

‘Some Fine Day We Shall All Have Medals’; The 94th Regiment, the South Africa General Service Medal, and the affair at Bronkhorstspruit.

By Ian Knight

In September 1880 Lieutenant-Colonel Phillip Anstruther of the 94th Regiment was languishing in the small town of Lydenburg in the Transvaal, and he was bored. He had been there for ten months and whatever slender glamour the town might first have had had long since lost its shine. Nor were there any great regimental demands on his time – the 94th were scattered in small pockets across the Transvaal, and Anstruther commanded just the headquarters detachment and two companies of his men (A and F). He had set his men to building a thatched barracks to get them out of their canvas tents and he had organised occasional parades and shooting matches with the townsfolk yet still time hung heavily on their hands and his men, he noted ruefully, fell to mischief when there was nothing to keep them occupied. Anstruther often took himself off with one of his colleagues to shoot fowl or buck, and now and then the officers and ladies from the town would stage amateur theatricals, although Anstruther himself had a low opinion of Lydenburg society, and thought the plays were not always very good. Once a week he charted his boredom in bright, sometimes brittle, letters to his wife at home in Scotland, a litany of disdain for the crushing inanity of small-town life in the Colony and for the Boers themselves which was punctuated by more professional fretting about the impact of Anglo-Zulu War service upon his career and those of his rivals – who had been rewarded substantive or brevet ranks, who had returned home to exert greater influence and won preferment as a result, and who might have vaulted a rung or two to place themselves above him on the long, slow ladder of promotion by seniority.

All this inactivity seemed worse by contrast to the excitements of the previous year. At the beginning of February 1879 the 94th had been stationed at Aldershot when the news of the defeat at iSandlwana had broken in the UK and they were ordered immediately to make ready to sail to Natal. Over the next fortnight they hastily enrolled nearly 350 volunteers to make up their numbers and on 26 February, standing at full strength with 28 officers and 897 other ranks, they embarked at Southampton on the SS ‘China’. They landed at Durban on 2 April 1879 (coincidentally the same day that Lord Chelmsford was defeating the Zulu army on the coast at the battle of kwaGingindlovu). The bulk of the battalion had marched up via Greytown and Helpmekaar to Conference Hill, on the Zulu border, where Chelmsford was assembling a new column for the second invasion of Zululand. That invasion had begun on 1 June, and over the following month the 94th had marched as part of the 2nd Division. At the beginning of July Lord Chelmsford had reached the banks of the White Mfolozi, just across the river from his strategic objective, King Cetshwayo’s royal homestead at oNdini. On 4 July he had crossed the river and formed up in a hollow square on a rise overlooking oNdini – among those with him were 20 officers and 593 men of the 94th (two companies having been left on garrison duty along the way). During the subsequent battle the 94th had held the rear face of Chelmsford’s square which at times had been the object of several determined Zulu assaults. The Zulu attacks were unsuccessful, however, and the battle marked the effective end of the Zulu army. In some outlying areas, however, individual amakhosi (chiefs) had continued to resist and the 94th were then attached to a new column, commanded by Lt. Col. Baker Russell, which was despatched to pacify northern areas along the line of the Ntombe River and Hlobane mountain. As such, the 94th had taken part in some of the last skirmishes of the war.

By September many of the other regiments who had taken part in the war were on their way to Durban to leave Africa. At the beginning of October the 94th, however, were ordered to march into the Transvaal. The colony had been annexed from the Boers in 1877 and there were rumours of discontent among Republican elements within the Boer community – and more to the point Lord Chelmsford’s successor, Sir Garnet Wolseley, had determined to end a long-running conflict with the king of the BaPedi people, Sekhukhune woaSekwati. On 28 November 1879 Wolseley had attacked Sekhukhune’s capital at Tsate, and the 94th had been in the forefront, spear-heading an assault on a rocky outcrop, known as the ‘Fighting Kopje’, which commanded the town. Yet the advent of 1880 brought more mundane duties as the 94th were split into packets of one or two companies and despatched to various small towns around the Transvaal to watch for signs of Boer agitation.

For Anstruther this was an anti-climax and he felt the contrast keenly between the battalion's successes the previous year and the dull work which now seemed to be their reward. On 19 September 1880 he had touched on this in one of his regular letters to his wife;

I see that they are giving us the Cape Medal with a bar across it '1879'. It really is a shame. People will take it for a medal for jams or soluble cocoa or something at an exhibition, and I think it is hard on the regiment who were all through Zululand and Sekukuni, to be massed with somebody who crossed the Zulu border for one day. They ought, at least, to give us a clasp for Sekukuni...

