

SEKUKUNI

A VETERAN'S NOTE ON '76 AND '79

Mr. Charles Read, of Potchefstroom, writes: Mr. Duggan Cronin's account of the Bapaedi country given in The Star of the 14th inst. is highly interesting, especially to all old campaigners who took part in the unsuccessful Republican campaign of 1876, which aimed to bring to book the tribe who for so long had defied the authorities and terrorised the adjacent borders of their territory.

Visiting the country as Mr. Cronin has lately done must have given a very different impression from that seen by those who participated in the great commando of 1876, when the long mountain ranges were crowded with well-armed men and deadly foes; when, to straggle from the protection of the laager or the ever active patrols meant certain death. Every donga, every patch of bush or group of rocks held the hidden enemy, continually alert to entice the unwary into their power, under the guise of being some our native allies, to their undoing. It being winter time and the grass consequently dry, advantage was taken by our opponents to burn off all edible vegetation on our line of march, with dire consequences to our cattle, as shown by the long lines of carcasses left behind us, especially during the later disastrous return. Our horses did not suffer so much as we fed them on kafir corn captured from the native kraals.

Mr. Cronin makes no mention of the route taken by the 1876 commando, nor of his coming across any signs of the remains of the triangular entrenchments thrown up by the force round the nightly laagers, which, although dug over 50 years ago, the writer considered it possible, might still show the outlines and probably be marked by different grass from the surrounding veld. Had someone been available to show the spots, traces might possibly have been found, but nature has a wonderful way of healing her wounds and reverting to her primitive conditions. The force was the greatest ever thrown out by the Republic up to the time and included native contingents and artillery, thus the camps were of considerable dimensions.

EFFECTS ON HISTORY.

All the other native wars of the old times were mere side issues in comparison with the Boer-Sekukuni war, as it was the failure of this great effort that brought the note from the British Government stating that unless the Transvaal Government put their house in order and properly controlled the native tribes that they, as paramount power in South Africa, would be bound to step in for the safety of all whites throughout the land. Thus, the failure of the great commando more or less directly brought on the annexation of the Transvaal by the British Government in 1877 and other important developments in our history.

My object is not so much to conjure up memories of those long past times as to correct an obvious error made by Mr. Cronin by which a serious injustice has unintentionally been done to the British forces which took part in Sir Garnet's successful attack on the stronghold in 1879, after several other expeditions had failed. Firstly, the great Republican commando already referred to. Then Aylward and Von Stigman's attempt with volunteers from Kimberley and locally, paid by the Transvaal. After the annexation in 1877. Colonel Rowland's visit with one British regiment. None of these efforts made any impression on the terribly rocky and cavernous stronghold situated on that terrible spur of the Lebembo Mountains, which ever defied all comers. Sir Garnet Wolsey, straight from his victorious settlement of Zululand, was now asked to take the matter in hand of subduing the tribe. Sir Garnet gathered a force, consisting of 8,000 Zwaizi warriors, under Capt. Macleod, of the 74th Highlanders, he having been specially detailed for the purpose, with the consent of the Zwaizi chief, and taking command of them throughout the operations. Further, there was a British regiment of redcoats, as the uniform then was, and Ferreira's Horse, a splendid body of experienced fighters comprising both Dutch and English in their ranks, under Colonel Ferreira himself, a born soldier and a true man. A few light British field-guns also took part in the fight, but could make but little impression on the heavy rocks.

Mr. Duggan Cronin states that on November 28, 1879, Sir Garnet Wolsey, with the Boer troops and a number of Zwaizis, with whom came the exiled Mompuru, attacked and captured Sekukuni's stronghold and Sekukuni himself shortly afterwards (really the next day). Now it should be clearly understood that no Boer troops whatsoever were present or took part in the action. How Mr. Cronin fell into the error mentioned it is hard to conceive.

TAKING OF THE MOUNTAIN.

All being ready the night before, the redcoats, the Zwaizis and the volunteers advanced simultaneously at dawn and immediately came under a fearful hail of bullets. All extended and charged upwards, bounding from cover to cover towards the summit, searching the crevices with heavy fire the while. The writer was told by a member of Ferreira's Horse, who took part, that the Zwaizis, on taking up the ground assigned to them, glanced round to see if the soldiers really meant business; seeing them already rushing upwards, they too sprang forward and soon caught up to the line of advancing whites, when all vied with each other in hurrying onward, taking many deadly caves full of the enemy, until the summit was gained and the main stronghold was won. Here the soldiers and the Zwaizis met and great cheering took place. The dead of both sides were lying round in heaps and casual shots dropping among them still took their toll. All ranks behaved splendidly. The Zwaizis are said to have lost between 500 and 600 killed besides many wounded.

The great stad was burnt to the ground. The loss of the enemy in killed could never be arrived at as so many fell into the caves and caverns of the mountains. Some hundreds of men surrendered the following day, besides numbers of women and children.

Thus was the long-standing menace of the Transvaal border brought to an end by the British authorities, after all previous attempts on the apparently impregnable fastness had failed.

CHARLES READ.

The office of the special justice of the peace at Petrusburg will be opened as a full revenue office for the transaction of all classes of revenue business from January 1.



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