

Tony Stimson

'Trooper Albert Page: an Aldgate Boy in the South African War,' in *The Flinders Column – Publication of the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society*, No. 130, December 2012.

In October 2012 I spent three weeks in South Africa touring Australian battlefield sites in the 1899-1902 Anglo-Boer War, research for a book I am writing on the 4th South Australian Imperial Bushmen contingent. A mounted infantry unit, 4SAIB was the fourth contingent to leave our shores in the empire's battle to subdue the two small Boer republics of Transvaal and Orange Free State.

It was in a small military cemetery at the foot of Diamond Hill that I stumbled across the grave of Trooper Albert Page, 4SAIB, best known to Hills people for the fountain commemorating his memory in Steamroller Park, Stirling.

A coachman and an Aldgate boy, Page was 19 when he enlisted in April 1900. He served in 'B' squadron under Captain A.E.M. Norton DSO, my grandfather, and 'by his good conduct and soldierly qualities in the field,' the *Register* said, 'gained the respect of everyone in the regiment.'ⁱ His death at Rhenoster Kop, in heavy fighting on the morning of 29 November 1900, was deeply mourned by his mates in 4SAIB and at home.

His last letter to his mother, written on 10 November, arrived home after the Premier told Stephen Page and his wife that their son had been killed in action.ⁱⁱ It is a cheery, detailed and vivid account of a long day of fighting near Bothaville on 5 November, appropriately enough Guy Fawkes Day, which ended when he was holed up in a sheep kraal with half a dozen comrades and an officer. It was a hot encounter, 'Guy Fawkes with vengeance':

'Directly you put up your head, crack, crack came the explosive bullets at you from over 100 Boers, who were well planted in a garden with a high stone wall around it, about 200 yards distant from us. We couldn't shift them out of it with shell and rifle fire.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Page survived that skirmish and recounted with glee the booty they took that day when the Boers, citizen soldiers, folded at the prospect of a bayonet charge: 128 prisoners, 15 oxen and mule wagons, 20 Cape carts, mules, oxen and horses, a Maxim gun and several artillery pieces. 'I must now close,' he ended. 'Remember me to everyone. I hope you are all well, as I am at present. I hope I shall be able to write again shortly.'^{iv} He had reason to think he would write again. His contingent had been heavily engaged for much of the time since first coming into contact with the enemy on 26 June and he had come through unscathed. 'Altogether I have been under fire eleven times,' he had told his mother proudly as recently as 16 August.^v

But his luck ran out at Rhenoster Kop, one of 4SAIB's fiercest encounters in its 12-month tour of duty. On 8 December Captain H.L.D Wilson, officer commanding 'A' Squadron, and in charge of the South Australians when Page fell, wrote to the young man's father from nearby Rietfontein to explain what had happened.

'He was a fine lad and did his duty as a true soldier should. On the 29th, early in the morning, just about half-past 5 o'clock, we were ordered to go on to a ridge in the firing line, and we marched off, knowing that we should have a big fight, and your brave boy was one of the first to fall. It is a sad time for you, but your son died with honour, and died fighting the battles of his country. You may well be proud of him, and we, his comrades, send you our most heartfelt sympathy.'^{vi}

Wilson was more forthcoming in a letter to his wife written a few days earlier. They had turned out at 2.30 am, 'had a bit of breakfast' and then moved out in the quiet stillness of the early morning. At 5.30 am a staff officer told him that 'the Queenslanders were in a tight place on the ridge in front of us' and ordered the South Australians to advance in support. They dismounted about 400 metres below the ridgeline and marched towards the crest. 'For God's sake, sir, lie down,' shouted an officer ahead, and at that moment Sergeant McCabe, next to Wilson, was shot dead as he urged his men on. To Wilson's horror as he reached the crest, the Boers were barely 300 yards distant, safe behind boulders one trooper thought as big as tramcars, and the South Australians were caught in open grass, exposed to 'a perfect sheet of lead and explosive bullets' not only from the front but also from more distant flanking fire. Moments later he heard that Trooper Page had died moments after being shot at the other end of the firing line. It was just 6 am. ^{vii}

