



Mafeking – the Place of Stones

Mafeking (pronounced Maf uh king) is the name the English colonists gave to a town in the dusty, sparsely populated southern tip of Africa. Its name means literally “place of stones”, because some huge stones near the town, reminded the early British colonist of Stonehenge. In 1899, Mafeking was a small town divided into a “black” African town of about 7500 and a “white” settlement of about 1350. It was an important railway siding on the line from the Cape to Rhodesia. This small town in South Africa, which sprang in the course of a few weeks from obscurity to fame (like Gettysburg, PA), played a pivotal role in the Boer War (1899-1902). This is the town where Baden-Powell gained fame as a military leader; and where he began to have the idea for Boy Scouts. To better understand the setting for this War, we need look back to colonization of South Africa.

The first Europeans to reach the Cape of Good Hope, toward the end of the 15th century, were Portuguese explorers seeking a sea route to the east. However, the Dutch East India Company established the first permanent European settlement in 1652, which led to an influx of Dutch settlers who became known as “Boers”, which is a Dutch term for peasant farmer. In 1787, South Africa was claimed as a colony of Great Britain.

The peaceful lifestyle that the Dutch Colonist had enjoyed for over two centuries was suddenly interrupted by the discovery of lucrative deposits of diamonds, gold and other minerals. Starting in 1866, “gold and diamond fever” was the impetus for the development of towns and cities in the interior. The multi-ethnic population of the goldfields was in constant conflict with the conservative government of the Boer farmers, who resented the influx of foreigners. This was the era when British imperialism reached its peak, and Great Britain wanted its share of fortune and control of these valuable minerals. Black nations were conquered and their lands annexed by both Boer republics and British Empire. The Boer republics were threatened; and as a result, the Boer War was declared on October 11, 1899. The public expected it to be over by Christmas, but it proved to be one of the longest (33 months), costliest (a half billion dollars), bloodiest (22,000 British, 25,000 Boers and 12,000 Africans lives), and humiliating wars that Great Britain had fought. The British Empire ultimately emerged victorious from the war.

The siege begins

As the war drew closer, Colonel Baden-Powell was commissioned to raise a force in Rhodesia to defend the border on the north of the Transvaal republic. He chose Mafeking as a supply base on the 800km frontier, and made moves to defend these supplies against

the Boers. In addition to defending the frontier, he was also told to keep the enemy occupied and away from the main British Army which was amassing in the south.

It was not clear why the British authorities would desire to hold this place, since it had no natural advantages to help the defense, but lies exposed in a widespread plain. A glance at the map shows that the railway line would easily be cut both to the north and south of the town, and the garrison was isolated at a point some two hundred and fifty miles from any reinforcements. Considering that the Boers could throw any strength of men or guns against the place, it seemed certain that if they seriously desired to take possession of it - they could do so. Under ordinary circumstances any force shut up at Mafeking was doomed to capture, but this expectation proved shortsighted, due to the extraordinary tenacity and resource of Baden-Powell, the officer in command. Through his leadership, the town acted as "bait" to the Boers, and occupied a large portion of the Boer Army, in a useless Siege. Thus buying time for the British to amass an army of 450,000 soldiers, as opposed to 80,000 Boers.

Until the declaration of war, B-P was prevented from making public preparations for war, for fear of offending the Boers and the Dutch living in the Cape. So his force could not recruit openly, or even arm itself adequately to defend the town.

'He could not call for volunteers, for instance, or arm the civilians, distribute ammunition or inquire into the supplies of the police openly - but he did these things nevertheless, secretly, with the connivance of Mafeking's British Mayor and Resident Commissioner. He could not fortify Canon Kopje, a height overlooking the town, but did it anyway under the pretence of building a rifle range. He could not requisition sandbags for fortifications, but collected all empty grain sacks usable for the purpose. He could not ask to have a couple of armored trains sent up from Cape Town, but had two constructed clandestinely in the railway yard at Mafeking by walling up long 'bogies' with steel rails.'

- Hillcourt in *Baden Powell: the two lives*

He did not even have decent armament for the defense: and the two guns he was sent from the Cape turned out to be obsolete 7-pounders. One was called 'Crooked-tail Sal'. Against this the Boers would bring the 94-pound siege gun known as Grietje, or 'Old Creechy' to the English townsfolk.

B-P's regiment consisted of 700 soldiers, to which he added 300 volunteers from the white men of Mafeking. He also armed 750 black Africans; although orders were that they could only defend their own land and not take part in the main defense. With this force he would have to defend a frontier around the town of 10 km, against a Boer force of more than 6000.

