



Willem Ratte **The Anglo-Boer War (The South African War)**
- 1899 - 1902

4 January at 22:22 ·

Having read some interesting posts and comments here and flapped my gums about it, methinks the following post from my site might be of some interest. Just to give something in return. I always thought I knew enough of the ABW, - until about two years ago I accompanied, rather reluctantly I must admit, some overseas visitors on a tour of ABW battlefields around Kimberley under the guidance of Steve Lunderstedt. Well, let's put it this way: Afterwards, I was far less smug about my own knowledge and understanding... And sat down to write this little piece below, based on what I had seen and heard that day. Thanks to Steve, whose repertoire of true stories of the bloody and often heroic (but sometimes equally stupid) battles around Kimberley must surely be unique. This is about a little British boy. DV, I'll follow it up with a piece about a little Boer boy.

"The little Drummer Boy of Magersfontein.

It's after midnight on 11 December 1899. 15-year-old William 'Willie' Milne, officially a drummer in Her Majesty's Seaforth Highlanders, is clutching his bugle, hemmed in by the big, dark shapes of hundreds, even thousands of burly Scots trying not to slip and fall and to keep direction in the tight quarter column formation. Those on the side even holding on to a rope to make sure they don't get lost. A total of 3,500 men in 30 companies aligned in 90 files, all compressed into a column 45 yards wide and 160 yards long. And a handful of drummer boys, now buglers ever since the British Army adopted the bugle and hunting calls of German Jaegers to pass orders during the melee of battle. It's dark, pitch-dark, as only a rainy African night can be during and after heavy thunderstorms. The usually dry veld is wet and soggy, and only the vague outline of the koppie of Magersfontein can occasionally be seen when lightning illuminates the sky. The British soldiers in their kilts have been walking since midnight, ever since they were issued one single bottle of water each, one or two tins of rations, and told they'd be moving into position to fix bayonets and attack the Boers on top of Magersfontein koppie at first light. The Boers who should have been softened up and in no mood for serious resistance after the heavy British bombardment the previous afternoon. This tactic seems to have worked quite well so far at Belmont, Graspan and Modderfontein for the British force trying to get through to a squealing Cecil Rhodes and Kimberley, cut off and besieged since the beginning of the war by the Boers. Though the Boers' withdrawals have had more to do with their unwillingness, so far, to stand and fight the overwhelming British force, than the predictable British tactics, as their commanding officer Lieutenant-General Lord Methuen is about to find out here at Magersfontein.

At about 3 o'clock in the morning, long before daybreak, the first line of British troops comes up against a fence. Unbeknown to them, this is only 300 metres from the Boer trenches, which one of the most brilliant Boer generals of the war, Koos de la Rey, had them dig in front and at the bottom of the koppies, instead of on top. When the British cut the fence, the snapping of wires confirms the exact position of the packed British infantry to the waiting Boer riflemen. Major General Wauchope, in charge of this column, only now starts to shake out and deploy his troops into extended line and a fighting formation. However, before this gets properly under way, while it is still dark, all hell breaks loose among the British regiments, most

of them still packed tightly in their quarter column formation. With little Willie Milne right in the middle of it.

A lantern is suddenly lit on the slopes of Magersfontein, - the prearranged signal for the Boers to open fire. Virtual marksmen through a lifetime of hunting and surviving in the wild, they simply cannot miss at this distance. Hundreds of the killed soldiers of the Highland Brigade are killed or wounded in just the few first minutes of the deadly Boer fire. Total mayhem and confusion reigns in the British ranks. Most of the survivors at the very head of the column can only disentangle themselves from the dead or wounded and flee. The Boers, though numerically far inferior, and lacking the fire-power of the British artillery, have pinned the whole of a brigade down on the open South African veld. The Brigade CO, General Wauchope, is hit and dies during the first enemy volleys. But not before realising that there is a gap in the Boer trench line on their left, his right, on the side of the koppie. And not before he can tell his adjutant to relay the order to launch an attack through that gap. An order which probably reached the drummer boys, who then blew their bugles to rally the troops and sound the attack. From here onwards, the fog of war precludes us knowing for sure where exactly Willie Milne found himself on the blood-soaked battlefield.

