

BRAVERY ON THE MOUNTAINS: JOHN JOSEPH FARMER

Capt [Retd] Pete Starling

Director, AMS Museum, Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale Aldershot, GU12 5RQ

The First Boer War

Since the annexation of the Transvaal by Britain in April 1877 there had been much discontent from the Boers. They continued to demand independence but Prime Minister Gladstone refused to give in and grant this. On 13th December 1880 over 4000 Boers met to proclaim a re-constituted South African Republic the formal proclamation taking place on 16th December 1880 and almost immediately afterwards hostilities broke out.

The Commander of the British forces in the Transvaal and Natal was Sir George Pomeroy-Colley. Although his expertise in Staff Duties was impeccable he lacked experience in commanding troops in the field and one of his first mistakes was to underestimate the fighting ability of the Boers. They inflicted their first defeat on the British troops on 20th December when a column of the 94th Foot, marching from Lydenburg to Pretoria was attacked at Bronkhorst Spruit and suffered over 150 killed and wounded out of a total force of 260 all ranks.

The Boers continued to besiege British outposts into early 1881 when Colley commenced relief operations, mounting the first on 28th January when he launched an attack on a force of 2000 Boers blocking his route of advance at Laings Nek. Once again the British column was beaten off and retired to bury their dead and await reinforcements.

There was now a brief respite from the fighting as President Kruger and the British Administration tried to reach a peaceful settlement.

On 26th February Colley undertook a reconnaissance in force to the summit of Majuba Mountain with its commanding a view some 2000 feet above the Boer positions of Laings Nek to the east. The force composed 22 officers and 627 men drawn from two companies of 58th Regiment under command of Captain AW Morris [1], three companies of 92nd Regiment commanded by Major Hay [2], two companies of 3rd Bn 60th Regiment commanded by Captain Holled-Smith [3] and 60 officers and men of the Naval Brigade from HMS Boadicea and HMS Dido. They were accompanied by Surgeon AJ Landon AMD and Surgeon EE Mahon RN and one NCO and three men of the Army Hospital Corps [4]. Surgeon Major H Cornish AMD and another soldier of the AHC moved out later and established themselves at a position between Majuba and Mt Imguela held by a company of the 92nd under Captain PF Robertson [5]. Here were left the horses and a quantity of ammunition in entrenchments prepared by the Highlanders.

Each of the fighting troops was ordered to take only greatcoats, waterproof sheets, three days rations and between them, four shovels and six pick axes. Each man was issued seventy rounds of ammunition and although the naval brigade

had both rockets and gattling guns, these were left behind. Colley initially felt that water was not a priority, some would be found on the top of Majuba but each man ensured that his canteen was full before the party set off [6].

The Battle of Majuba

The Principal Medical Officer for Natal was Deputy Surgeon General J Holloway CB [7] and he had as his Principal Medical Officer, Natal Field Force, Surgeon Major Thomas Babington [8]. Babington was warned at 9pm, half an hour prior to the start of the operation, that the force was about to leave. Hardly enough time to make arrangements for the medical care of the force. He immediately warned Surgeon Landon and Surgeon Mahon to proceed with the force and they were to be accompanied by the men of the AHC. They quickly loaded a packhorse with their equipment and set off accompanied by bearers carrying seven stretchers. At 1am the second force set off and Surgeon Major Cornish assembled his equipment aboard a packhorse and two pack mules and set off with Private Lowe AHC, some bearers and the hospital sergeants from the regiments involved. [9]

The main body having set off into the night at 10pm and reached the foot of Majuba at 1.30am. The officer's horses were sent back to camp and a company of Highlanders ordered to dig in on the lower slopes. Guides led the column along the rough track, which led up the south side of Majuba. It was not an easy climb and wrong turnings were taken on numerous occasions and men fell and injured themselves but by 3.40am the advanced elements of the force reached the top. It was another two hours before the tail of the column wound its way onto the plateau, tired and with lungs bursting; their number now reduced to 354. On reaching the top the men were given five minutes rest and then began to take up their positions. A well was dug and a hospital area set up close by. Surgeon Langdon and his men commenced unpacking their equipment, confident that they would not be required to use much of it. Colley felt it unnecessary to dig in and anyway the men were tired. He was confident that his position was impregnable. There seemed to be no discipline about concealment and noise and just before 6am the element of surprise was lost when a subaltern of the 58th fired a round into the Boers below. Other firing followed despite Colley calling for a cease-fire.

The Boers were taken by surprise and initially did not contemplate an assault on the hill but eventually men were rallied and at 7am began to climb Majuba. They continued advancing, firing as they went, for most of the morning and about 10.30am, whilst observing their progress, Commander Romilly RN was shot through the abdomen [6]

Below the hill Surgeon Major Thomas Babington was concerned that there might be far more wounded than expected so mustered all remaining men of the AHC, under command of Surgeon Ring [10] and set off with orders to try to get as far up the mountain as possible [11]. It was not long before the relief force came under fire. Babington himself went under a flag of

Corresponding Author: Captain [Retd] PH Starling, Director, AMS Museum, Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale, Aldershot, GU12 5RQ

Tel. 01252 868820 Fax. 01252 868832

Email: armymedicalmuseum@btinternet.com

truce to the Boer General, Smit and received assurances that he would not be harmed as he went about his errand of mercy. He set up a temporary field hospital at O'Neil's Farm, at the foot of Majuba and began searching for wounded and it was not long before he found Surgeon Major Cornish lying fatally wounded on the lower slope, shot through the left lung [11].

