war, enlisted in the Imperial Light Horse. He won his VC at Elandslaagte in repulsing a Boer counter-attack on a koppie they were holding. His troops broke and started retreating but were stopped by Johnston, who not only rallied them but led a reckless but successful counter-attack. He was wounded in this action. He went back to Ireland in 1911 and died peacefully as a farmer in 1950.

Tom Crean was a contemporary of Johnston with a similar background. They met playing rugby for Wanderers in Dublin and became inseparable friends. While Johnston had joined the army on leaving school, Crean studied medicine, becoming an eminent surgeon. He also remained behind in South Africa after the 1896 rugby tour and also enlisted in the Imperial Light Horse in 1899. Instead of joining as a doctor, he enlisted as a trooper and was wounded at Elandslaagte. He was in Ladysmith for the siege, where he acted as a doctor. Promoted to Captain, he took part in the relief of Mafeking. Reverting to a medical role, he was serving as the regiment's medical officer when a column he was in was ambushed outside Bethlehem. Crean's coolness under heavy fire as he tended to the wounded, even though being twice wounded, earned him the VC. He went on to serve in private practice in London but re-enlisted in 1914 in the Royal Army Medical Corps, earning the DSO in 1915. The war in the trenches broke his spirit and on return to civilian life in 1918 his practice collapsed, as did his health, and he died aged 49 in 1923.

John's last recipient was Lieutenant the Honourable Frederick Hugh Sherston Roberts, the only son of Field Marshall Frederick Roberts. Young Freddie was born in India, educated at Eton and Sandhurst and then joined the Indian Army. He was a popular, if ineffectual, soldier who had a succession of interesting and glamorous posts, until his career came to a sudden stop when he was twice unable to pass the entrance exam for admission to the Staff College. His father used his influence to no avail so Freddie was sent off to South Africa as a member of General Buller's staff, basically to prove that he was good enough to be re-considered.

On 15th December 1899, Buller was engaged in a frontal assault against the Boer lines at Colenso. In the course of the action the British field guns were placed too far forward and came under heavy fire. It became obvious that they would fall into Boer hands, with all their crews wounded or dead. Volunteers were called for to retrieve them, among them Freddie Roberts. A mad ride across a bullet-swept half-mile then ensued, during which Roberts was hit five times. He was dragged back to safety but died of his wounds. He was awarded the VC for this gallant action.

Having concluded his talk, John was thanked by past chairman, Bob Smith, for his most informative lecture, whereupon the meeting adjourned for tea.

Ivor Little,
Scribe.

* * * * *

FORTHCOMING LECTURES

Johannesburg:

12th August

CR	With the Chilean Navy in Antarctica	Ivor Little
ML	The Lost Boys	Kathleen Satchwell

9th September

CR	Ethiopia - Battle of Adowa 1896	Col. James Jacobs
ML	A Century of mud - 1860's to 1960's	Ann Bourdin

KZN in Durban:

12th August

DDH	'Allied Operations in Syria, Persia & Iraq, May to September 1941'	Capt Brian Hoffman
Main Talk	'The Raid on the Medway'	Jesse Wesseloo

9th September:

DDH	'Lt Col JN Crealock's Watercolours - Then and Now'	Ken Gillings.
Main Talk -	'The Role of Indian Troops during the Anglo-Boer War'	Ganes Pillay.

Cape Town:

12th August: UNITA, Angola and the Media - A Personal Retrospective by Cloete Breytenbach
Our speaker will be the well-known photographer/photo-journalist, Cloete Breytenbach, who had the unforgettable experience of spending long periods of time in the bush deep inside Angola, documenting the Angolan War from the perspective of one of the three main contenders for political control in the war-ravaged country, UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola - National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). This inevitably also led to getting to know one of the most perplexing and enigmatic personalities in the Angolan Civil War - Dr Jonas Savimbi - on a personal basis.

SAMHSEC in Port Elizabeth:

SAMHSEC's next meeting will be at 1930 on **9 August 2010** (Public Holiday notwithstanding) at the EP Veteran Car Club in Port Elizabeth. The curtain raiser will be on the **Activities of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in the Eastern Cape** by **Charles Ross**. The main lecture will be **The Underground War** by **Mike Duncan**.

* * * * *

For KwaZulu-Natal details contact Ken Gillings 031-702-4828 ken.gillings@mweb.co.za
For Cape Town details contact Ray Hattingh 021-592-1279(am) ray@saarp.co.za
For Eastern Cape details contact Malcolm Kinghorn 041-373-4469 culturev@lantic.net
For Gauteng details contact Joan Marsh 010 237 0676 scribe@samilitaryhistory.org