

"SPOILING HIS PAINT": A CHRONICLE OF ANGLO-BOER NAVAL CLASHES, 1901 - 1902

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'n Kroniek van Anglo-Boere-seeskermutselinge, 1901-1902

In hierdie artikel word die algemene historiese foute oor die aantal skermutselinge tussen Britse oorlogsskepe en Boere-kommando's en die invloed van die seemag op die Anglo-Boereoorlog bespreek. Die "burgeroorlog"-aspekte van die konflik in die Kaapkolonie (1901-1902) word behandel en die seeskermutselinge word in die konteks van die ras- en klasstryd in noordwes Kaapland geplaas. Die ontplooiing van vlooteenhede om die Boere-aanvalle te keer, is bespreek en 'n chronologie van die werklike insidente word beskryf. Daar word ook gepoog om die verskillende skepe en kommando-eenhede en leiers betrokke by elke insident te identifiseer. Die aksies is in hul breë historiese konteks geplaas en tentatiewe historiografiese gevolgtrekkings word gemaak.

The widespread historical errors concerning the number of skirmishes between British warships and Boer commandos and the influence of seapower on the course of the Anglo-Boer War are examined. The "civil war" aspect of the conflict in the Cape Colony in 1901-1902 is discussed and the naval skirmishes are situated in the context of the racial and class strife in the north-western Cape. The deployment of naval units to counteract the Boer raids on the Cape Colony is discussed and a chronology of the actual incidents is constructed. An attempt is also made to identify the various ships and commando units involved in each incident. The actions are placed in their broader historical context and tentative historiographical conclusions are drawn.

Introduction

In 1897, during the tense period after the Jameson Raid had soured Boer-British relations in South Africa, a squadron of British warships visited Delagoa Bay to "show the flag". This prompted the *Natal Mercury's* humorous columnist, "The Man in the Moon", to gleefully quote an undoubtedly fictitious Boer reaction to the Royal Navy's visit:

It was in some wild, scarce-known, dop-diluted dorp, a thousand miles from nowhere. How the news ever got there, goodness only knows. But it did, and the patriarch of the village was naturally called on for an opinion. "Yes," he said, "the only way to fight these damned English is at sea." "But how?" promptly interposed the usual discordant element in the village coterie. "We must buy a ship of our own," thundered the local Solomon, "and I will put my name down for £5!"¹

Regrettably for South African naval history, no *Vierkleur* - flying equivalent of the Confederate raider *Alabama*, ever preyed on British shipping during the Anglo-Boer War, but curiously enough, the *Natal Mercury's* "Oom Schalk Lourens"-like figure's prophesy of battles between the Boers and the British fleet was fulfilled, and not just once! These incidents are, however, mentioned but rarely, and even then, confusingly, in the history books and this had led to the perpetuation of several myths.

Natal Mercury, 7-8-1897, p. 6. The original account is from the *Cape Register*.

A recent example of the prevalence of the myths is the intriguing remark made by British military historian, Ian Knight, in a popular article on the battle at Port Natal in 1842. Describing the landing of the relief force, he suggests that the covering fire from the frigate HMS *Southampton* was "the first - and perhaps only? - broadside fired from a man-of-war against the Boers".² Popular historical literature on the Anglo-Boer War generally focuses on the dramatic battles and sieges, on the guerilla phase of the war, or on the concentration camps and mentions of the naval aspects of the war are few and far between, so Knight's question is entirely understandable.³

The rare references to clashes between British warships and Boer commandos which do appear in the literature are usually either inaccurate or incomplete and often make contradictory claims of a "unique" naval engagement between a commando and a gunboat. These claims have never been systematically analysed, nor have the naval clashes been placed in any broader context. The Anglo-Boer War has been rightly characterised as a civil war and while naval engagements symbolise the international aspects of the war, they occurred at times and in places where the civil, and racial, strife was at its most acute.⁴

This paper aims to correct the distorted historical record. The influence of seapower on the course of the Anglo-Boer War will be discussed, and the literature on Anglo-Boer naval clashes analysed, so that the sources for the persistent errors can be determined. The conflict in the Cape Colony during 1901 and 1902 will also be placed in its broader context. Thereafter the individual clashes will be identified, where and when they occurred, and the units and combatants involved from both sides will be identified wherever this is possible.

Seapower and the Anglo-Boer War: Brigades and blockade

Naval brigades were landed in South Africa from warships of the Royal Navy on several occasions during the 19th century, but there was rarely any opportunity for the ships themselves to get involved in action. Naval brigades took part in military actions during the Frontier Wars in the Eastern Cape, the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and during the First Anglo-Boer War of 1881. Warships played a noteworthy part during the Anglo-Zulu War, but that is another story. During the Majuba campaign in 1881 the action took place hundreds of miles inland and only the landed naval brigades were involved.

When the Second Anglo-Boer War broke out in October 1899, seamen, often called "bluejackets", and naval guns were rushed to the front lines in northern Natal

2. Ian Knight, 'Siege of Port Natal', *Medal News*, 26(1), Dec. 1989/Jan. 1990, pp. 15-17. This article prompted me to undertake the research for this present paper and for this I am most grateful to Ian Knight. A popular version of my preliminary findings, "Broadside against the Boers: Warships versus horsemen on the South African Coast" was published in *Medal News* 29(7), Aug. 1991, pp. 19-22. The present paper is a major revision of the preliminary findings. I also acknowledge, with thanks, the assistance of my wife, Anne Dominy, who proofread this paper and Ms Fiona Barbour of the McGregor Museum, Kimberley, for advice and comments. The assistance of other individuals and institutions is acknowledged at appropriate places, but the responsibility for any possible errors and misinterpretations remains mine alone.

E.g. Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), which is one of the most popular and influential books of fairly recent times on the Anglo-Boer War, makes virtually no mention of the Royal Navy, other than the naval brigades, and certainly does not mention any Anglo-Boer War naval clash.

The conflict is characterised as a civil war in L.S. Amery (ed.), *The Times history of the War in South Africa 1899-1900*, 1 (2nd ed., London, 1900), pp. 8-9. Amery was general editor of the entire series, but individual later volumes were edited by other writers, see below, fn. 13. Iain R. Smith in, 'The origins of the South African War (1899-1902): A Re-appraisal'. *South African Historical Journal*, 22, Nov. 1990, pp. 24-60, claims that both General Smuts and Lord Roberts acknowledged, at the time, that it was a civil war.

and in the northern Cape. As the situation worsened (from the British point of view), the defences of Durban were prepared to face a Boer attack, warships in the outer anchorage were put on the alert and naval guns were landed. These precautions were unnecessary as the Boer forces settled down to besiege Kimberley, Ladysmith and Mafeking. None of the seaports was seriously threatened.

The activities of the naval brigades during the first year or so of the war have received some attention from historians and several officers of the Royal Navy collaborated in a publication chronicling the experiences of the sailors ashore, even before the war was over.⁵ Some contemporary attention was given to the strategic role of the Royal Navy, which was the most powerful fleet in the world at the turn of the century and the pride of the British Empire. Leo Amery claims that the war afforded a "signal manifestation" of the "unquestioned supremacy of British seapower". Despite having an army of 200 000 men in South Africa, seapower kept the Empire as "invulnerable and as secure from the possibility of hostile European aggression as if those men had never been moved from their homes".⁶

A contemporary naval writer, Commander Charles Robinson, claims that British naval strength exerted "silent pressure" on foreign opinion which assured the "neutrality of the world" and the safe passage of thousand of troops across the sea: "That is the indirect but nevertheless most important share of the Navy in the war."⁷ Robinson also mentions the "direct share" provided by the patrols along the South African shore undertaken by the blockading squadron:

Theirs was perhaps the most arduous and least recognised work, demanding on some occasions diplomatic discretion and tact, any lack of which might easily have precipitated international complications, and it was fraught also with peril, for the ships were shorthanded, while often it was utterly unexciting and monotonous.⁸

The extent and diversity of naval activity, on land and sea, during the first year of the war is best depicted in a map in Jean's work which shows the movements of the naval brigades and the blockading ships. (*Figure 1*)

After the capture of Bloemfontein and Pretoria in 1900, the Boers adopted guerilla tactics to continue their opposition to British occupation. During this phase of the war the Royal Navy's Cape Squadron was still on "active service", although the major naval brigades were withdrawn to their ships. When President Paul Kruger sailed out of Delagoa Bay aboard the Dutch cruiser *Gelderland*, he passed a blockading British cruiser.⁹ In fact, Delagoa Bay was an important rendezvous for the Royal Navy and a few weeks before the President left for Europe, no fewer than five British warships were photographed at anchor together in the bay.¹⁰ These ships maintained patrols off the coast of Portuguese East Africa, particularly off the mouths of the Limpopo and Maputa rivers, to prevent gun running to the inland republics. It has been alleged that the coast of Portuguese East Africa represented the "only weak point" in the British blockade and that two ships, loaded with arms

5. T.T. Jeans (ed.), *Naval Brigades in the South African War 1899-1900*, (London, 1901). This early publication date accounts for the fact that the actions of ships in 1901-1902 were not recorded.