But we can guess, and my guess is he was part of the charge by just over a hundred Scottish soldiers of the famous Black Watch 'through the gap' of the Boer lines, obeying their general's last order. They charged forward on the right, bypassing the Boer line at the bottom of the hill. About a hundred then climbed the koppie, still trying to occupy it, but then ran into exploding shells and shrapnel. Shells and shrapnel from their own guns, when their artillery opened up again in the mistaken belief that a renewed bombardment of the hill would relieve the pinned down brigade. Instead, many of the charging Scotsmen were killed or wounded and driven back down. Meanwhile, thirty-odd others had stormed further into the rear, when suddenly, still in the dark, they came across the Boer horses, which the Boers had tethered on the side of the koppie. Believing this to be a mounted Boer commando, they opened up. Only to draw the attention of a real Boer commando rushing in to close their gap, who then attacked and killed or wounded and took prisoner the now utterly exhausted and beaten Scotsmen. Somewhere during these desperate charges, sometime, the young drummer and bugler boy Willie Milne might have been shot and wounded, collapsing there onto the rocky, hard African soil, far from his native home in Scotland. Probably already unconscious.

As the sun comes up, and the heat of the day reaches the high African summer temperatures, the remaining Highlanders are lying prone under the harsh, burning sun, unable to advance or retreat due to accurate Boer rifle fire. Whenever they move, some Boer sniper opens up. Their kilts give little protection to their legs, and to top it all, termites come out and begin biting them underneath, where, we are told, most of them don't wear underpants. British artillery, Methuen's reserve reinforcements and two Maxims do come forward and try to help them disengage, and some Highlanders do manage to pull back. But most are stuck right there on the killing field for most of the day. In the late afternoon, they break completely. Those who remain alive and are able to stand up, flee west towards the main body of British troops. This unexpected move leaves many of the field guns which had been advanced to the front line over the course of the morning exposed to the Boers. Only a lack of initiative on the part of the Boers saves the guns from being captured.

Maybe that evening right there between the soldiers facing each other,

without any official orders, but at the latest officially the following morning, Boer and Brit agreed to a cease-fire and went in to collect the dead and wounded. The British stretcher bearers were allowed to move about in front of the Boer lines, but not at the back, for understandable reasons. It is probably there then that some Boer father came across the body of the wounded young Scottish boy, unconscious and unable to speak, since his name would remain a mystery for nearly a hundred years. Maybe still clutching his bugle, as he would be known amongst the Boers only as 'the bugler boy'. The Boer who picked him up must have been reminded of his own boys, many of whom also fought, and died, alongside the men. Together with severely wounded Boers, he was carried to the Boer dressing station at a farm not far to the rear, owned by one Bisset, himself of Scottish descent. Here, there was no bitterness between the two enemies. Especially not towards a little boy who must have reminded fathers of their own. Quite apart from the fact that the Boers did have a strong regard for 'die Skotte in hulle rokkies'... Here, the Boer medics, short-staffed and under-supplied since the British had captured and refused to give back their ambulances and medical personnel at Modder River, did their best for the young drummer boy. But his injuries must have been so severe, he died without regaining consciousness. And here, Boer and Brit were buried together. So little Willie Milne ended up in a mass grave together with the fallen Boers behind Bisset's Farm, where his body remains to this day. When our former South Africa built the striking so-called Burger Monument in the sixties, our former War Graves Board put up a dignified, marble-clad grave and headstone with the following inscription:

"A young unknown Scottish bugler,
who died of wounds
and was buried here by the burgers.
Magersfontein, 11th December 1899"

Since then, the dedicated staff at Kimberley's McGregor Museum, and others, started the search for the name of the unknown drummer boy. And found out there were five drummers, as they were known officially, at the Magersfontein battle. Four were accounted for, - so the fifth must have been 'the unknown bugler'. Drummer William Milne. An additional inscription was subsequently added to the bottom of his headstone, which reads:

"Since identified as
Drummer William Milne
Seaforth Highlanders"

Good-bye little drummer boy. We salute you. May you rest in peace there where all brave soldiers come to rest.

