

The Site of the Battle of Muizenberg

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Preamble

These notes are intended to be a living collection of information about the Battle of Muizenberg, the existing battlements site, the neighbours, participants, efforts, archaeology, literature and personalities, in other words everything that future generations might find useful when managing the site. They are designed to be understood by guides, and should form a sufficient basis for anyone to tell the story. They form a sketch map, incomplete but containing all the important features and some detail as well. They are by no means facts for historians or archaeologists.

Overview

The Battle of Muizenberg began on Sunday 7th August 1795 between the British forces and the VOC, and lasted six hours, from 2.00 pm until sunset. The campaign that followed ended five weeks later with the surrender of the Cape to the British. Only two days were spent skirmishing around Muizenberg — the balance of the action, such as it was, occurred around Sandvlei, Retreat, Steenberg and Wynberg.

The Battle of Muizenberg was a battle in our history only. Militarily, this action counted not even as a skirmish, but as a scuffle, such as might have happened outside the pub on a Saturday night. The British butcher's bill was two dead for the day of the initial engagement, and three more killed over the next five weeks. In the same time, 34 men died of disease and sickness!

The battle was in truth a small affair. Mrs Emily Dibb, a director of the society in 2000, approached the British Army Historical Section in Aldershot, England, for material on the subject, and was met with blank incomprehension. The Battle of Muizenberg is renowned only in South Africa. One can see why. In the terms of the British Army it simply does not register. In an age when real battles were fought between armies, raged for days and claimed tens of thousands of lives, the Muizenberg action was barely a footnote. What is important about the Scuffle of Muizenberg is the consequences.

The British Empire

Sierra Leone was the first African colony established by the British, in 1787. The British already had significant colonial possessions, amongst them Canada and India, and of course they had only recently lost America (War of Independence 1776). Australia was yet to be claimed. The Cape appears to have been the second significant British Colony in Africa. Britain was by any measure a wealthy and dynamic country, a world power equalled only by France, the other superpower of the time.

The VOC

De Vereenigde Ost-Indische Compagne, or VOC for short, deserves its place in world history. This was the greatest commercial venture in the history of the world, and it has never been equalled. General Motors, Microsoft, Exxon or Royal Dutch Shell are all corner cases in comparison. For 300 years the VOC controlled unimaginable profits. The board of directors was the Here XVII or

the 17 Gentlemen. Drawn from all the Dutch province, they exerted enormous power. 1795 marked the end of the VOC in the Cape. The social upheavals in Europe started by the French Revolution spilled over into the Netherlands, and management of the VOC became a problem. Competition increased, expenses became unsustainable, and in Cape Town the VOC governor was left to fend for himself as best he could with few staff, no money, and no chance of support from Head Office.

The Ground

The Battle of Muizenberg was essentially fought over a small piece of ground on the hillside between Muizenberg and St James. On this site the Dutch had erected crude fortifications of whatever rocks came to hand. They had three days in which to prepare their defences. Some of these fortifications can still be seen; the middle battery is unchanged. The lower breastworks were demolished by the British and the rocks of those defences were incorporated into the British fort. The upper breastworks are probably the work of the British.

The middle battery is a small lookout post halfway up the hillside, on a gentle promontory which gives it an excellent view from Simon s Town to Kalk Bay to Muizenberg Beach. It is recorded as a battery which means it must have mounted at least one gun. A small gun would probably be a 4-pounder, of which several were known to have been deployed on the site. A 4-pounder would have weighed about 900 kg and would have required some effort to get up into position. Such a gun would have been used for signalling or to fire grape and musket-shot at foot soldiers. The little battery is home to the ruins of a stone hut built using cement, which indicates it was built by the British. The hut is currently demolished. Also of interest here is the ground fill, which is clearly from an ancient midden. Archaeologists have advised that it was common for strandlopers to carry their food some distance from the shore to cook it, and it is probable there was something about this area that appealed to them, quite possibly the fact that it was and remains a good lookout point. The fact that the fill is incorporated into the dry stone walls indicates it was building material, and this presents an archaeological problem; the Dutch built their fortifications hurriedly, and are unlikely to have gone to the trouble of bedding the stones down in fill. Yet the upper battery is clearly marked as existing in 1802, and the shape on the map matches what we see now. Did the British knock down and rebuild the upper battery? It is possible. The site has an excellent view and was worth using, the walls were low and short, and cheap to rebuild properly in British Army fashion.