6. Amery, *Times history I*, p. 9.

7. Introduction to, Jeans, *Naval Brigades*, p. xix.

8. *Loc. cit.*

9. R.C. de Jong, 'President Kruger se reis met die *Gelderland*', *South African Journal of Cultural and Art History*, 2(4), 1988, pp. 242-250.

10. A double page photograph captioned 'A Portuguese port and South African scenes' shows HMSs *Forte*, *Magicienne*, *Thetis*, *Thrush* and *Widgeon*, together with a French gunboat and the Dutch cruiser *Friesland*, *The Navy and Army Illustrated X*, 9-6-1900, pp. 286-287. [The *Friesland* protected Dutch interest in the area for months before the arrival of the *Gelderland* - see De Jong, 'President Kruger se reis met die *Gelderland*', p. 243].

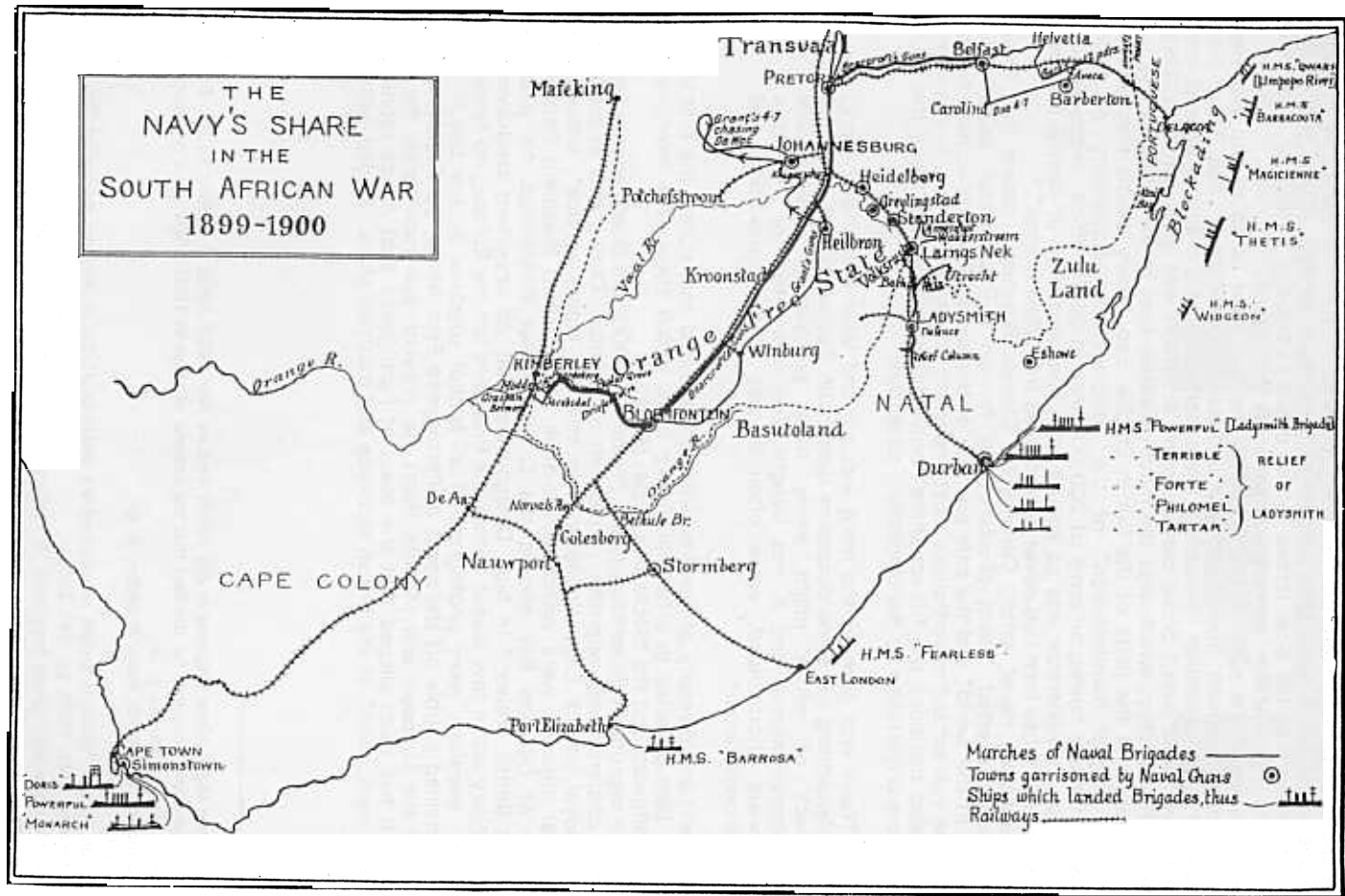


Figure 1. From: T.T. Jeans, *Naval Brigades in the South African War 1899-1902* (London, 1901).

for the Boers, managed to get through.¹¹

By the end of 1900, however, the Boer generals had realised that if they could not intensify pressure on the British in some way, their cause would ultimately be doomed.¹² They therefore planned a series of attacks on the Cape Colony in 1901 and 1902 to arouse the Afrikaners of the Cape to rebellion thus opening a new front against the British and providing a new source of recruits and supplies for the hard pressed commandos. There also seem to have been attempts to contact Boer supporters in Europe either through German South-West Africa or, more fancifully, by sea.¹³ Ironically, it was during these raids that the coastline and several minor ports of the Cape Colony were more seriously threatened than Durban had been during the major campaign of 1899.

Pakenham points out that in 1901 Lord Kitchener had to tie up large number of troops in garrisons at the Cape ports because most Cape Afrikaners seemed to sympathise with the republican cause.¹⁴ Rayne Kruger, in *Good-Bye Dolly Gray*, describes how Orange Free State commando leader and former judge, James B.M. Hertzog, who led the first major raid into the Cape Colony in late 1900 and early 1901, headed for Lambert's Bay where, rumour had it, he would meet a ship from Europe, loaded with munitions, supplies and volunteers for the Boer cause.¹⁵

Hertzog's raid prompted a severe scare in the Cape and it was linked with aggressive moves by other commandos, notably that led by Commandant Kritzinger.¹⁶ The naval manoeuvres brought about by these activities have been summarised by Captain Maurice Grant, who stresses the extent to which the British commanders were dependent upon the navy to plug the gaps in their extended lines across the Cape: HMS *Sybil*, "steaming up to Lambert's Bay," was "the true left flank of the British forces"; the flagship herself, HMS *Doris*, had to land sailors to defend Mossel Bay and provide a communications link with Col. Douglas Haig's isolated column while HMS *Widgeon* patrolled close inshore, beyond Plettenberg Bay, reassuring the coast dwellers "who had given themselves up for lost".¹⁷ Mossel Bay came under threat again in August 1901 when Cmdt. Scheepers's commando was operating in the vicinity, but it was deterred from attacking the port by presence of a gunboat, HMS *Bramble*, and by the well prepared local defences.¹⁸ The serious threat to the British military and political position in the Cape was therefore partly countered by utilising the one weapon which the Boers could not challenge - seapower (*Figure 2*). But the internal conflict within the Cape Colony nevertheless posed a major threat to the British position.

The civil war in the Cape Colony: 1901-1902

The "international" and the "civil war" aspects of the Anglo-Boer War are part of the

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11. A.E. Read, 'The History of the Royal Navy Brigade and its role in South African Wars 1880-1900', *Bulletin of the Simon's Town Historical Society*, 15(4), July 1989, pp. 127-140. For a lively contemporary account see 'Secret service in Portuguese East Africa: a river affected by Boer gun-runners', *Navy and Army Illustrated XVIII*, 22-2-1902, p. 570.
 12. For Smuts's views on the need for the Boers to raid the Cape Colony see Pakenham, *The Boer War*, pp. 520-521.
 13. Erskine Childers (ed.), *The Times history of the War in South Africa 1899-1902*, V (London, 1907), pp. 130-131.
 14. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 496.
 15. Rayne Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray: The story of the Boer War* (London, 1967), pp. 398-401.
 16. See C.R. de Wet, *Three years war*, (London, 1903), p. 245, for an account of Kritzinger's crossing of the Orange River into the Cape Colony and of Hertzog's favourable report on Boer prospects in the colony.
 17. M. Grant, *History of the War in South Africa IV* (London, 1910), pp. 70-72. This work is the British official history of the Anglo-Boer War, described by Pakenham as "saying too little" because the War Office Staff found it impossible to "write frankly" about various "regrettable incidents": *The Boer War*, p. xvi.
 18. H.W. Wilson, *After Pretoria: The Guerilla War*, II (The supplement to *With the flag to Pretoria*), (London, 1902), p. 711.