The tradition of issuing medals to every man who had served in a particular campaign, regardless of rank, had begun with the issue of the Waterloo medal and was well-established by the 1870s. The issue of a medal to commemorate service in the cluster of wars at that time in southern Africa had been approved by the Queen and promulgated by Army Order 103 of August 1880. The medal was to be struck in silver and issued directly to men in the regular Army – upon the completion of rolls by individual regiments listing those who qualified – and to the authorities in Natal and the Eastern Cape for issue to Colonial and Volunteer units. The medal was, indeed, a version of an earlier medal, as Anstruther suggests – the medal issued for service on the Eastern Cape Frontier during three wars against the Xhosa people in 1834-35, 1846-47 and 1850-53 (the Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Cape Frontier Wars). This medal had been authorised retrospectively for all three wars in November 1854 and was made from silver with designs by two members of the Wyon dynasty, who were leading engravers of the day; the Waterloo medal had been designed by Thomas Wyon the younger, and Thomas' cousin, William Wyon, had designed the head of the young Queen Victoria which appeared on a number of campaign medals including the South Africa 1853 medal. The reverse of the 1853 medal was designed by William's son, Leonard Charles Wyon, and featured a motif of a lion – supposedly drinking from a waterhole, although the crouching pose suggests one of submission – against a background of a bush and surmounted by the words 'South Africa'. The medal was issued without clasps or bars and bore a single date in a space below the lion motif – 1853, the date at which the last of the campaigns ended. The name of the recipient was engraved around the rim but there was no reference to indicate the campaign in which he served – often the only way for modern researchers to determine this is to check the name and unit against the relevant medal rolls.



The medal for the campaigns of the 1870s was suspended from the same ribbon as the 1853 one – 'watered orange' (golden yellow) with two wide and two narrow dark blue stripes – but the medal itself was modified in two crucial respects. Firstly, the date '1853' was replaced with a design depicting a Zulu shield and spears, and secondly it was issued with a bar bearing the date of the recipient's service in various combinations of the period 1877, 1878 and 1879. The medal was officially known as the 'South Africa General Service Medal' and the campaigns clumped together to be covered by the award were in fact a separate series of campaigns across that period and included a

further war against the Xhosa (the Ninth Cape Frontier War, 1877-78), a brief campaign against the Griqua (1878), the invasion of Zululand (January to September 1879), the operations against the Sotho chief Moorosi (March to November 1879) and the final conquest of King Sekhukhune (November to 2 December 1879). The official cut-off point for qualification for the award was therefore 2 December 1879, and troops arriving in the field after that point, including replacement drafts for regiments who had taken part in the fighting, would not qualify.

As an interesting aside, anyone who was already in possession of the '1853' medal and served again in 1877-8-9 would not be entitled to the issue of a new medal but merely to any relevant bar to which they might be entitled to add to their existing medal. To complicate matters further, those who had the '1853' medal, who had then served in some capacity in the 1870s (and were therefore entitled to the award) but did not qualify for one of those bars (and therefore could not be issued with a new bar to add to their existing medal) would receive a new medal with no bar!

The issue of clasps by date, rather than bearing the name of a particular battle – as had a number of earlier medals, for example, including the medal issued for service in the Crimean War – was something of a sore point among the troops since it did not allow for any particular distinction. In the case of the Zulu campaign the issue of a bar was a recognition of active service – in order to qualify for the bar '1879' for that campaign a soldier had to have crossed the border into Zululand and to have served on enemy territory. If he had been deployed during the war but had remained in Natal or the Transvaal and not crossed into Zululand he qualified for the medal but with no bar. Thus a soldier who had spent much of the war in garrison duty on the Zululand side of the border but never heard a shot fired in anger was as entitled to the bar '1879' as one who had gone through a series of hard-fought battles. Indeed, neither did it recognise a soldier's participation in any act of particular distinction – there was, for example, nothing to show if he had been present at iSandlwana or Rorke's Drift – although, like the 1853 medal, it did bear the recipient's name impressed around the rim. The distinction in the Zulu campaign between those who had crossed into enemy territory and those who had not also raised some concern, not least because there were no similar restrictions in the other campaigns covered by the award. In Zululand it had been relatively easy to determine a criteria for active service but this had not been the case on the Eastern Cape, for example, where the campaign of 1877-78 had been more fluid. The Commander of Colonial Forces, Brigadier C.M. Clarke, grumbled that 'the members of the Corps who never left King William's Town ... are intended to receive similar distinctions to those who actually were engaged in the Field against the enemy' (letter of 27 Nov. 1880, reproduced in D.R. Forsyth's 'The South Africa Medal 1877-8-9 Roll'). Furthermore, even the '1879' bar lumped three different campaigns together – the invasion of Zululand and the Moorosi and Sekhukhune campaigns – and any soldier who had served in more than one of these would still only receive the one bar. Anstruther, writing his wife again on 21 November 1880, clearly felt that he had been through two distinct and different campaigns, and had been in two battles, and that this should have been recognised;

We have, at last, got our medal rolls completed and they go off by this mail, so some fine day we shall all have medals but I am very angry at getting one clasp with the number 1879 on it. They certainly ought to have given us a clasp for Ulundi and another for Sekukuni.