The Royal Navy logs record that the British forces captured two flags after the fight — a VOC flag and a red flag. The red flag would have been a *bloedvlag* or battle ensign, flown to inspire the troops to greater effort. It is possible the upper battery was the site of this flag, and it will be re-erected here in due course.

Legal title to the land was first established in 1844, when the land was granted to the Respective Officers of Her Majesty s Ordinance on the 25th

November 1844. Her Majesty in this case was the young Queen Victoria, who became Queen in 1837. The site plan of the land is a map drawn in June 1802 by Captain Chapman and the Regiment of Engineers, which clearly shows the original Dutch fortifications. This is curious. The title deed map was drawn in 1802. By 1844, when the title was granted, an entire British fort had already been built and abandoned. Why not show the British fort on the title deed?

Energetic visitors to the site today are able to see three corner beacons of the property. In true British Government style they are solid and permanent. They consist of four-sided granite pillars, deeply engraved with the War Department broad arrow and relevant survey markings. Apparently the very apex of the stones marks the corners — a precise measurement. There is no granite around False Bay, so the speculation is that these stones were quarried on the Atlantic side of the peninsula. One stone is embedded in the Bailey s Grave steps, the other two are set in the hillside about 30 metres below Boyes Drive, between Bailey s Grave and Muizenberg.

Referring again to the map accompanying the original title deed, there is another anomaly. The area covering our Battlements Site is clearly marked, and so are the fortifications. But Beacon B is shown on the map as being on the end of a line of breastworks. The actual beacon is some fifty metres up the hill from the breastworks. Were the breastworks removed? There is no sign now that they ever existed.

In 1923 the Battlements site was put up for auction by the Union Government, to the loud dismay of the public, who clearly recognised the historic importance of the site. The Prime Minister, General Smuts, was unmoved, and declared that the site was of no value to the Defence Force (which was true) and that the historic interest was insufficient to stop the sale (untrue), and that the land would therefore be sold for commercial development. Sixteen lots were sold for £6710. (*Ref: Cape Times 25 April 1923*). Fortunately, no development occurred on the main site, and in 1965 the local council bought the land back for R300,000, a very substantial sum, in order to preserve it. Of the sites that were developed we assume that Baileys Cottage was one, and the three road-facing properties were others. One of these now supports the double garage, another used to house a (Methodist?) church, which by 1998 had been demolished for some time. The newspaper article reads The plots abutting the road attracted much interest, realizing between £925 and £812 each, and the plot on which a house stands at present was not sold, the present tenant being given the option of purchase. This was probably Bailey s Cottage, which architecturally fits the 1900 s period.

In 1998 the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society put forward a preservation proposal to South Peninsula Administration, then the controlling civic authority, who eventually accepted the plan. A lease was granted to the Society in January 2003.

The Battle

At 8.00.am on Sunday 7th August 1795 the British Army began a march along the False Bay coastal track from Simon s Town to Muizenberg. 1600 men, a mix of regular soldiers and sailors borrowed from the Navy. They had no horses and pulled no guns. Everybody, officers and men, were on foot. Their weapons were swords, knives, muskets and bayonets. The officers carried pistols. The soldiers wore red coats as uniforms, but the sailors had no uniforms, they were dressed in a variety of clothes, most of it blue or brown. Their progress was uneven, and so the column stretched back about a kilometre. The track was narrow, rocky, and in places deep sand. On Glencairn beach they encountered quicksand, and had to move carefully. The track out of Fishhoek beach was steep and difficult.

Parallel to the marching army sailed four ships of the Royal Navy. HMS Stately and HMS America were big ships, classified as 3rd rates, carrying 64 guns each. Accompanying them were two small ships, called sloops — HMS Rattlesnake and HMS Echo. These carried only 16 guns each. They had sailed from Simon s Town at 12.00am and now cruised slowly, at walking pace, just offshore from the army. They hoisted just enough sail to keep pace with the army. HMS stands for His Majesty s Ship, or today Her Majesty s Ship.