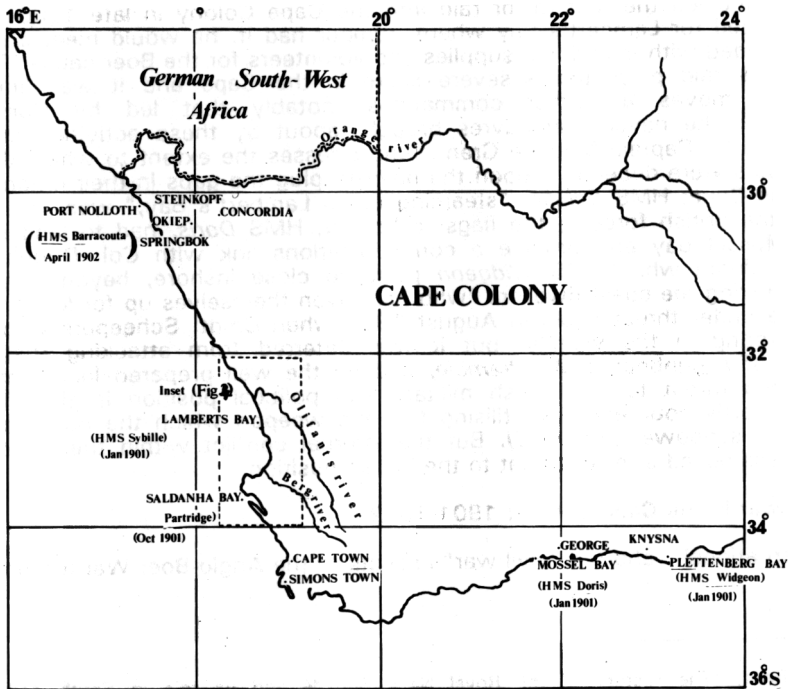


Figure 2. Naval activity off the Cape Coast 1901-1902
 Map by: Miss E. van den Bergh, Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg

same continuum of conflict. Iain Smith acknowledges the "path-breaking" work of Peter Warwick and other writers in demolishing the myth that the Anglo-Boer War was a "white-man's war". Smith also points out that, even within the white communities, neither Boer nor British populations were monolithic and that once the focus is moved away from the main battlefields into the countryside, "what emerges is a civil war which took on widely varying and often specifically local forms and meanings".¹⁹

The conflict in the Cape Colony, stimulated by the raids of Republican commandos, has been used by Warwick and more recently by Bill Nasson, to expose the roots of social, class and racial conflict which influenced the course of events for many years afterwards.²⁰ Some of the events which illustrate the harshness of social and racial conflict in the Cape during the commando raids need examination before the nexus between them and the naval clashes is explored.

The context for these events is best expressed by Nasson who claims that a major Republican objective was the assertion of "local political dominance and social and labour discipline over the black labouring class and peasantry in the countryside".²¹ Commandos ruthlessly conscripted labour and resources from the peasantry in the countryside through which they passed. The British tended to pay their labourers, although they also mistreated them on various occasions. It would be facile to argue that the British paid wages because they were nicer people; it is more true to say that they had a bureaucratic infrastructure in place through which workers could be recruited and paid. On the other hand the Boers were hunted intruders or local rebels who could only operate by living off the land and by moving on when a column of troops approached. As such they were ruthless with people who could betray their movements and some commando leaders shot, out of hand, pro-British blacks who were found in uniform and carrying weapons, or who were suspected of spying on the Boers.²²

One of the harsh events during the guerilla campaign in the Cape which attracted a great deal of attention at the time and which has been thoroughly explored in recent literature, is the murder, or execution, of Abraham Esau, a black artisan from Calvinia, in January 1901.²³ Esau was a staunchly pro-British leader in the local black community who led a parade to celebrate the relief of Mafeking in May 1900 and who organised a voluntary, semi-official militia to resist a Boer attack on Calvinia. This attack came on 7 January 1901 and by 13 January, the little town was securely held by a large commando led by General Hertzog and Commandant Charles Nieuwoudt. Esau became a symbol of resistance for local blacks, many of whom were enfranchised with full civil rights and who bitterly resented the swaggering attitude and brutality of the Republicans. Esau refused to disclose the whereabouts of an arms cache. He was publicly flogged by Veldcornet Van der Merwe on 15 January and executed on 5 February, after a further beating by Stephanus Strydom.²⁴ Local blacks retrieved his body which became a focus for

19. Smith, 'Origins of the S.A. War', pp. 24-25. See fn. 4 for full reference.

20. Peter Warwick, *Black people and the South African War: 1899-1902*, (Cambridge, 1983), see chapter 6 and especially pp. 119-124; see also Bill Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War: A black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902*, (Cambridge, 1991).

21. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War*, p. 102. Following Nasson's example, the term "black" is used in this paper to describe the members of the Khoisan-descended, or racially mixed underclasses of Namaqualand and the North-western Cape also described in the sources as "Baster", "coloured", "half-caste", "Hottentot" or "non-white".

22. Many of these killings were subsequently admitted by the Boers themselves. Much grim empirical detail is given in A. Wessels (ed.), 'Die oorlogsherinneringe van kommandant Jacob Petrus Neser, *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 7, Maart 1988, e.g. pp. 10, 74-75 & 86.

23. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War*. This paragraph is drawn from chapter 7, pp. 120-141.

24. *Ibid.* On p. 120 Nasson states that Esau was executed on 5 January, but this is clearly a misprint because the Boer occupation occurred on 13 January and on p. 121 the date of the execution is given as 5 February. The dates of 5 and 13 January are significant in the light of the incident at Lambert's Bay.

mourning and resistance. The following day a British column occupied Calvinia and Esau's body was given a military funeral. The propaganda value of his killing was later exploited by Lord Milner and by Cape Progressive politicians during the post-war period.

The ill-treatment and death of Abraham Esau has been described at some length because it involves some of the personalities who participated, both in the first skirmish with a British warship and in some of the "civil war" aspects of the strife which have been highlighted by Nasson. This forms part of a nexus between the "international" and the "civil" aspects of the war. One of the most important of the manifestations of civil war conditions in the north-western Cape was the resistance offered to the Republican commandos and local Boer rebels by black communities. Not only were these communities fighting enemy forces from hostile state, i.e. the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, they were also fighting their own landlords, i.e. the Cape rebels, with but grudging and ambiguous support from the colonial authorities.²⁵

The hostility between the blacks and the Afrikaner rebels and supporting republican invaders, is also mentioned in P.L. Scholtz's history of the Olifants river region. Scholtz states that many Afrikaners rose in rebellion because of the British policy of arming blacks and placing them in uniformed formations. The black and "Baster" Border Scouts "wou oor die blankes baasspeel" which encouraged many Afrikaners to support Manie Maritz, the major Republican leader in the region.²⁶ Maritz was more successful than Hertzog at fomenting rebellion, partly because Hertzog's men looted horses and sheep from the white farming community. Maritz, on the other hand, personally whipped his men for looting from whites.²⁷

Maritz has been accused of an act of atrocity at the Methodist Mission Station of Leliefontein in Namaqualand in January 1902. Deneys Reitz describes how he and General Smuts found the place "sacked and gutted", with dead "Hottentots, still clutching their ancient muzzle-loaders". Reitz adds that this was "Maritz's handiwork ... a ruthless and unjustifiable act", which infuriated Smuts.²⁸ According to Nasson, Maritz first attempted to negotiate, then threaten and finally bully the inhabitants of the mission into abandoning their lucrative support for the British.²⁹ He was resisted and driven off. Maritz returned with reinforcements and totally destroyed the mission station until it was "no longer a centre of production, nor even of habitation".³⁰ Destitute Leliefontein refugees roamed Namaqualand until many reached Port Nolloth and Lambert's Bay from whence ships of the Royal Navy transported them to Cape Town.³¹

As with the Calvinia incident, the Leliefontein incident thus provides a surprising link with the navy and with one of the clashes between British warships and Boer commandos which will be explored in greater depth below.

The "only" naval engagement during the war? - Sources in the popular historical literature

In *Shipwrecks and salvage in South Africa*, Malcolm Turner states that HMS *Sybille*,

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-126.

26. P.L. Scholtz, 'Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier 1660-1902', *Archives Yearbook for South African History*, 29(2), 1966, p. 163.

27. Hilary A. Shearing, 'The second invasion of the Cape Colony, 1901-1902 during Anglo-Boer War' (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1989), p. 26. Shearing does not actually mention whites, but this is apparent from the context and consistent with Maritz's overall attitudes.

28. Deneys Reitz, *Commando: A Boer journal of the Boer War* (London, 1968 - first published, 1929), pp. 298-199.

29. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's war*, pp. 108-112.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

31. *Loc. cit.*

the guardship at Lambert's Bay, was involved in the only "naval engagement" of the Anglo-Boer War when she "exchanged fire with Gen. J.B.M. Hertzog's men".³² This amplifies Rayne Kruger's remark that when Hertzog's men reached Lambert's Bay seeking a ship full of weapons and European volunteers, "A ship indeed waited for them. But it flew the White Ensign and greeted them with a salvo of shells".³³

Kruger's source is clearly the *Times History*. Erskine Childers, the editor of Vol. V of the *Times History*, was also the author of the Edwardian spy story *The Riddle of the Sands*, and subsequently an Irish nationalist martyr, who had a dramatic turn of phrase. He described the aim of Hertzog's campaign as being to meet a supply ship from Europe at Lambert's Bay, and thus reinforced, to raid the rich areas around Cape Town. Childers, with sublime imperial arrogance, recounts that when Hertzog's patrols reached Lambert's Bay in January 1901, indeed they saw a vessel, but unfortunately,

it flew the white ensign and saluted the raiders with a volley of shell as a reminder that they had reached the element where Britain, under Providence, was undisputed mistress.³⁴

An intriguing footnote names the ship as "HMS *Sybille*, wrecked shortly afterwards at this spot".³⁵ This will be discussed in more detail below.

