

## M'PISANA'S FORT

M'Pisana's Fort was built by members of Steinaecker's Horse in the latter half of 1900. Steinaecker's Horse was a British unit and their duty was to patrol the Portuguese border to prevent any communication between die Boers on the battlefield and the Boer Government members who had fled to Lourenco Marques with President Kruger. M'Pisana's Fort was one of their most northerly outposts and lies about ten miles to the north of Bushbuch Ridge in the Eastern Transvaal Lowveld. Steinaecker had his headquarters at Komatipoort.

The Fort was named M'Pisana's because of its close proximity to the village of the Shangaan chief, M'Pisana.

Of the Fort itself, little remains. The trenches surrounding the Fort are still distinguishable and the graves of two British soldiers are close to where the Fort stood.

The graves are those of R. Luxford and Captain H. S. Francis. The latter was the Officer In Charge of the twenty-five soldiers stationed at the Fort. He was killed in action on the 6th August 1901. Of R. Luxford, who died on the 11th June 1901, little is known. He may have been killed by one of the small Boer parties which were active in the area at the time, or he may have succumbed to malaria.

Both graves have been opened up. This was probably done by witch doctors who wanted their bones for "muti" or by fortune seekers who hoped to find the odd coins or possessions buried with the two men.

The Fort was attacked on the 6th August 1901 by a Commando of Boers under the leadership of Commandant Piet Moll. The events leading to this attack have been described by General Ben Viljoen in his book *My Reminiscences Of The Anglo-Boer War*.\*

Towards the end of July 1901, General Viljoen left his Commando on the Highveld to visit and tighten up the discipline of a number of small Commandos in the Lydenburg and Nelspruit areas. He met two Commandos, one under Commandant Piet Moll, and the other under Commandant D. Schoeman, at a disused hotel twelve miles west of Nelspruit. He met these with the intention of attacking the British-held Crocodile Poort Station.

On the 1st August, Boer scouts reported that the English were driving a large herd of stolen cattle in the direction of Komatipoort. General Viljoen held the column at M'Pisana's responsible for the majority of the thieving which had been taking place. He therefore decided to switch his attack to M'Pisana's instead of the Station.

Viljoen assembled a Commando of one hundred Boers under Commandant Moll and set out for the Fort on the 3rd or 4th of August.

In his book, General Viljoen describes the occupants of the Fort as being: "a corp formed of all the desperados and vagabonds to be scraped together from isolated places in the north, including kaffir storekeepers, smugglers, spies and scoundrels of every description, commanded by a character of the name of . . . who or what this gentleman was I have never been able to discover, but judging by his work and the men underhim, he must have been a second Musolino." The gentle-

\*Chapter xxxix, p. 407-415. Published by Hood, Douglas & Howard, 1902.

man Viljoen refers to was Captain H. S. "Farmer" Francis. Viljoen continues; "From all accounts the primary occupation of this corp appears to be looting and the kaffir attached to it were used for scouting, fighting and worse."

On Monday, the 6th of August the Boer's attacked the Fort in the early morning. They met with stronger resistance than expected. The British soldiers fired volley after volley from the trenches surrounding the Fort. Nevertheless, the Boers rushed steadily on and the defenders were forced to abandon the trenches and retreat into the Fort from where they continued firing through loopholes in the walls. At this stage, several Boers had already fallen, and Commandant Moll with a group of Boers rushed the twelve foot wall in an attempt to enter the Fort. Heavy fire was directed at them, and seven men including Moll, fell severely wounded. Undaunted, Captain Malan who was next in command of the division, led another assault on the wall and a number of burghers succeeded in getting into the Fort. A desperate resistance followed, during which Captain Francis was mortally wounded and the defenders were forced to surrender.

The battle was barely over when a Boer sentry, who had been posted on top of the wall sighted a strong Commando of Natives approaching the Fort. The Boers repelled the attack without loss. A large number of Natives were killed. This counter-attack had been led by Chief M'Pisana who was friendly with the occupants of the Fort.

The English losses were that of Captain Francis and two wounded, whilst a large number of Natives were wounded and killed. On the Boer side, six men were killed and thirteen, including Moll, were severely wounded. The Boers captured twenty-four whites and about fifty Natives. General Viljoen says: "The captured kaffirs were tried by court martial and each punished according to his deserts."

Inside the captured Fort, the official records of the column were found. These contained systematic entries of their activities. All loot captured items had been divided evenly between the members, and with each haul, twenty-five percent was deducted for the British Government.

At this stage General Viljoen was uncertain as to whether his European captives were a recognised branch of the British Army, if not, he wished to treat them as common brigands and would probably have court martialled them. He approached Lord Kitchener, who confirmed that the captives were members of the British Forces. He then wanted to know whether Lord Kitchener would take action against the men. This Kitchener refused to do.

This correspondence between Viljoen and the British led to a meeting between himself and General Bindon Blood in Lydenburg on the 27th of August. After this meeting the twenty-four captives were handed over to the British, after having promised never to return to their barbaric form of life.

Peter R. Kruger.