At Kalk Bay the VOC had a picquet (or picket) with a cannon, designed to delay the attacking force. A swift couple of shots from HMS America was all that was required to send the VOC gunners fleeing back to Muizenberg, without apparently firing a shot.

The Date

Sunday 7th August 1795.

The Final Act

Aguably the tension that began with the arrival of Elphinstone was only finalised 11 years later, when the British and forces of the Dutch Batavian Republic signed a peace treaty in 1806, formalising the 2nd British occupation after the Battle of Blaauwberg. That treaty was apparently signed under a milkwood tree in Woodstock, and the tree still stands today (May 2003). It is called the Treaty Tree, and it grows on the corner of Spring Street and Albert Road. The tree was declared a national monument in 1967.

The Enemies

The British

Commanders

Admiral Keith Elphinstone

Major General Craig

The Dutch

Sluysken

Abraham Josias Sluysken was the VOC Governor of the Cape and the senior man on the Dutch side.

Gordon

Colonel Robert Gordon was the VOC commander in chief, and the senior military man. He reported to Governor Sluysken. Despite his name, Gordon was born and bred a Dutchman, his grandfather having fled there from Scotland.

The day after the VOC surrender Major-General Gordon, humiliated and spurned, put a gun to his head and shot himself. Suicides were forbidden in those days to be buried in consecrated ground, i.e. a formal graveyard, so he was buried in an unmarked grave in the veld, and to this day his final resting place is unknown.

Thibault

L M Thibault was a military engineer employed by the VOC. He was responsible for all the fortifications around the Cape. He was sent late in the day to create some defences at Muizenberg, with very scanty supplies of guns and equipment.

De Lille

Lieutenant Colonel de Lille was the military commander at Simon s Town. He reported to Major General Gordon.

Maritz

Lieutenant Maritz was the gunner in charge of the Dutch artillery at the Battle of Muizenberg. If anyone ever had a desperate job, it was him.

Timeline of the Battle

Events in Europe

Slavery

The Pandouren

The pandouren were Coloured or Khoisan men who were either slaves of the Dutch or free men subject to the authority of the VOC. If the Governor required their services to defend the Cape they were obliged to serve. The military corps called the pandouren was first established in 1793.

The name comes from Eastern Europe (Hungarian pand r). In the 17th Century, Eastern Europe was a lawless, dangerous place. Hungarian nobility when they travelled took with them armed servants for protection, but these bands gained notoriety as vicious thugs to be feared by the local villagers. The sense of armed servant carried through to the Cape.

Reference: Henry C Jatti Bredekamp, University of the Western Cape.

The Pandour Companies played a spirited part in the campaign of the 1st British Occupation, and on occasion showed up their Dutch masters. It seems they played little part in the action of 7th August, but later in the campaign

they took independent action against the British when their Dutch officers failed to show the required resolve.

Many of the Pandouren came from Genadendal.

Guns

The Muizenberg defences were hurriedly constructed, and similarly the guns were assembled from various sources. The first guns on site were two 4-pounder field guns, with large wheels for rapid movement with horses. These could be used against soldiers. The little 4-pounders were nevertheless bulky, and weighed 900 kg each.

A few days later came a 13-inch mortar and a howitzer, a kind of short, heavy cannon, and also a powder wagon, a kind of box on wheels with a steep roof. These were for dropping explosive shells, instead of solid shot, on to enemy troops.

Next came two 24 pounder cannons and their gun carriages. These were far too heavy to be used in the field, and were designed as ships or battery guns to be fired from fixed positions. It is believed that these guns arrived without ground platforms, an essential requirement for heavy guns. Without the wooden platforms or decks for the guns to stand on. The guns, which weigh about 2500kg, would quickly sink into the soft sand found around Muizenberg and become impossible to aim.

Lastly, two more 4-pounders were sent to join the fight.

In the rout that followed the fight, it is possible that the 4-pounders were hitched up to teams of horses and removed to fire another day. The 24-pounders, the howitzer and the mortar would have been abandoned due to their weight, and would have been captured by the English. Very likely they were spiked by the Dutch, a manouvre which temporarily took the guns out of action.

Acknowledgements: The Muzzle Loading Cannon of South Africa by Gerry de Vries and Jonathan Hall. 2001, privately published.