War was declared on October 11, 1899, and by October 13, the town was surrounded by the Boer forces, cut off by rail and telegraph from the outside world.



The Boer Army had taken the “Bait”, and Baden-Powell, out numbered 6 to 1, would have to improvise...

Baden-Powell's game of Bluff

When the siege of Mafeking began, the British regiment was outgunned, outnumbered, and cut off from the outside world by an army of more than 6000 Boer soldiers.

But Baden-Powell was in charge of the defense, and he was an expert at the "Game of Bluff".

The Butterfly Hunter

Many years before Mafeking, B-P had disguised himself as a butterfly hunter in Dalmatia, and spied on the forts and defenses of the enemy. Whenever he met an enemy soldier,

'with my sketch book in hand, I would ask innocently whether he had seen such-and-such a butterfly in the neighborhood, as I was anxious to catch one. Ninety-nine out of a hundred did not know one butterfly from another - any more than I did - so one was on fairly safe ground in that way, and they thoroughly sympathized with the mad Englishman who was hunting insects.'

- Baden-Powell, quoted by Hillcourt in *Baden Powell: the two lives of a hero*

What the officers did not notice was that Baden-Powell's sketches of butterfly wings included maps of their own forts and defenses...

Warning: landmines!

One of the first priorities was to prevent the Boers from storming the town, because they could easily overpower the flimsy Mafeking defense. But Baden-Powell deduced that the Boers were afraid of minefields. So, to confirm the Boer fears, B-P got groups of the town's inhabitants to carry metal boxes around the town, with dire warnings not to drop or bump them. Hundreds of these were buried on the outskirts of the town, and the areas marked with warnings for the inhabitants and cattle herds to stay clear. Then he warned the townsfolk to keep inside while the new mines were tested.

With everyone safe indoors, Major Panzera and I went out and stuck a stick of dynamite into an ant-bear hole. We lit a fuse and ran for cover until the thing went off, which it did with a splendid roar and a vast cloud of dust.

Out of the dust emerged a man with a bike who happened to be passing, and he pedaled off as hard as he could go for the Transvaal, eight miles away, where no doubt he told how by merely riding along the road he had hit off a murderous mine. The boxes were actually filled with nothing more dangerous than sand!

- Baden-Powell, quoted by Duncan Grinnell-Milne in *Mafeking*

Many searchlights

In the town when the siege began was a traveler who made acetylene lamps. Baden-Powell and Sergeant Moffatt put him to work in creating a searchlight: by soldering together two biscuit tins, and inserting an acetylene burner with a rubber tube supplying the gas. This was attached to a sharpened pole, which could be stuck into the ground.

The first night the searchlight was put into use. First it was shone over the Boer outposts on one side of the town, then rushed over and shone on the other side... before long, the Boers were convinced that an attack at night was hopeless because the whole town was surrounded by searchlights...

Unfortunately the searchlight did not last long: the supply of carbide was soon destroyed, either in a fire caused by a Boer shell, or by flooding after a rainstorm.

Two more guns

The same bluff was also used with the town's small supply of guns. B-P built gun emplacements around the town, and his soldiers would fire a gun from one of them, then rush it to another and fire it again. To the Boers it appeared that there were dozens of guns protecting the town.

But Mafeking soon added to its own limited heavy artillery: an ancient cannon was found being used as a gatepost. The gun was soon mounted and put into active service. It was named 'Lord Nelson', and fired a ten-pound cannon ball. A Major Godley commented that 'it bumped along the road exactly like a cricket board ... and one old Boer tried to field it with disastrous results to himself.'

Strangely enough, 'Lord Nelson' had the initials B.P. & Co. stamped on it. It had been cast in the foundry of Bailey & Pegg in 1770.

Another gun soon came into action: homemade in Mafeking, in a furnace made of a cistern lined with bricks. The gun was made of a 4-inch steel furnace pipe strengthened by rails bent into rings. The chassis came from an old threshing machine. Spherical shells were made by melting down scrap metal. The gun could fire an 8kg projectile almost 4000 meters.

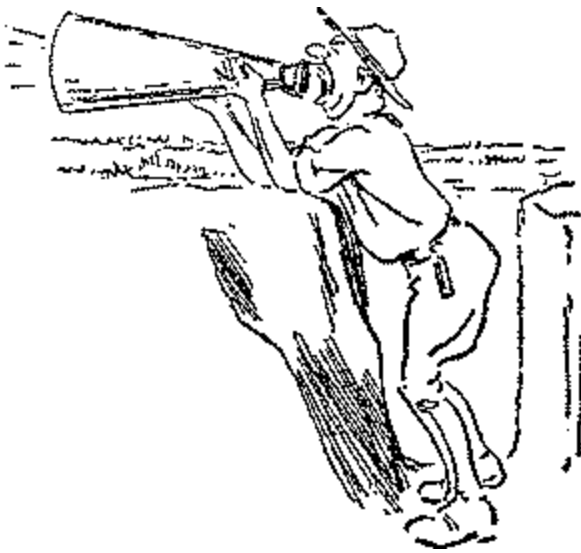
The gun was named 'The Wolf' in honor of Baden-Powell: *Impeesa*, the Wolf that never sleeps.