In the dying months of the war General Jan Smuts was virtually the master of Namaqualand and he attacked the copper mining centres of Concordia, Springbok and Okiep. According to Byron Farwell, in *The Great Boer War*, while Smuts was planning this offensive, his men had time for relaxation and he took some 60 to 70 lads who had never seen the sea before, down to the coast to swim in the cold South Atlantic. They had a wild time riding their horses into the surf and partying on the beach. Farwell describes how a smaller group, under Commandant Maritz, rode to the sea further south and saw a British warship at anchor off Lambert's Bay. They happily fired on it and were harmlessly shelled in return. The Boers bolted, boasting that they had fought in the only naval action of the war. Farwell, however, reminds his readers of the incident at Lambert's Bay in January 1901 when Hertzog's men were shelled by a British warship.³⁶

Turner claims that HMS *Sybille's* action with the Boers was the only naval engagement of the war, yet Farwell mentions two incidents. Clearly, Farwell's source for Maritz's action is Deneys Reitz's vivid, and much quoted, first-hand account of Boer heroism in the Anglo-Boer War, *Commando*. Reitz gives a lively description of Smuts taking the farm lads to the sea and their antics "riding barebacked into the surf, shouting and laughing, whenever a rider and his mount were thrown headlong by the breakers".³⁷ Reitz also recounts an incident with a local black fisherman who "stared open-mouthed at the sight of armed Boers patrolling the water-line". Reitz accosted the man and asked in mock anger for the road to England, loudly claiming that the Boers were crossing to capture London! Back came the reply "My God, Baas, don't do it; the water is over your head here, and you will all be drowned".³⁸ Reitz repeated his story to Commandant Maritz who

32. Malcolm Turner, *Shipwrecks and salvage in South Africa - 1505 to the present* (Cape Town, 1988), p. 141.

33. Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray*, p. 401.

34. Childers, *Times history V*, pp. 130-131.

35. *Loc. cit.* See also Marischal Murray, *Ships and South Africa* (London, 1933), p. 75, which repeats the account from the *Times history V*.

36. Byron Farwell, *The Great Boer War* (London, 1976), pp. 347-348. Johann du Pisani, 'Boere val Kaap binne onder genl. Smuts', *Knapsak* 3(2), Julie 1991, pp. 16-17, claims that Smuts took his men to see the ocean in an effort to raise their morale which had reached a low point. Du Pisani mistakenly claims that the men were taken to Lambert's Bay which is unlikely as the harbour was well defended and Reitz clearly indicates that the incident took place elsewhere.

37. Reitz, *Commando*, p. 296.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 296-297.

told him that two of his men had,

recently ridden on to the beach at Lambert's Bay, where an English cruiser lay at anchor close in-shore. Dismounting they opened fire. Their bullets pattered harmlessly against the armoured side of the warship, and when the crew turned a gun on them they made haste to disappear into the sandhills, but, on their return to their commando, they boasted that they had fought the only naval action of the war.³⁹

Here, in a well-known set of contemporary reminiscences, is a claim for the "only" naval action of the Anglo-Boer War. While Farwell's description of the "action" is a virtual paraphrase of Reitz's words, he does draw a distinction between the action involving HMS *Sybille*, and the action undertaken by Commandant Maritz. It should also be noted that Reitz's account is secondhand!

In an Afrikaans newspaper article published in 1979, S. Vercuiel claims that Maritz's commando attacked Saldanha Bay on 15 October 1901 and fired at a British gunboat, HMS *Partridge*. The ship returned the fire and shelled the dunes until the Boers withdrew. The article concludes with a statement that HMS *Partridge* was the "only" ship to be attacked by Boers during the Anglo-Boer War.⁴⁰ This incident is also described in Jose Burman's history of Saldanha Bay which states that the bay has the "distinction" of having been the scene of "probably the only naval incident of the Boer War".⁴¹

It can be seen, therefore, that the popular published histories give contradictory accounts of the "only" Anglo-Boer naval action. Local lore is no clearer. The curator of the Sandveld Museum at Lambert's Bay kindly provided me with a colourful account of how the Boers crept through the scrub and fired at HMS *Sybille*, killing a Royal Marine. The victim, Corporal Smallwood, is buried in the Lambert's Bay cemetery, next to Able Seaman Jones who died when the *Sybille* was wrecked. This is a fascinating story, marred unfortunately by the fact that the local tradition has Jan Smuts as the leader of the Boer commando.⁴² Smuts did not arrive on the west coast until nearly a year later! It also appears that Cpl. Smallwood was not a Royal Marine from the *Sybille*, but a member of the 3rd Battalion, South Staffordshire Regiment, which manned the line of blockhouses between Lambert's Bay and Clanwilliam.⁴³

Robin Knox-Johnston's maritime history claims that Lambert's Bay has the "distinction" of having been the scene of a naval engagement during the Anglo-Boer War when Hertzog's men attempted to make contact with a ship carrying supplies. Knox-Johnston repeats the familiar account of a commando arriving on the coast where they saw a ship, HMS *Sybille*, which promptly opened fire. The Boers galloped away and returned to the Orange Free State, although Knox-Johnston adds that the Boers must have "smiled grimly" a few days later when they heard that the

39. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

40. *Beeld*, 13-10-1979 (Supplement to ...). One of Vercuiel's sources seems to have been Wilson, *After Pretoria: The Guerilla War, II*, pp. 763-764. The sketch of HMS *Partridge* used by *Beeld* appears on p. 763. A Boer fighter named Vercuiel is mentioned by Ben Bouwer, one of the leaders of Smuts's commando. See O.J.O. Ferreira (ed.), *Memoirs of General Ben Bouwer: as written by P.J. le Riche* (Pretoria, 1980), p. 232. "Vercuiel" is also spelt "Vercueil" in the sources; the former version is used in this paper.

41. J. Burman and S. Levin, *Saldanha Bay story* (Cape Town, 1974), p. 116.

42. Personal communication from Mr. G. Dun, Sandveld Museumvereniging, undated. I am most grateful to Mr. and Mrs. D. Groenewald of Pietermaritzburg for visiting the cemetery in Lambert's Bay and for transcribing the headstones on Jones and Smallwood's graves for me. Regrettably, the inscription on Smallwood's cross is virtually illegible and the date of death if not visible.

43. Personal communication from Prof. Arthur Davey, Onrus River, Cape Province, 17-2-1992. Prof. Davey's source is "W.G. 270: Secretary British War Graves Committee, National Monuments Council, to A. Davey, 27-1-1984". I am indebted to Prof. Davey for this information. The proximity of Smallwood's grave to Jones's grave seems to have caused the confusion and the association with the *Sybille*.

Sybill had been wrecked near Lambert's Bay.⁴⁴ He also mentions the incident between Maritz's men and HMS *Partridge* in Saldanha Bay in October 1901.⁴⁵ Knox-Johnston and Farwell are the only writers to mention more than one Anglo-Boer naval incident, although neither of them contextualises the events nor offers any conclusions for their readers.

But this is not all: Louis Creswicke's *South Africa and the Transvaal War*, a popular contemporary work,⁴⁶ mentions naval activity on the West Coast towards the end of the Anglo-Boer War, but, while painting the most glowing picture of British activities, glosses over Hertzog's raid into the Cape without mentioning either the Lambert's Bay or the Saldanha Bay incident. Creswicke does, however, mention the name of a warship, HMS *Barracouta*, in connection with General Jan Smuts's campaign in Namaqualand in 1902.⁴⁷ This prompts the question as to whether there were any more Anglo-Boer naval clashes besides those already mentioned?

Before this question can be answered it is necessary to focus more specifically on the above-mentioned incidents in order to establish, as far as possible, what took place, where, when and who was involved. Once this is achieved, some other, seemingly obscure, incidents fall into their proper context.

Lambert's Bay: HMS *Sybill* versus Hertzog's men

The principal published source for the clash between HMS *Sybill* and a Boer commando at Lambert's Bay in January 1901 is Childer's Vol. V of the *Times History*, which has been discussed already. Grant's description of the *Sybill* as the "true left flank of the British forces" has also been mentioned, but Grant fails to mention the subsequent action with the Boer force, or the sinking of the *Sybill*.⁴⁸ The movements of Hertzog's force have been comprehensively traced by Hilary Shearing who claims that Hertzog had caught the British by surprise and his men "rode virtually unchecked from the Orange Free State, across the sparsely occupied north-west Cape, and a few even reached Lambert's Bay on the Atlantic Ocean".⁴⁹ The Royal Navy's side of the skirmish will be dealt with before the Boer's side of the story is analysed.