In the event, however, fate intervened for Anstruther and the men directly under his command. Largely unnoticed by the officers of the 94th – Anstruther thought Boer resentment at British rule was exaggerated and was convinced it would come to nothing – republican sentiment in the Transvaal was steadily mounting. The same month that Anstruther was writing home about medal rolls for the previous fighting a Boer named Piet Bezuidenhout was summonsed in Potchefstroom for refusing to pay his taxes. Bezuidenhout contested the amount of the arrears so the magistrate confiscated his wagon to settle the debt – but when the day of the sale came a body of 100 armed Boers forcibly retrieved the wagon. On 23 November 1880 elements of the 94th, including Anstruther's Headquarters detachment and his two companies, were ordered to march to reinforce the garrison in the capital, Pretoria. It was not until 5 December that Anstruther succeeded in accumulating the necessary transport wagons and his march was further delayed by the onset of heavy rains. In the meantime events had moved on and with anti-British sentiment rising the Republican leaders had held a meeting in December on a farm called Paardekraal and had elected a provisional

government independent of British authority. Anstruther was warned of the looming crisis but continued his march. At about 12.30 on 20 December Anstruther's column – a total of 259 officers and men and 24 wagons – was marching through almost flat, featureless countryside about two miles from the village of Bronkhorstspuit when a party of mounted Boers appeared off to one side of the road. A single rider came forward and offered Anstruther a letter; it was a note from the Republican government instructing him to halt his march. Anstruther read the note and replied that he intended to continue towards Pretoria in accordance with his orders. As he returned towards the column he noticed that the Boers had dismounted and had fanned out along the length of the column just 200 yards away. Anstruther ordered his men to deploy in skirmishing order beside the wagons but had no sooner done so than a volley burst out down the length of the Boer line. The 94th were completely exposed to a devastating close-range fire and within the space of just fifteen minutes 156 men and one of the soldiers' wives (some of whom were accompanying the column) were either killed or wounded. Seeing the devastation Anstruther ordered his men to surrender – he had been shot no less than five times in the legs himself, and would die a few days later.

The attack on the 94th was the opening act of the Transvaal Rebellion. Across the country British garrisons came under siege whilst in Natal, the senior British commander, Major-General Sir George Pomeroy Colley, hastily collected a relief force - largely consisting of troops who had remained in the colony since the end of the Zulu campaign - to march to their aid. The Boers blocked his line of advance at the Laing's Nek pass and in January and February of 1881 Colley fought a series of battles to dislodge them. He lost them all, and was himself killed at Majuba Hill on 27 February. In the peace negotiations which followed, Britain largely gave up her claim to the Transvaal.

Today the Bronkhorstspuit memorial lies close to a highway in the open country outside the town. The direction of the roads has changed and the British graves themselves have been moved and the monuments re-erected. Even so, it is possible to trace the line of the road Anstruther was marching along, and the lack of cover available to his men is painfully obvious. There are the names of 57 men killed in the action on the memorial, the majority of them from the 94th. All of those names appear on the medal roll for the 1879 campaigns – veterans of Ulundi and the attack on Sekhukhune they were entitled to that medal and bar. When these were at last issued, the medals of those killed in action, including in the action at Bronkhorstspuit, were sent to their next of kin.

There was one further irony to come. In the light of the dismal nature of the 1881 campaign it was decided not to commemorate it either with the issue of a specific medal, or even with an '1881' bar to the existing medal. Many of the soldiers who fought there, both in the Transvaal and in the Natal theatre, were veterans of the 1879 campaigns, and the SAGS medal would remain the only token of their service in southern Africa at that time.

Anstruther, had he lived, would hardly have approved.

Note; Anstruther's letters are in the National Army Museum collection in London, and are published in 'War and Peace in South Africa 1879-1881' by Dr Paul Butterfield (Johannesburg, 1981).

The monuments and graves of the British dead on the Bronkhorstspuit battlefield.