Soon after 1pm a party of Boers gained the top of Majuba, in front of the position held by the Highlanders and subjected the latter to a withering fire. Battle now ensued as lines broke, were reinforced and broke again; still the Boers came on. The British lines gradually contracted into the centre with Colley himself was in the thick of the fighting but in the vicinity of the hospital position was hit in the head at very close range, the bullet entering just above the right eye; he fell mortally wounded [6].

The battle raged around the hospital area and as Surgeon Mahon was treating Commander Romilly the Boers appeared above the hospital position and began to pour fire down, wounding Private Sealey AHC in both shoulders. Mahon tried to stop them and a white flag was raised but shot away. Eventually he succeeded in contacting the Boers and pleaded for protection for the wounded. Surgeon Landon encountered the same problems and was himself shot in the lung but managed to direct Lance Corporal Farmer AHC, himself slightly wounded, to waive a white triangular bandage to indicate that there were wounded present [11]. Standing up in full view he waived the bandage vigorously but was immediately shot through the hand, dropping the bandage. As he bent down to pick it up with his left hand he muttered to Landon, 'I've got another arm'. As he waived the bandage above his head a bullet passed through his left arm, close to his elbow. The Boers then advanced on the position and the firing ceased. Despite his own wounds, Landon was able to give Farmer an injection of Morphine to ease the pain of his wounds.

The remnants of the British force now surrendered in pockets or tried to run down the hill but some carried on fighting to the bitter end. Down at Robertson's position, those who had fled Majuba poured in, many wounded and Surgeon Major Cornish did his best to treat them. Shortly after, the Boers turned their attention to Robertson and his men and a mounted force of some six to seven hundred Boers surrounded the entrenchment and commenced pouring heavy fire in to the ranks of Highlanders. Once Robertson received orders to retire he hastily organised loading the remaining stores and ammunition onto the horses and the wounded were prepared for evacuation. It was soon after this that Surgeon Major Cornish was shot in the chest whilst helping to carry a stretcher and despite waving a white handkerchief to the Boers [11].

For the medical men, with the fighting over their job began. Surgeon Mahon continued to work on the wounded, totalling some 36, throughout the night, trying to ease their pain and keep them warm and dry, as rain fell. At dawn Babington and Ring along with 100 men reached the summit of Majuba and began to administer to the wounded, including their comrades from the Army Medical Department and Army Hospital Corps. During the battle, besides General Colley, 91 officers and men were killed in action and 134 wounded; those wounded who remained on the summit were now in need of urgent evacuation down to the farmhouse. By the end of that day there were 24 wounded in the farm, placed under the care of Surgeon Gormley assisted by Corporal Douglas and Privates Callard, Lane and Wallace AHC. Surgeon Major Cornish would die there at 10am on 1st March. The farmhouse would eventually be evacuated and closed down on 8th March, the field hospital in the main camp having transferred two officers and forty-nine men to Newcastle, which gave room to receive the wounded men from the farm [11].

Lance Corporal Joseph John Farmer AHC



Figure 1: Artist's depiction of L/Cpl Farmer's VC action

Joseph John Farmer was born in the Parish of St Andrews, Middlesex, on the 5th May 1854, just as another of Victoria's wars was starting. His father Thomas John Farmer eventually sent him to school in Kings Cross and then, at the age of 10 years he was apprenticed to a builder. Obviously the building trade was not to his liking and at the age of 13 years he left his apprenticeship and went to sea. Whilst in the mercantile marine he was shipwrecked twice, off the Isle of White in 1875 and again off Hong Kong in 1876. Farmer returned to dry land in 1878, being paid off at Liverpool and at about the same time he contracted small pox, being admitted to Hempstead Smallpox Hospital. Whilst recovering from the disease he helped subdue a delirious patient who tried to jump through a window. Perhaps as a consequence of this, on his discharge from hospital he was offered the post of Night Porter, attending to the delirious patients. He did not stay long in this post, leaving in August 1878 because of job cuts and moving to Banstead Asylum, where he stayed for only a short period of time [12].

Perhaps it was his interest in medical matters, which caused him to enlist in the Army Hospital Corps at Aldershot on 27th February 1879. His enlistment papers tell us that he was 5 feet 9¼ inches tall, with a chest measurement of 38 inches. His complexion is described as fresh and having Hazel eyes and dark brown hair. Both of his forearms were adorned with tattoos, no doubt acquired on his travels whilst at sea. After courses in Anatomy and ambulance work he left with reinforcements for the Cape of Good Hope. On arrival in the Cape he moved up country to Pietermaritzburg and then on to Ladysmith where he worked with Surgeon Major Babington, attending to the wounded from Ulundi. Further duties included escorting convalescents between Utrecht and Pietermaritzburg. During his time in South Africa Farmer managed to blot his copybook on several occasions. He had entries in the Company Defaulter Book for various offences including absence from Tattoo, insubordination, being drunk and a civil offence of disturbing the peace in Pietermaritzburg when he broke windows and made a noise in Commercial Road [13].