They were to remain on the ridge, refusing to pull back, lying flat, pinned down by enemy fire, and with little food and water in blazing heat, until evening. Somehow no other South Australians were killed but other units suffered heavily. When morning broke the Boers had vanished, fearful as ever of encirclement. Later that day Lt. Colonel Rowell, 'who we all worship for his real good and daring generalship in leading us into action,' Trooper Wilkins wrote in a letter to a friend, 'and the never-tiring way that he looks after us,' read the funeral service as the two men were buried, 'the tears...rolling down his cheeks and his voice...husky trying to choke his grief.'^{viii} Trooper W.H. Hanley too wrote to his brother.

'We have just buried poor Page and McCabe. Every soldier available turned out, carrying side arms. Our good old colonel read the burial service and I never saw a man break up more than he did. I never thought he could finish it. He was terribly moved, and I can tell you there was more than one wet eye among the men. The bodies were just sewn up in their blankets and lowered into the hole. The men handled them as carefully as if they were wounded. They lowered them as gently as babies, and when filling the graves up they let the clay roll gently down the side as though they may hurt.'^{ix}

Three days later the South Australians were still camped nearby. They were grateful for the breather; it gave them a chance to catch up on lost sleep and tidy up the two graves. 'We have put little wooden crosses on both South Australian graves,' Hanley wrote on 3 December, 'and decorated the graves with Mauser and our own cartridge cases. We built a mound and put a few wild plants and laid stones around. I can tell you it does credit to those left behind.' Visiting the graves General Paget thought so too. For Hanley it was now all about revenge. The Boers had used explosive bullets and dum-dums. The wounds these bullets caused were sickening, tearing the flesh and shattering bone. 'The Boers ought to be riddled with bullets when we get them instead of being taken prisoner.'^x

His long letter, with its graphic description of the fighting and Page's burial, was published in the Adelaide press on 9 January 1901, and four weeks later a public meeting was held in Stirling to consider how best to perpetuate the young man's memory. There was unanimous agreement to proceed with the construction of a memorial, a committee was set up to raise the money and determine what form it should take, and a Mr. P. McNamara started the appeal with a donation of £2/3/6. The evening ended when Mr. W.C. Torode presented the Aldgate School with an enlarged photograph of the late trooper, 'artistically illuminated by Miss M. Torode.' This T.G. Roberts, master at the school, accepted with thanks.^{xi}

Chaired by Torode, the committee set to work to raise funds and determine what form the memorial should take. At length it was decided '...to erect a drinking fountain at the corner of Avenue-road and the main road to Aldgate,' close to the Stirling Institute and within easy walking distance of the railway station, and Sir Samuel Way, Lieutenant Governor, unveiled it before a large and curious crowd on 31 January 1903.

A landmark for Stirling, the fountain was already an attraction, a photograph of it having appeared in the press a week a week earlier. Grotto shaped, it was built of rockery stone hewn from the Murray River cliffs and positioned on a Murray River granite base, and a white tablet set in the stone bore the words, 'Erected by the public, in memory of Trooper Albert S. Page. Killed in action November 29, 1900, at Rietfontein, South Africa.' In all it had cost £63/13/1, not including gifts of material and labour. The greater part of the expenditure was out of sight; a 5,000 gallon underground rainwater tank had been put down at the Town Hall, 100 yards away, and galvanized pipes laid to the fountain. 'A good supply of water has thus also been ensured to the hall.' A more useful community memorial it was difficult to imagine.^{xii}

There was a large turnout, it being a Saturday afternoon, Page being the only one of the 12 local men to have enlisted and to have died in South Africa, the Lieutenant Governor being present, and the prospect of military pomp with Colonel James Rowell, late commander of 4SAIB, and other senior officers attending. Some of the late trooper's comrades formed a guard of honour for Way while Cawthorne's Orchestra, its members providing their services for no charge, played the National Anthem. Page's parents stood under a floral arch bearing the words 'Honour to the Brave,' a photograph of the late Queen Victoria, a copy of Captain Wilson's letter and a photograph of the trooper's last resting place in South Africa. The picture presented to Aldgate School by the Torodes was also present, presumably on loan for the day.