Addendum: There has been an input, further down amongst the comments, which challenges the view that the 'little bulger boy' of this story was not a boy anymore, putting his age at the time of his death as somewhere in the early twenties. Readers can look up the references given there in support of this and make up their own mind, of course. I have done so, going through what was written and what it was based on, and would just like to say this in defence of Steve and the tradition surrounding 'the unknown bugler boy' of Magersfontein, as I have passed it on to you: The basic outline of the story, as it is told above, still stands unchallenged and by itself remains a poignant drama full of bravery, sadness and compassion in the midst of horrible slaughter. The only difference of opinion is the bugler's age. In this regard the following needs to be kept in mind, methinks: Drummer 3543 W. Milne's Regiment itself could not give his age. In spite of research done, Fiona

Barbour admits that there is no certainty. Speculation based on his age on enlistment, therefrom deducing his age at the time of his death, is at the end of the day just that, speculation. Also, looking through the available circumstantial evidence, customs and history of the outgoing century in which the bugler boy lived, even the minimum age of 14 was in so many cases not adhered to by Army recruitment officers, nor by the boys themselves. The fee paid for each new recruit, the boyish enthusiasm for war, the frequent lack of birth certificates and a wide-spread desire to escape an often drab life back home, all help to explain the fact that so many boys of that time were later found to have enlisted far below the official minimum enlistment age. Plus, there were so many William Milnes, it's impossible to pin him down for definite. So for what it's worth, for my part, I am inclined to stick to Steve's and the commonly accepted Boer tradition's view of him being a bugler 'boy', ie a young British boy, who looked like a teenager, - whatever his real age, - and as such touching the hearts of the Boers who found him mortally wounded on the battlefield. And then tried to save his life and eventually buried him amongst their own, with all the sympathy and sorrow accorded the very young. Of course I stand to be corrected, if need be, - especially if Steve himself can come in and give us a different opinion.



Robin Smith, Chris Pretorius and 177 others

52 comments

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Bruce Allenbach You really should be authoring scholarly books on this topic sir.

Seriously.

You've a grasp and ability to teach.

Like · Reply · 4d

5



Hennie Maartens And astonishing command of the language. Jislaaik this was a good read

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7



John Leach Well written Willem. Voorspoedige nuwe jaar

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5



Willem Ratte Thanks John.

Like · Reply · 4d

2



Wendy McClelland Yes, very well written...there must be so many, such sad and moving stories.

Like · Reply · 4d

1



Trevor Newsome Yes, very well written. My Grandfather served in the ABW with the KRRC mounted inf..

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1



Peter Odendaal An interesting and informative account, thank you.

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1



John B McDonnell So sad. I have read some accounts of men being killed by blue on blue artillery. However none involved killing a child on their own side. RIP drummer boy and all who died in the Boer War on both sides. A war that should not have been fought IMO.

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6



Liesl Human Parkin

Like · Reply · 4d

1



Warren Hardwick RIP Soldier.

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1



Danie Coetzee Dankie Willem! Waar is daardie stuk wat jy geskryf het oor die unie vlag en wat dit beteken. Ek wil dit so graag he asb

Like · Reply · See translation · 4d

1



Susan Louw

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Iain Hayter Very interesting, thank you

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Andre van der Merwe Brave beyond comprehension, the Little Drummer Boys. A thoughtful piece Willem. Thank -you.