HMS *Sybill* was a relatively new, 2nd class, twin screw, cruiser, of 3 400 tons, commanded by Captain Hugh P. Williams RN. She had a top speed of 20 knots and was first commissioned in 1895.⁵⁰ She had only served on the Cape station for a few days before she was wrecked, although the actual date of her arrival in South African waters is unclear. Humphries quotes the *Cape Times Weekly Edition* of 23 January 1901 which claims that the *Sybill* had arrived the previous Saturday (referring to Sat. 12 January) from Britain to relieve HMS *Barossa* on the station.⁵¹ On the other hand, according to the *Slipping & Mooring Book* for the Simon's Town naval dockyard, the *Sybill* arrived in the harbour on 5 January when she coaled and spent the following day taking stores and provisions. HMS *Sybill* and the tiny torpedo boat *T.B. No. 6* then "slipped from moorings and proceeded to sea" on 7 January.⁵²

44. Robin Knox-Johnston, *The Cape of Good Hope: A maritime history* (London, 1989), p. 114. Murray, in *Ships and South Africa*, p. 75, declares that the Boers heard of the fate of the *Sybill* with "grim satisfaction".

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

46. Louis Creswicke, *South Africa and the Transvaal War VII* (Manchester, n.d.).

47. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

48. See above and fn. 17.

49. Shearing, 'The second invasion of the Cape Colony', p. 19. See also D.S.G. van Lill, *Ned. Geref. Gemeente Vanrhynsdorp 1877-1977* (Vanrhynsdorp, 1977), p. 105 - cited by Shearing.

50. The information concerning HMS *Sybill* is drawn from Peter Humphries, 'HMS *Sybill* - wrecked at Lambert's Bay 16 January 1901'. *Bulletin of the Simon's Town Historical Society*, 13(3), Jan. 1985, pp. 84-99. Humphries has reproduced various contemporary newspaper articles concerning the fate of the *Sybill* in this article.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

52. Copies of extracts from these books have been supplied to me by the Simon's Town Museum. I am most grateful to the curator, Mrs. E. Biggs, for her kind and generous assistance.

The crisis which sent the ships hurrying to sea was the advance of Hertzog's men towards the Cape west coast. This provoked a great deal of official concern and the British were clearly on their guard against any attempt from the sea to land supplies for the Boers. The newly appointed Customs Officer at St. Helena Bay, Mr. Birchfield, was warned that he had to prevent the illegal importation of arms and ammunition and be on his guard against any vessels "hovering about the coast, communicating with the shore by means of boats or signals, or whose movements are otherwise suspicious".⁵³ The alarm felt by the British was justified, the London *Times* printed a Reuters telegram, dated 10 January, which claimed that Hertzog was "50 miles east of Clan William" and that "*Sybille* has anchored off Lambert's Bay and landed bluejackets and guns".⁵⁴

Lambert's Bay was well defended by the *Sybille*'s naval brigade and by the local militia. The local forces were probably members of the Colonial Defence Force (C.D.F.) which the Cape Government began raising in December 1900 to help repel Hertzog's invasion. It included town guards, scouts and district mounted troops. Blacks clamoured to join up and appealed for weapons from the reluctant colonial authorities so that they could defend their homes.⁵⁵ Lambert's Bay appears to have had many black auxiliaries among its C.D.F. defenders. The farm Rietvlei near the town was protected by a corrugated iron blockhouse manned by black troops supported by bluejackets from the *Sybille*.⁵⁶

One of the minor mysteries surrounding the clash between the *Sybille* and the Boers is the identity of the commander of the Boer force. His name is not mentioned in any of the standard English-language sources, but Shearing's thesis contains a very useful and highly detailed series of maps tracing the movements of the various commandos. On the first of these, the column which moved to Lambert's Bay is shown to be that commanded by Commandant Nieuwoudt.⁵⁷ This is confirmed by Commandant Japie Nesor who states that from Calvinia the commando moved on to Vanrhynsdorp, "van waar 'n afdeling van ons kommando tot by Lambert'sbaai aan die see was".⁵⁸ André Wessels, the editor of Nesor's memoirs, states, in a footnote, that Hertzog sent Nieuwoudt on from Vanrhynsdorp into the Sandveld and that a detachment of his men went to Lambert's Bay where HMS *Sybille* was at anchor. She was fired at by some of the Boers, and returned the fire with a few shells.⁵⁹ Wessels cites two contemporary published sources, one being the *Times History*, Vol. V, as his authorities. The other is the German-language war reminiscences of Commandant A.G. de Wet and others who were involved in the conflict in the Cape. They confirm the sudden descent of Nieuwoudt's column on Lambert's Bay, and the shock that this gave the British, but do not mention a clash with a warship.⁶⁰

Childers does not give a specific date for the clash between the *Sybille* and Hertzog's men, but the incident had to predate the storm which wrecked the ship in the early hours of 16 January. Neither Nesor nor Shearing give a date for the arrival of the Boers at Lambert's Bay, but it is possible to narrow down the period when the action with the *Sybille* would have taken place by studying other texts. According to Nasson, Cmdt. Charles Nieuwoudt entered Calvinia on 11 January and

53. Simon's Town Museum, *Birchfield Papers* (hereafter B.P.), "Instructions to Officer proceeding to St. Helena Bay", 12-1-1901. I once again acknowledge the kindness of the Curator, Mrs. Biggs, in sending me copies of these papers.

54. *The Times*, Sat. 12-1-1901, p. 5. *The Times* does not mention a clash at Lambert's Bay, but the edition of Fri. 18-1-1901 reports the loss of the *Sybille* on p. 4.

55. Shearing, 'The second invasion of the Cape Colony', pp. 66-67.

56. Personal communication: Mr. G. Dun, Sandveld Museumvereniging, Lambert's Bay, n.d.

57. Shearing, 'The second invasion of the Cape Colony', map (in rear pocket): 'Raid of the commando under Gen. J.B.M. Hertzog into the Cape Colony from Sandrift 16-12-1900 until return 26-02-1901'.

58. Wessels, 'Oorlogsherinneringe van kmdt. Nesor', p. 59.

59. *Loc. cit.* See fn. 169.

60. A.[G.] de Wet, H. van Doornik and G.C. du Plessis, *Die Buren in der Kapkolonie im Kriege mit England* (Munich, c. 1902), p. 92. (This work is Part IV of a series *Im Kampf um Südafrika*).

on the following day he launched a manhunt in the town which captured Abraham Esau.⁶¹ Nasson's "Charles Nieuwoudt" is the same man as the Cmdt. Tielman Karl Nieuwoudt identified by Shearing whom she traces from Lambert's Bay to his rendezvous with Hertzog in Calvinia.⁶² The Reuters telegram, published in *The Times*, giving the arrival of the *Sybilie* at Lambert's Bay is dated 10 January so it seems that she arrived at the port and landed her naval detachment in the nick of time. It is therefore most probable that the action between the *Sybilie* and Nieuwoudt's men took place on either 10 or 11 January, perhaps while the ship was close inshore landing her naval detachment.

What actually happened at Lambert's Bay on 10 of 11 January 1901 is difficult to determine given the paucity of first hand information. It would appear from later reminiscences, however, that there was neither a major clash nor even a noteworthy skirmish. There is a second-hand account by the widow of Sarel van der Merwe, one of Nieuwoudt's lieutenants, which describes a raid on Lambert's Bay and the capture of civilian loot.⁶³ The Boer party consisted of 26 youngsters and they surrounded a social gathering in the village and seized clothing and valuables, including a pile of much needed raincoats. There were no fatalities on either side, but one British, or colonial, soldier was wounded. This account is the only plausible corroboration, traced thus far, of Childers's claim that the *Sybilie* fired on the Boers, who were busy looting the local populace ashore. This seems to be the substance behind Childers' pompous statement that the *Sybilie* greeted the enemy with a "volley of shell" proving that Britain, "under Providence" was "undisputed mistress" of the sea.⁶⁴ It does not appear from Mrs. Van der Merwe's account that the Boers bothered to return the fire.⁶⁵

There are two other possible reasons for the lack of a clear record of the exchange of shots between the *Sybilie* and Nieuwoudt's party. From the British side the event was totally overshadowed by the dramatic loss of the ship a few days later and from the Boer side the minor incident was part of a major disappointment best forgotten. Nieuwoudt had failed to make contact with a ship carrying reinforcements from Europe, if such a ship ever existed, and he had been driven away from Lambert's Bay by the Royal Navy and the local Town Guard - many of whom were black. Nieuwoudt's disappointment here may provide an explanation for his subsequent actions at Calvinia. Shearing claims that despite Nieuwoudt's bad reputation at Calvinia he was a "model of propriety" at Vanrhynsdorp, and gives Van Lill's history of the local Dutch Reformed Church as her authority.⁶⁶ While Van Lill's claim cannot necessarily be taken at face value, it is worth pointing out that Nieuwoudt was at Vanrhynsdorp *en route* to Lambert's Bay and that the brutality in Calvinia was *after* the engagement with the *Sybilie*.

After their return to Calvinia from Lambert's Bay, Nieuwoudt and his men had to deal with Abraham Esau, the pro-British black activist who had refused to divulge the whereabouts of an arms cache which, since the European weapons and reinforcements had not materialised, the Boers probably needed for their own use. Did the frustration of Lambert's Bay and the increasingly desperate need for supplies play a part in provoking acts of such great brutality by Nieuwoudt and his men? The answer remains speculation.

61. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War*, p. 129.