Barbed Wire

Soon B-P ran out of barbed wire to protect his soldiers' trenches. But he noticed that from a distance, all he could see was soldiers crawling under some invisible obstacle - he could not actually see the wire. So he told them to continue putting up posts and stringing imaginary wire between them. Then they would pretend to crawl under the new 'obstacles' they had erected. The enemy had no way of telling that there was no wire in place.

The following accounts of Baden-Powell's strategy come from his autobiography: Lesson from the Varsity Life, 1933

On the subject of disturbing the enemy at night I had a joyous little dodge of my own. I had a big megaphone made out of tin, with which I could proceed to one of our advance trenches in the night, and play a ventriloquist stunt upon the enemy, as I found that one's voice carried quite easily twelve hundred yards, and I would command an imaginary attacking party, giving in the voice of the officer orders to advance very silently, and asking Sergeant Jackson if his men were all ready.



Speak-easy!

"Sergeant Jackson" would then reply: "Tell Private Thomas to get his bayonet fixed," etc., etc.

Presently this would be responded to by tremendous rifle fire as the Boers took the alarm, and as I hoped called up reserves from their sleep in camp.

We always tried to make the night as lively as possible for our foes and as quiet as possible for ourselves, for the men needed all the rest they could get.

SNIPERS

We had a number of excellent rifle shots in the garrison and these men were detailed to creep out on to the veldt and to pick off gun layers in the enemy's batteries and officers, etc. They devised a method whereby each man went out during the night, carrying with him a trenching tool and a green window blind. Having arrived at the point where he expected to get a good view of the enemy's gun emplacement he would dig a pit for himself and when daylight came he would coil down in this with the window blind stretched over him to hide the hole, and quietly slumber there till the afternoon

Generally about sunset he would get to work, with the sun on his back and shining on the enemy. He would put in his shots very often with deadly accuracy, while being in the eye of the setting sun himself it was almost impossible for the enemy to locate him and therefore to retaliate.

We played this game also even with our guns, having moved them fairly near to the enemy's camp by night, lying doggo all day, and just as the sun was dipping over the horizon in the west the guns would let them have round after round for the few minutes left of daylight.

BOMBS

Another bright invention which necessity mothered upon us was—bombs.

When our enemy entrenched themselves in earthworks close to the town we pushed out small works towards them where our men could be under cover to harass them and eventually drive them back. To get to these works we had to dig deep pathways.

Thus by degrees we established a regular system of trenches quite on the lines of old-time warfare. Eventually we got to a point where we were only thirty yards from the enemy and here we stuck for some days till we thought of bombs or hand grenades.

These we made out of old meat or jam tins filled with dynamite or powder with a fuse attached, and we hurled them into the Boers' trenches. They soon replied with more artistically made hand grenades. But they did not like ours and they withdrew their advanced trench a few yards; and there we stuck for a fortnight at sixty-eight yards apart.

To Sergeant Page, who had done sea fishing from the rocks at East London, it occurred to "cast" bombs from the end of a fishing rod, which he did with great effect and a range of nearly a hundred yards.



The Mafeking Cadets

Mafeking was a small town in South Africa, and when the Boer army surrounded it, Baden-Powell had only a few hundred soldiers to defend it. Every soldier was vital for the firing line, and there were many jobs that needed doing, carrying messages, lookout duty, helping in the hospitals, and many others.

B-P put his chief-of-staff, Major Lord Edward Cecil, to work. He quickly formed a Cadet Corps of 18 boys, aged 9 and older. The Mafeking Cadets had their own uniform: khaki uniforms, wide-brimmed hats (with the brim turned up on one side), or caps.

Before long the boys were well trained in delivering messages between the town defenses, assist as orderlies, help in the hospitals, and act as lookouts to warn the forces when attacks were expected, and also to warn the townsfolk when the big Boer siege gun was aimed at the town, to give them a chance to take cover before the shell arrived.

Now the boys had something to do in the town rather than just running around collecting parts of shells that had exploded! They took to their new job with pride, and were soon a recognized part of the town defenses. The corps was soon enlarged from 18 to 40 boys.