On the outbreak of the war with the Boers, Farmer found himself in a field hospital attending to the wounded from Laing's Nek as well as some involvement in relief columns sent in the direction of Potchefstroom and to Lydenburg. Finally in February 1881 Farmer found himself struggling to the top of Majuba [12].

After the battle Farmer, his wounds bound up, was evacuated down the mountain to the farmhouse and eventually to



Figure 2 L/Cpl Farmer

Newcastle where on the 8th April 1881 he was found unfit for further service and put aboard a ship bound for the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley [13]. It was during this time that Sir Evelyn Wood recommended Farmer for 'favourable consideration for the Victoria Cross'.

Whilst at Netley the award of the Victoria Cross was announced by the War Office on 16 May 1881, 'For conspicuous bravery during the engagement with the Boers at the Majuba Mountain, on the 27th

February 1881, when he showed a spirit of self-abnegation and an example of cool courage which cannot be too highly commended. While the Boers closed with the British troops near the wells, Corporal Farmer held a white flag over the wounded, and when the arm holding the flag was shot through, he called out that he had "another". He then raised the flag with the other arm, and continued to do so until that also was pierced with a bullet.' [14]

On the 6th August 1881 Farmer was ordered to proceed to Osborne House, Isle of White and to receive the Victoria Cross from Queen Victoria on the following Tuesday, 9th August.

A medical board which sat a few days before the medal

presentation decided that Farmer was permanently unfit, 'both limbs have been seriously injured and he will scarcely be able to contribute in any way towards earning a livelihood in civil employ'. On the 10th August Farmer left the army after having served 2 years and 156 days towards his pension. He was granted an annuity of £10.00 from 27 February 1881 [13].

He initially moved to Camden Town and on 1st September 1881 joined the Corps of Commissionaires [12]. On discharge life moved fast for Farmer, on 9th October he married Emily Siggers in the Old Parish Church of St Pancreas, they would eventually have five sons and two daughters. Shortly after his marriage life became hard for Farmer; on 14th July 1901 he wrote from his address of 169 Wandsworth Bridge Road, Fulham to the Secretary of State for War asking for his pension of one shilling a day to be increased to two shillings. In this letter he stated that his trade was a painter and that during the winter the cold affected his wounds and he had to stop work often. It was recommended that the increase be sixpence per day. In October 1925 he again wrote, this time from 27 Rectory Road, Fulham and his pension underwent a further increase [13].

Joseph John Farmer lived to the age of 76 and died on 13th June 1930 in the Mount Vernon Hospital, Northwood. His must have suffered a painful death because the death certificate lists the cause of as Bronchopneumonia, Carcinoma of Pharynx and malignant glands of neck [15]. He was afforded a military funeral, his coffin being borne through the streets of Fulham on a gun carriage to his burial in Brompton Cemetery. A boulder from Majuba Mountain forms his headstone, being inscribed 'This rock, sent from the scene of the battle of Majuba Hill, South Africa, fought on the 27th February 1881 is dedicated to the memory of Joseph John Farmer, V.C. Army Hospital Corps. Died 30th June 1930, aged 76 years. Erected by his family, comrades of his Corps, together with Fulham and South African citizens. Rest in Peace.' [16]

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5. Cornish, Henry. Born Taunton, Somerset 2 June 1844. Ass. Surgeon 2 October 1866, Surgeon 10th Hussars, 21 September 1872, Surgeon AMD 1 March 1873. Surgeon Major 2 October 1878. Died 1 March 1881. The walking stick he used to waive a white flag on Majuba Mountain is now in the AMS Museum.
6. T. Fraser, 'Extract from private letters', *The Royal Engineer's Journal*, 1 June 1881
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8. Babington, Thomas. Born 22 July 1837. Ass. Surgeon, Staff 31 March 1864, 19th Hussars 12 October 1867, 31st Foot 28 October 1871. Surgeon AMD 1 March 1873, Surgeon Major 28 April 1876. Commended by Sir Evelyn Wood for services during the Boer Campaign. Died in London 2 April 1891.
9. Appendix VI to the Army Health Report for 1880 by Surgeon Major Thomas Babington, AMD
10. Ring, James. Surgeon AMD 30 September 1873, later Brigade Surgeon Lt Colonel 27 January 1897. Died Rawalpindi 16 October 1898. Commended by Sir Evelyn Wood.
11. Appendix VI to Army Health Report
12. Letter written by Farmer in VC File, AMS Museum
13. The National Archives, PIN71/2564, Farmer Pension File
14. The National Archives, WO32/7402 Farmer VC Citation
15. Death Certificate issued by the District of Uxbridge, Vol. 3a, page 24, July-September 1930
16. Army Medical Services Magazine, Vol. IX, No.2, 1957, pp. 60-1



Figure 3: L/Cpl Farmer's Medal Group on display in the AMS Museum