62. Shearing, 'The second invasion of the Cape Colony', see p. 229 and map of Hertzog's raid. According to Nasson's notes he has used contemporary British documents which accounts for the Anglicisation of Nieuwoudt's Christian names. See also Jacques Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902* (Pretoria, 1990), p. 47, which has a very short note on Nieuwoudt but without a mention of the Lambert's Bay expedition.

63. Johann Bekker, 'Jasse vir die Boere', *Die Huisgenoot*, 3-6-1949. I am indebted to Mrs. Hilary Shearing, "Layton" Farm, Beaufort West, for this reference. Personal communication from Mrs. Shearing, 22-2-1992.

64. See above, fn. 34.

65. Bekker, 'Jasse vir die Boere'. I am indebted to Mrs. Shearing for this interpretation.

66. Shearing, 'The second invasion of the Cape Colony', p. 22, citing Van Lill, *Ned. Geref. Gemeente Vanrhynsdorp 1877-1977*, p. 105.

As for the fate of the *Sybille*, on the night of 15/16 January 1901, while Captain Williams was ashore and the ship was being temporarily commanded by Lieutenant Holland, there was a severe storm and Holland decided to put to sea and ride it out away from the dangerous shore. He did not make allowances for the heavy seas and a strong current which sent the ship drifting south. The lights of a farm were mistaken for those of Lambert's Bay and the *Sybille* went aground opposite Steenbokfontein a few miles south of Lambert's Bay. One sailor, Able Seaman Jones, was killed, when a huge wave crushed him against a gun turret, but the rest of the crew got safely ashore. The wreck was visited by the Admiral who had sailed hastily up to Lambert's Bay in his flagship, HMS *Doris*, and the shipwrecked crew made valiant efforts to save stores from the *Sybille* and even salvaged most of her guns.⁶⁷

One of the puzzling factors about the sinking of the *Sybille* is why the captain was ashore when the ship went aground? According to Humphries, Lambert's Bay was being utilised as a military base, and this necessitated the presence ashore of Capt. Williams and about fifty members of the crew when the storm which sank the *Sybille* blew up.⁶⁸ When a large detachment of sailors and marines are landed it is acceptable for the captain to accompany the shore party, particularly once the enemy has been encountered.⁶⁹

Saldanha Bay: HMS *Partridge* versus Maritz's men

Deneys Reitz claimed that the "only" naval engagement of the Anglo-Boer War was between Maritz's men and a British gunboat at Lambert's Bay, but as has been shown above, there is well authenticated evidence for the clash having occurred in Saldanha Bay.

After Hertzog's commando withdrew to the Orange Free State in February 1901, there was a lull in the fighting in the Cape Colony, but by the middle of the year the rebels in the north-west had been rallied by Commandant Manie Maritz. As spring approached he planned a strike southwards across the Berg river towards the lush farms of the Boland. The British military commander, General French, organised columns to pursue the Boers and strongpoints to protect farms and settlements. All the military activity placed a great strain on the harbour facilities at Cape Town and ships were forced to wait for days and even weeks before they could unload. For this reason the harbour and naval authorities began sending ships to anchor in Saldanha Bay where they could tranship their cargo to barges in sheltered conditions.⁷⁰ This increased the strategic importance of the Bay and made it a more tempting target for Maritz.

The Royal Navy assigned HMS *Partridge*, a 1st class gunboat of 755 tons, to the protection of the West Coast and Saldanha Bay. Her captain, Lieutenant Eustace Leatham RN, became friendly with Mr. Birchfield, the customs officer at St. Helena Bay, and corresponded regularly with him as the *Partridge* passed up and down the coast. It is clear from the correspondence that strict controls were maintained on all movements in the coastal areas and, as Maritz began his raids in August, a rigid system of passes was instituted and the commandant of Malmesbury informed Birch-

67. Humphries gives a full account of the *Sybille*'s disaster and quotes extensively from newspaper accounts of the subsequent court-martial. Published accounts include those of Turner, *Shipwrecks and salvage*, p. 141, and Murray, *Ships and South Africa*, pp. 75-76. Wilson, *After Pretoria: The Guerilla War*, 1, p. 280, reproduces an indistinct sketch of the wreck of the *Sybille*, but also makes no mention of an action with a Boer commando.

68. Humphries, 'HMS *Sybille* - wrecked at Lambert's Bay', p. 96.

69. E.g. the naval brigade from HMS *Powerful* which was besieged in Ladysmith, 200 km+ from the sea, was commanded by Captain Lambton, the ship's commanding officer. See Gerald Sharp, *The siege of Ladysmith*, (Cape Town, 1976), pp. 153-154.

70. Burman and Levin, *The Saldanha Bay story*, pp. 115-116.

field that "every precaution is necessary" and that "inconvenience to the public at the present time is of secondary importance".⁷¹

Maritz's spring campaign in the Boland is not clearly described in the sources and his own memoirs, published privately in 1939, are merely a selection of incidents from his life, presented for propaganda purposes at a time when his elderly mind was filled with stern rightwing-nationalist, and even neo-Nazi, thoughts.⁷² His recollections of his Boland campaign are therefore episodic and not very detailed. He does however, describe seizing the blockhouse at Velddrif at St. Helena Bay, which must have scared Birchfield!⁷³ He then went on to seize hundreds of horses and a large group of British prisoners near Piketberg and threatened Malmesbury.⁷⁴ The London *Times* reported receiving a telegram from Lord Kitchener, dated 14 October, which complacently stated that a "small southward movement towards Piquetberg is being dealt with by General French".⁷⁵ Maritz entered Hopefield on 10 October, seized the money in the Post Office, locked the local police in their own cells and collected all the available horses. A patrol under Veld Cornet Thys Boonzaaier was sent to raid Vredenberg and continued on to Saldanha Bay.⁷⁶ Maritz claims that the patrol he sent to Saldanha Bay was led by Boonzaaier and P. van Niekerk and adds that it is not generally known that they attacked the "Engelse vloot".⁷⁷

According to Vercuiel, Boonzaaier's patrol attacked Saldanha Bay on 15 October 1901, a date which tallies with the telegram of 16 October sent from Cape Town to the London *Times* reporting a Boer attack on Saldanha Bay and Hopefield.⁷⁸ Burman describes how panic spread through the Saldanha Bay settlement as the Boers approached and the inhabitants fled from their homes into fishing boats and crossed the bay to the safety of the opposite shore. Thus, he adds, "the thread of 'discretion rather than valour' continued to run through the story of Saldanha Bay".⁷⁹ Boonzaaier's men raided the store in Hoedjes Bay and totally disrupted the transhipment of cargo, firing on the vessel involved in the process until HMS *Partridge* appeared in the Bay.⁸⁰ The *Partridge* had been moored at Simon's Town between 8 and 10 October when she put to sea, doubtless in response to the appearance of Maritz's men at St. Helena Bay.⁸¹

Vercuiel describes how Lt. Leatham searched the shoreline through his binoculars and spotted the Boer commando sheltering behind high sanddunes. They promptly opened fire on the gunboat with their Mausers. Leatham ordered his second-in-command, Lt. Richard Bridgeman, to return the fire with the ship's four-inch guns. At this Boonzaaier prudently withdrew his patrol and rejoined Maritz's men inland. Vercuiel adds that a detachment of sailors and Royal Marines was hastily landed at Lambert's Bay in case Maritz decided to attack this port as well.⁸² Within a few days a strong British force had driven Maritz back north into the

71. B.P., Chas. O. Caher to Collector of Customs, St. Helena Bay, 6-8-1901.

72. Manie Maritz, *My lewe en strewe* (Pretoria, 1939?). I am indebted to the staff of the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein for this reference and for the later reference to the memoirs of Ben Bouwer. See also Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere*, pp. 42-43, which confirms Maritz's neo-Nazi views in later life, but which does not mention the Saldanha Bay incident.

73. Maritz, *My lewe en strewe*, p. 46.

74. Vercuiel, 'Kaapse rebelle skiet op Britse skip', see fn. 37.

75. *Times*, 16-10-1901, p. 3.

76. Burman and Levin, *The Saldanha Bay story*, p. 115.

77. Maritz, *My lewe en strewe*, p. 46. Malan, *Die Boere offisiere*, does not mention either Boonzaaier or Van Niekerk.

78. *Times*, Fri., 18-10-1901, p. 3.

79. Burman and Levin, *The Saldanha Bay story*, p. 116. Vercuiel claims that the inhabitants of Saldanha Bay were misled by British propaganda which alleged that Maritz was the cruellest of the Boer generals and that this is why they fled in a small steam launch.

80. *Times*, Mon. 21-10-1901, p. 3: Telegram dated 19-10-1901 - the *Partridge* is not named in the report.

81. Information from: *Slipping & Mooring Book* (Copy).

82. Vercuiel, 'Kaapse rebelle skiet op Britse skip'.

Olifants river valley, although he managed to retire with all his booty and captured horses.⁸³ Apparently Maritz sent a defiant message to Leatham as he retired, claiming that although the Boer republics did not have their own fleet of warships, they nevertheless had soldiers who were brave enough to attack any British warship, even if only with small arms.⁸⁴ The *Natal Mercury's* patriarch from the "dop-diluted dorp" would have cheered heartily!