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Chris Phillips Fascinating. Thank you!

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John Costello A story well told

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Kevin Hamer Awesome read thanks

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Chanelle Alberts Very interesting reading.

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Steven Newbold To young to die in a senseless war. Respect

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1



Jimmy Von Sorgenfrei Thank you. Very interesting read.

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2



Ade Snakes Very interesting, and it proves the point, that input from both sides is important to get a more accurate picture. So I am very disappointed that the English admin "Scotty" has been forced to loose interest in this site.

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3



Tony Horn A sad story, but highlights the compassion of humans even when all hell is let loose.

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1



Chris Pretorius Willem, dis 'n kosbare bydrae, en aangrypend aangebied. Ek glo jy sal straks self 'n slagveld-gids sonder weerga kan wees. Dankie hiervoor, met waardering.



4

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Clive Timothy Durston Thanks for this information - beautifully written!

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3



Rocky Mann Always inspirational.

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1



Agnes Olivier Dankie Willem, as ons maar meer manne soos jy gehad het.

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1



Christo Giani Renzo Giani

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1



Rosemary Montgomery What an incredibly sad ending to a young



...an incredibly sad ending to a young life. RIP young man ♡

Thanks for sharing. I look forward to reading the story about the little Boer boy too - hope I don't miss it

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2



Mark DeWet Great account - so priveledged to have access to the ABW group , thanks

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Robert Miller Thank you for this posting ,much appreciated

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Monica van Staden Thank you for sharing this !

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Arnold van Dyk Dankie Willem!

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Meurig Jones The work by Fiona Barbour et al of the McGregor Museum was written up in the [SA] Military History Journal, vol.4, no.6, December 1979., 'Who was Magersfontein's 'Young Unknown Scottish Bugler'?'. <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol046fb.html>



SAMILITARYHISTORY.ORG

Who was Magersfontein's 'Young Unknown Scottish Bugler'? - South...

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4



Meurig Jones In the article by Fiona Barbour she notes that they were unable to ascertain Milne's age. And she refutes the common mis-understanding that "Drummers" were boys. We can now take an educated guess at Milne's age thanks to the work by Paul Nixon on <http://armyservicenumbers.blogspot.com/.../seaforth...> Milne's service number was 3543, so he enlisted between Jan 1891 and May 1892. If was 14 when he enlisted then he was 22/23 years old when he was killed, if he was 18 on enlistment then he was 26/27 years old. Definitely not a "little Drummer Boy".

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Meurig Jones Willem Ratte why let facts get in the way of a good story? "Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth" <https://www.bbc.com/.../20161026-how-liars-create-the-...>



BBC.COM

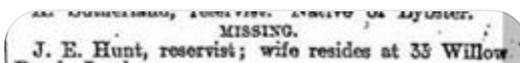
How liars create the 'illusion of truth'

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Meurig Jones Enlisted March 1891. Information supplied by the regiment to The Scotsman newspaper 18 Dec, 1899.



J. E. Hunt, reservist; wife resides at 33 Willow



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Robert Miller Some years ago at Belmont I picked up a boot heel and wonder if it could of been his !

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1



Bruce Aldridge Very intresting story! Just shows how senseless war is. Who wins? Thank you for this article.

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1



Kevin FitzGerald Thank you [Willem Ratte](#). Very poignant story and told with due sensitivity.

The futility of war, once again laid bare.

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2



Liesl Human Parkin Kevin FitzGerald concur

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2



Jan Meyer Thanks Willem, very interesting story about this young Scottish lad

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Helene Oli Ek leer elke keer iets by. Baie dankie

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1



David Wilson Thanks for a fitting account. (Drummer being his rank. Trumpeter being the rank of a mounted bugler, carrying both. Musician being the rank of a bandsman.) 'Drummer' being a hangover from days when infantry in close order were marched up to face the enemy within range of their muskets.

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3



Write a comment...

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