In his address Way declared roundly that young men like Page, through their heroism in South Africa, had shown the world that 'Australians were not degenerate sons of the gallant race from which they sprung (hear, hear)'. That, he said, was the true meaning of their service. The ceremony then ended with the orchestra playing 'Soldiers of the Queen' and children from Grunthal, Aldgate, Crafers, Stirling East, Scott's Creek, Mylor and Upper Sturt schools singing 'Song of Australia' with what *The Advertiser's* correspondent called 'good effect.'^{xiii}

The fountain grotto was demolished in the mid 1960s when the main road at Stirling was widened in the course of construction work on the new freeway, and it

was replaced by a small brick memorial and drinking fountain behind the bandstand. However a public campaign after 1998, in which the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society played an important part, saw the fountain re-erected in similar stone and style to the original, though on a smaller scale. On 26 November 2000 more than 200 people attended what the editor of the Society's newsletter was to call 'a triumphant dedication ceremony,' two months before the centenary of Page's birth.^{xiv}

As for Albert Page's grave, it is well cared for, unlike so many other military graves in South African cemeteries, as the Diamond Hill cemetery and much of battlefield around it are in the heart of a gated Afrikaner rural community. He lies at the foot of Diamond Hill itself, reinterred there after the war. McCabe again lies at his side and Lt. Colonel the 11th Earl of Airlie, commanding the 12th Lancers, at his feet.^{xv}

ⁱ *The South Australian Register*, 11 December 1900 p.5.

ⁱⁱ This was not the last such message the Page family would receive. A younger brother, Norman Page, survived foot and hand wounds at the Gallipoli landing, was ruled unfit for service but refused to ship home, and was wounded again at Pozieres when 13 pieces of bomb were found in his back. After a stint as a training instructor in England he was promoted to sergeant, returned to France and was killed in action on 8 October 1917. When he died eight cousins were serving in the army. Page senior had died in July.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Advertiser*, 5 January 1901 p.5

^{iv} *The Advertiser*, 5 January 1901 p.5

^v *The South Australian Register*, 27 September 1900 p.5

^{vi} *The Chronicle*, 26 January 1901 p.11

^{vii} *The Border Watch*, 12 January 1901 p.3.

^{viii} *The Port Pirie and North Western Mail*, 6 February 1901 p.3. A South Australian, Rowell's command included single squadrons of Tasmanian and Western Australian mounted infantry as well as the two South Australian squadrons.

^{ix} *The Advertiser*, 9 January 1901 p.6.

^x *The Advertiser*, 9 January 1901 p.6.

^{xi} *The Chronicle*, 16 February 1901 p.34

^{xii} *The Register*, 26 January 1903 p.4 and 2 February 1903 p.4; and *The Advertiser*, 2 February 1903 p.6

^{xiii} *The Advertiser*, 2 February 1903 p.6

^{xiv} Chris Chardon, 'A Young Soldier remembered – Trooper Albert Page,' in *The Flinders Column. Newsletter of the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society*, No. 91, January 2001, pp. 7-8. See also T. Dyster, 'Memorial Fountain,' in *Newsletter of the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society*, No. 31, November 1985.

^{xv} Farwell notes that there is some debate as to Airlie's last words as he led the 12th Lancers at Diamond Hill in June 1900. '*The Times History* recorded that his last words were an order: "Troops, right about wheel!" Churchill reported the order as "Files about!" but according to Conan Doyle his last words were addressed to a cursing sergeant: "Pray moderate your language.'" Byron Farwell, *The Great Boer War* (Wordsworth Editions, Ware, 1977) p.303.