Maritz later met and combined with Smuts's commando and their movements up the West Coast continued to alarm the British. In November, Leatham warned Birchfield that 200 Boers had been seen near Clanwilliam heading north-east: "So the same old game is on again & 'hide & seek' commences again I suppose", Leatham added gloomily. The *Partridge* was sent to Lambert's Bay as part of the British countermove.⁸⁵ Early in the New Year Maritz attacked Leliefontein and Smuts, in an unrelated effort to counter the low morale among his men, organised the beach party referred to by Reitz. But, Smuts's party crowd was not the only group of Boers to approach the coast in January 1902 and this leads to the consideration of yet another "naval engagement".

Doringbaai: The mystery incident

Smuts had two senior semi-independent commanders during his campaign in the north-western Cape and Namaqualand, Maritz, whose doings have already been discussed in detail, and Ben Bouwer, a highly capable officer who was promoted to "Veggeneral" by Smuts during the Namaqualand campaign.⁸⁶ Bouwer was also a staunch Smuts-man (and remained so during the First World War). While Smuts was moving north into Namaqualand in January in preparation for his assault on the copper mining centres, Bouwer was left in command of a rearguard in the Olifants river - Clanwilliam area. Bouwer's memoirs are very much more reliable than Maritz's propagandistic reminiscences.⁸⁷ He describes how on 18 January 1902 he led a patrol to "Doorn Bay" (Doringbaai on modern maps) where there was a small British outpost manned by a local Town Guard detachment and where the Boers found a British warship anchored nearly a mile (or some 1500m) offshore. Bouwer's men left their horses hidden behind the sanddunes and stealthily crept down to some rocks at the water's edge:

After placing ourselves comfortably we opened fire on it. They scorned to do anything at first, but afterwards threw over a few shells, which, as they had no idea where we were, banged harmlessly into the dunes behind us. We continued our fire and later she hauled up her anchor and steamed away. It would of course have been mere madness to attempt sending men ashore in boats to attack us. I don't know whether we are entitled to claim a naval victory. She went to Lambert's Bay and we returned to Windhoek near Urionskraal.

I suppose her captain found we were spoiling his paint. I should like to have heard what he had to say about it.⁸⁸

83. Scholtz, 'Historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier', pp. 165-166. See also Maritz, *My lewe en strewes*, pp. 46-47.

84. Veruciel, "Kaapse rebelle".

85. B.P.: Leatham to Birchfield, 16-11-1901.

86. Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere*, p. 20.

87. Ferreira, *Memoirs of General Ben Bouwer*, (see above, fn. 40). Mrs. Shearing has also traced Tottie Krige's Diary among the Smuts Papers at the State Archives in Pretoria (Ref. A.1, Vol. 341/1), which she believes is a manuscript transcribed version of Ben Bouwer's original war diary in Dutch.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 233. The remark about spoiling the ship's paint has been used in the title of this paper.

In the Tottie Krige/Ben Bouwer manuscript diary, there is an entry for 17 January, "Wij schoten op oorlogs schip. Schip vluchte richting Lambert'sbaai".⁸⁹ This supports the statement in Ben Bower's memoirs, but, as with most Boer sources, the ship is not named.

Ferreira, in footnotes which refer to Vercuiel's *Beeld* article, tentatively identifies the ship as HMS *Partridge*.⁹⁰ This is unlikely as, in a letter to Birchfield, sent shortly before Christmas 1901, Leatham regretted that the *Partridge* would not be serving on the west coast any longer as "tomorrow we are off up the East Coast to Zanzibar & shall probably be up there until April". He concluded: "I really believe you have seen the last of the Boers now."⁹¹ Information from the Simon's Town dockyard confirms Leatham's letter. The *Partridge* slipped No. 5 mooring on 21 December and "proceeded to sea". There is no further information on her until she arrived back in port on 19 April 1902 and ten days later she was placed in quarantine, which may indicate that some tropical disease had broken out aboard.⁹² There are limits to the value of the dockyard records as, while they account for the presence of ships in dock, they do not account for what ships were doing when they were not in Simon's Town harbour.

On 11 January Maritz attacked Leliefontein and the little west coast ports were soon filled with refugees who were rescued by ships of the Royal Navy. This increased naval activity would account for the presence of a vessel close inshore as Doringbaai, but the problem is to identify the ship. According to information received from the Cape Archives Depot, there were several British warships operating off the west coast in early January 1902 viz ... HMS's *Barracouta*, *Beagle*, *Maggie*, *Monarch* and *Philomel*.⁹³ Creswicke claimed that HMS *Barracouta* was involved on the west coast during Smuts's Namaqualand campaign.⁹⁴ It appears, however, from the dockyard records that the *Barracouta* was moored at Simon's Town from 11 January until 25 February 1902, possibly undergoing a refit.⁹⁵ If this is correct, then she could not have been involved in the clash with Bouwer's commando at Doringbaai on 17 or 18 January 1902. The only one of the other vessels, mentioned above, which is recorded as having arrived in port from the west coast at the right time is HMS *Monarch* (Figure 3). She arrived at Simon's Town on 23 January 1902, her previous port of call having been Lambert's Bay.⁹⁶

That the *Monarch* was the ship fired at by Ben Bouwer and his men is not certain. In the first place she was an elderly battleship of 8 845 tons (commanded by Captain C.H. Bayley RN), not the sort of vessel that one would expect to have been used for inshore operations under normal circumstances. In the second place, her logbook has no entries for the period between 13 and 20 January, when she is recorded at Saldanha Bay.⁹⁷ She was, however, in roughly the right place at the right time, unlike the *Barracouta* or the *Partridge* and no other British warships are listed as having arrived in Cape Town or Simon's Town from the West Coast between 18 January and early February 1902.⁹⁸

89. Smuts Papers, A.1, Vol. 341/1/ Citation from transcription by Mrs. Shearing. Personal communication 22-2-1992.

90. *Ibid.*, pp. 232-233: See Ferreira's fns. 22 and 24.

91. B.P.: Leatham to Birchfield, 20-12-1901.

92. *Slipping & Mooring Book*, (Copy).

93. Personal communication received from Chief, Cape Archives Depot, 15-2-1991. I am most grateful to Mr. D.B. McLennan for his assistance.

94. See above and fns. 46 and 47.

95. *Slipping & Mooring Book*.

96. Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town: Archives of the Secretary, Cape Town Chamber of Commerce: *Register of Arrivals and Departures of vessels, Cape Town and Simon's Bay: 1901-1910*, Vol. C.C. 3/7/1/5, p. 16. I am indebted to Mr. McLennan for this reference.

97. I am indebted to Mr. Ian Knight for this information. Mr. Knight examined the *Monarch's* logbook in the British Public Record Office at Kew in Richmond, Surrey, on my behalf.

98. C.C. 3/7/1/5, p. 16.

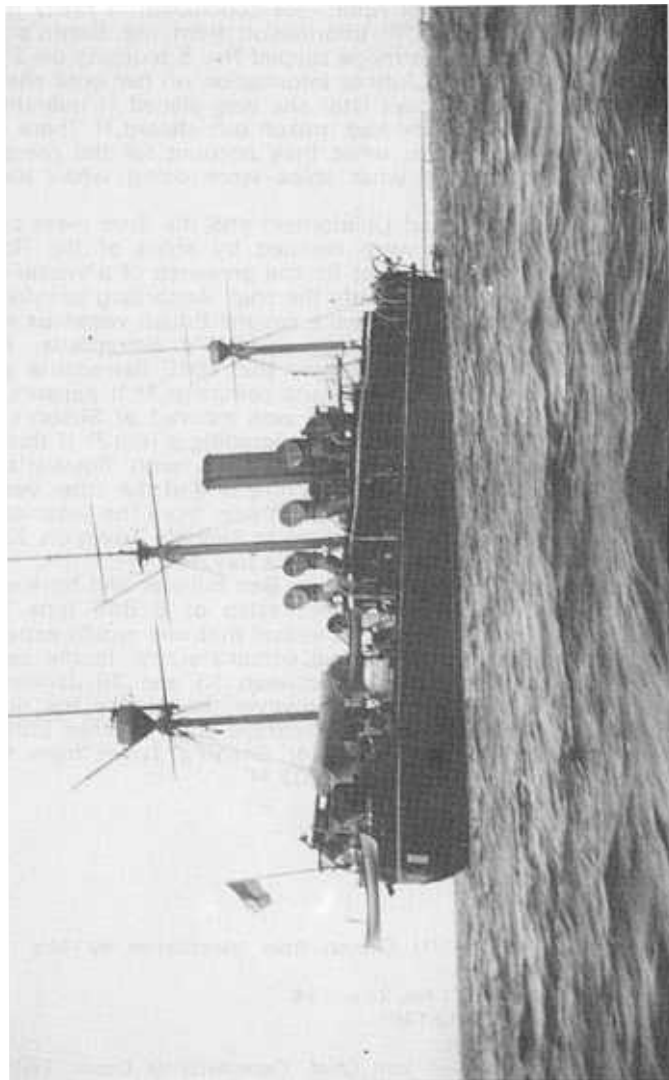


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There are no reports on the action in the London *Times*, which contains far fewer reports on the war in South Africa in 1902, overall, than it did the previous year. Most of its news in early 1902 related to the preparations for the coronation of the new king, Edward VII. The other reliable source of information is the British military intelligence reports, but while Bouver's movements are reported, there is no mention of a naval clash.⁹⁹ This may, of course, be a case of army prejudice against the navy or simply a lack of communication between the services. The army did, however, need the navy again towards the end of the war and HMS *Barracouta*, a 3rd class cruiser of 1 580 tons commanded by Commander S.H.B. Ash, played an important role during Smuts's campaign in Namaqualand.