At the beginning, the Cadet Corps was supplied with Donkeys that had been captured from the Boers. Boys who had to cover the great distances to the Outposts mounted these Donkeys and became proud "horsemen" (or better, "Donkeymen") But this did not last for long as gradually one donkey after the other was requisitioned by the army and disappeared into the soup kitchen. The poor creatures had to be killed for food. Conditions had become so severe that there was no wastage, as far as this "operation" was concerned, and the following crude, but true account may be of interest.

“The mane and tail were used for stuffing pillows and mattresses in the hospital (Victoria Hospital). The shoes were melted down for shells. The flesh became sausages. The skin and hoofs and head were boiled for hours and ultimately became a kind of brawn. The bones were used in soup.”

With the Donkeys gone, there was no Donkey Corps any more, so instead they used bicycles, and often had to deliver messages by bicycle under heavy fire. In one famous story, B-P warned one of the boys that he could get hit, and he replied 'I pedal so quick, sir, that they'll never catch me.'

Warner Goodyear was 12 years old when the shadow of a Siege with all its hardships fell upon him, his family and the citizens of Mafeking. But he was such an efficient, courageous boy that it was not long before the Colonel Baden-Powell recognized the excellent "Scout Leader" qualities of this youngster. He showed all the characteristics of a good "Scout"; Loyalty, Unselfishness, Enthusiasm, Inventiveness and Courage. At twelve years old, Goodyear was appointed Sergeant-Major of the Cadet corps. “Warner Goodyear did right good work," and he and his companions were "well deserved the

medals which they received at the end of the war." So wrote Baden-Powell in his book *Scouting for Boys*, and there is little doubt that the world-wide movement of Boy Scouts sprang from the little band of boys between the ages of 11 and 14, under the leadership of Warner Goodyear, who were employed as orderlies in lieu of men who could not be spared from the trenches during the siege.

When the town ran out of stamps during the siege, they needed a special design to print new stamps. Since the cadets delivered all the letters, the new design showed the leader of the Cadet Corps, Warner Goodyear, seated on his bicycle. After the siege, the special Mafeking stamps became collectors' items all over the British Empire.

Baden-Powell, himself taught the boys woodwork, camping and hiking whenever he could manage. When the boys were off-duty, for instance on Sundays, he arranged competitions which in type were very similar to competitions still familiar to Boy Scout of today. To tell the truth, Goodyear and his gang of boys were about the only ones who treated the Siege more as a game. As one of these Scouts once wrote to me: They were full of playful nonsense and just loved the excitement of doing errands and other duties while shells were whistling around.

The Relief of Mafeking

Mafeking was besieged for 217 days before the British army arrived to relieve the town. Back in Britain, the papers every day carried news of the "plucky defenders" under Baden-Powell... B-P... Impeesa, the wolf that never sleeps...

The town's defenders became the heroes of the British Empire, like a sports team taking on a much more powerful side, and still holding out against them. And B-P, the captain of the Mafeking side, became famous for his stories of bluff and courage - his jaunty messages like 'Four hours bombardment. One dog killed' made him a favorite of the British press, and a welcome change from the stories of defeats and frustration at the hands of the Boer forces.

When Britain heard that Mafeking had been relieved after 217 days, the news spread like wildfire, and huge street parties sprang up as thousands of people celebrated this important symbolic victory. That Mafeking had not surrendered was largely due to Baden-Powell's remarkable professionalism – the will to win, hidden behind the mask of good clean fun. B-P played to win, and he made his own rules as he went along. This was the strange type of victory – the avoidance of defeat – in which the people could take pride: how one man and a few soldiers, with little help from the War office, had fought against fearful odds and had, by English pluck and ingenuity, turned a hopeless situation into a triumph. Baden-Powell had not only given back Britain its self-confidence, but also dealt the Boers a crushing psychological blow by denying them Mafeking. No other British commander in the war had done so much with so little.

When B-P eventually returned from the war, he went first to Cape Town, South Africa, where he received a huge welcome from the crowds. At the port of Southampton, where he finally returned to Britain, the crowds again welcomed their returning hero.

The city of Mafeking was famous, and Baden-Powell was a hero in his own country. But who could guess that the most famous product of the siege would come from the group of boys who made up the Mafeking Cadets? Under the direction of their 12-year-old leader, Warner Goodyear, the boys of Mafeking were the models for the Scout movement, which soon grew to virtually every country of the world.

Sources:

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The Boer War; Thomas Pakenham

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Lessons from the Varsity of Life, 1933; Sir Robert Baden-Powell

U.S. Scouting Service Project; web: *www.usscouts.org*

Pine Tree Web Site: *www.pinetreeweb.com*

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