HMS *Barracouta* at Port Nolloth: The last naval brigade

In March 1902 Smuts decided to attack the copper mining centres in Namaqualand and overwhelmed the weakly garrisoned centres of Springbok and Concordia, the latter town surrendering without firing a shot! Okiep, the main centre of the Cape Copper Mining Company, was stoutly defended by Lieutenant-Colonel W. Shelton with a mixed garrison of Namaqualand Border Scouts and the local Town Guard, which was drawn from the black community and from white miners, a handful of British Militia and a small detachment of Cape Garrison Artillery.

Port Nolloth, the copper mining port of Namaqualand was threatened, but HMS *Barracouta*, was in the harbour. Ash landed a party of bluejackets with a ship's gun and this small naval brigade assisted the Namaqualand Border Scouts, under Captain M. MacDonald, in securing the approaches to the port. This enabled a relief force for Okiep to be sent by sea from Cape Town and saved the British from an arduous march across the desert. This force was sent inland from Port Nolloth along the railway line to attack the Boers at Steinkopf, but was initially repulsed.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, Lord Kitchener and General Botha were setting the stage for peace negotiations and at the end of April, Smuts, with the irrepressible young Deneys Reitz as his orderly, departed under a flag of truce from Port Nolloth for the meeting of Boer leaders at Vereeniging. Smuts and Reitz sailed aboard the troopship *Lake Erie* and arrived in Cape Town after a voyage of five days. Here they were transferred to HMS *Monarch* in Simon's Bay and "spent a week in comfort, for officers and men vied with each other in their efforts to welcome us".¹⁰¹

Okiep was relieved on 4 May 1902 and Smuts's force, without its leader and awaiting the outcome of the negotiations, withdrew rather than face the relieving column in a set-piece battle. Lt.-Col. Shelton had held Okiep under siege for thirty days. On 31 May 1902, the Boer leaders and Lords Kitchener and Milner signed the terms of the Peace of Vereeniging which ended the Anglo-Boer War. The Namaqualand campaign was just about the last flurry in the war.

Conclusion: Chronology and confusion

Three clashes between warships and horsemen have been identified and described (*Figure 4*). While each incident seems trivial in itself, it forms part of a chain of more important events and each influenced the wider scene in unanticipated ways. When they are examined as part of this pattern and not simply in isolation, their relative importance is increased and the historiographical confusion becomes very evident.

99. State Archives, Pretoria: *War Office Records (1896-1902)*, (Microfilms and Photocopies): Photocopies, F.K. 1959 - "Summary of Intelligence 13/12/1901 - 25/5/1902". The reports for the weeks ending 20 Jan., 2 Feb. & 9 Feb. 1902 (pp. 52, 74 and 85) describe Bouver as moving around the Lambert's Bay area looting horses. The *War Office Records* are frustratingly incomplete both because of destructive "weeding" and because of W.W. II bomb damage (See the introduction to the inventory).

100. Grant, *History of the War in S.A.*, IV, pp. 468-472.

101. Reitz, *Commando*, p. 318.

1. Hertzog vs HMS Sybille: 10–11 Jan 1901 ?
2. Maritz vs HMS Partridge: 15 Oct 1901
3. Boucher vs HMS Monarch ? : 18 Jan 1902

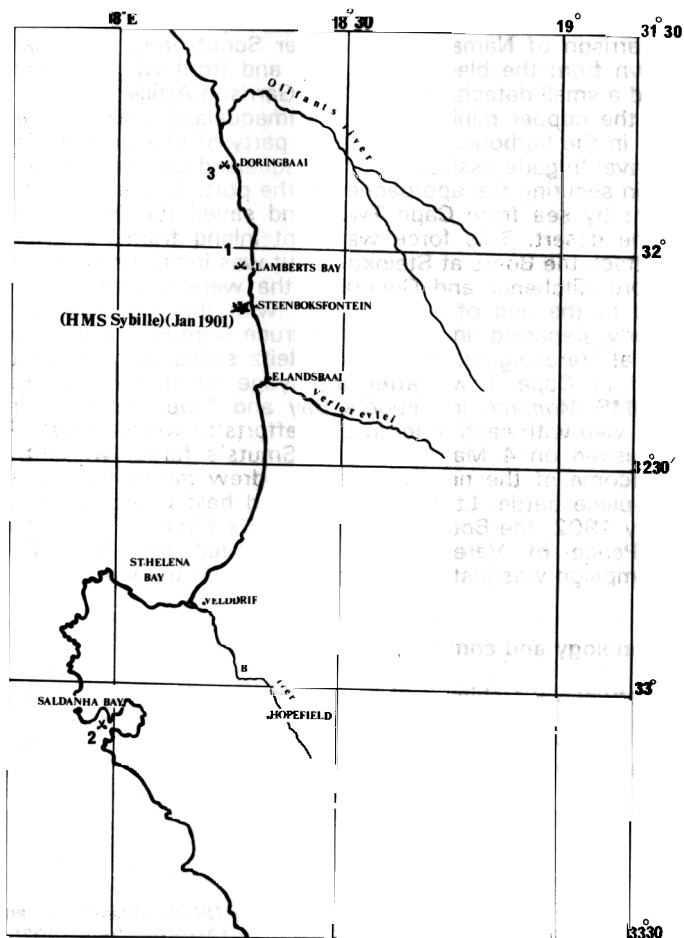


Figure 4. Anglo-Boer naval engagements: Inset to Figure 2.
 Map by: Miss E. van den Bergh, Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg.

As stated, the principal published source for the incident at Lambert's Bay in January 1901, is the *Times History*, Vol. V. It also seems to be the only contemporary source and is quoted by Farwell, Knox-Johnson, Rayne Kruger and Murray. Knox-Johnston, however, quotes Murray's repetition from Childers, rather than Childers himself. The presence of the *Sybil* at Lambert's Bay is corroborated by the London *Times* itself, but a clash with Nieuwoudt's men is not mentioned. Nesper's memoirs, and those of Cmdt. De Wet *et al*, confirm the presence of Nieuwoudt's men at Lambert's Bay, but do not mention a clash with the *Sybil*. Bekker's account of Mrs. Van der Merwe's reminiscences suggests that the *Sybil* did fire on the Boers, but also fails to date the incident. By using Nasson's work, the *Times* and the Simon's Town dockyard records, it has been possible to suggest that the clash between Nieuwoudt's men and the *Sybil* occurred on 10 or 11 January 1901. There is also a possible link between the Lambert's Bay incident and the better known killing of Abraham Esau in Calvinia.

The Saldanha Bay incident in October 1901 is the most accurately described in the literature, although, as with the Lambert's Bay incident, it too has been erroneously claimed to be the "only" naval engagement. Vercuiel's date of 15 October for the incident if verified by the reports in the London *Times*. The identity of the combatants on both sides is known and correctly recorded. What is historiographically interesting, however, is that Reitz, in his over-quoted and seemingly highly authoritative memoirs, *Commando*, conflates the Lambert's Bay and Saldanha Bay incidents and this has been the cause of much subsequent confusion in the literature.

The only sources for the incident at Doringbaai on 17 or 18 January 1901, are Bouwer's memoirs, including the possible version given by Tottie Krige, which are generally reliable and give a great deal of circumstantial detail about the incident, including a date (with minimal variations between the Krige manuscript and the later publication), which lends credibility to his account. The intelligence reports confirm that he was in the general area when he claims that the incident took place. The dockyard records and the registers of shipping movements also confirm that HMS *Monarch* was in the same general area at the same time, although her log is blank for the crucial dates. It is surprising that Reitz did not mention the incident at Doringbaai as he was accommodated in the *Monarch* for a week and claims to have been on excellent terms with her officers and crew. Surely, they would have mentioned the skirmish to him if indeed it had occurred? It is remotely possible that Reitz has conflated all *three* of the naval skirmishes and not just the Lambert's Bay and Saldanha Bay actions. The *Monarch's* involvement in the Doringbaai incident can therefore be regarded as no more than highly probable until more evidence is uncovered.

As far as is known HMS *Barracouta* never fired on the Boers and neither Port Nolloth, nor any of the coves on the coast of Namaqualand, north of Doringbaai, was the scene of a naval skirmish. The landing of the *Barracouta's* naval brigade, the last such brigade of the Anglo-Boer War, has been generally neglected and this paper has at least focused some attention on this forgotten topic. The paper should also serve as a further reminder to historians to reserve judgement on the accuracy of their sources, even when as seductive and apparently reliable as Reitz's *Commando*.

This paper has sought to identify and correct the confusion in the sources, as far as is possible. Furthermore by locating the naval skirmishes in the context of the civil war raging in the Cape at the time, it seeks to further demolish the myth of the "white man's war" and to associate an international aspect of the conflict with the historical experiences of the ordinary people of all races and classes.