The Royal Navy

The First Squadron of Four Ships

Captain John Blankett sailed from Portsmouth on 16 February 1795 with four ships.

Ships

HMS America (64)

A 64 gun 4th rate cruiser, commanded by Captain Blankett, who also commanded the squadron. Ships of this size were the general workhorses of the Navy, falling in between the massive battleships of 100 guns (HMS Victory, for example), and the small, nimble and fast, but lightly-armed frigates of 24 guns. The Society has a copy of her log for the period of the battle.

HMS Stately (64)

Stately was another 4th rate cruiser.

HMS Ruby (64)

Another 64.

HMS Echo (16)

A little vessel of 100 tons, carrying 16 small guns (eight to a side), this sloop was recorded as being on the West Indian station in 1794, meaning that she travelled half-way round the world to take part in the 1st British Occupation of the Cape. Echo was the ship that tested the defences at Hout Bay a few days after the Battle of Muizenberg. Her role there was to draw fire, so the British officers in Monarch, waiting out of range, could see how many guns there were, and where they were placed. The Dutch gunners were overcome with excitement at having the enemy in sight, and they fired everything they had at the little ship. Echo sustained no damage, and the British wisely concluded that there were easier ways of attacking Cape Town than via Hout Bay.

Admiral Elphinstone mentions her Captain as being Hardy, presumably with the rank of Lieutenant.

*The Second Squadron of Six Ships***HMS Monarch (74)**

HMS Monarch was Vice-Admiral George Elphinstone's flagship, and a line-of-battle ship. At 74 guns, she was a 3rd rate vessel. She took no part in the Battle of Muizenberg, but remained at anchor in Simon's Town. She features in Steele's Navy List of 1813 as being a King's ship in ordinary, which means she was no longer in active service, but was laid up in reserve. It is likely she was scrapped shortly hereafter, since there was a massive over-supply of warships at the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars. This point also marked the end of the American War of 1812, an obscure affair which entailed military and naval action on the East Coast of America.

HMS Arrogant (74)

A 3rd rate 74 gun cruiser.

HMS Victorious (74)

A 3rd rate 74 gun cruiser.

HMS Sphynx (24)

A frigate, 24.

HMS Rattlesnake (16)

Another 16-gun sloop, she disappears from view after the Occupation, and her fate is unknown. (*Further research required.*) Her Captain at the time was Lieutenant Spranger. Sloops were the smallest ships that the Royal Navy recognized as an independent command. She would be commanded by a Lieutenant, assisted by perhaps one other junior officer and about 45 men.

Arniston

A merchant vessel chartered by the British Government, subsequently wrecked close to Still Bay, from whence comes the name of the picturesque fishing village Arniston.

Royal Navy Logs

The historical research department of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth holds all existing log books from Royal Navy ships over the centuries, and much else besides. The Society was able to obtain a photocopy of the log of HMS America for the period of the battle. A lot of the content is now difficult to understand — the technical terminology has no modern usage. The log that we have is neatly written (a fair copy), is all in the same hand, and is marked in days. The actual working logs were written up by the officer of the watch, and record each watch, not each day. It is possible this log was a summary, written up by the Captain's secretary (??).

Economic Comparison

It is worth considering the huge costs of running a fleet of ten warships. Think first of the wage bill, remembering that every man on board was paid a monthly salary, and paid it on time. Think of the administration behind it, to record ranks, promotions, punishments, expenses, deductions. Add to that the substantial cost of provisions for these thousands of men, the running costs of the ships on terms of rope, canvas, timber, ammunition, repairs etcetera, and you come to a sturdy sum, all of which was raised through taxes. Against this economic giant was ranged the Vereenigde Ost-Indische Compagne, bankrupt and in disarray. They had few staff, because they could not pay them, no warships any more, they paid their mercenaries with promises and their burghers and slaves with threats. Their military strength was tiny. It was no contest.

Flags

Interestingly, the Royal Navy logs refer to capturing two flags on the battlefield — the Dutch flag (VOC??) and a red flag. The red flag appears to have been a *bloedvlag* (literally blood flag), here interpreted as a battle ensign. Dr Dan Sleight of the VOC Society states that the red flag usually carried an emblem, perhaps a star or a crescent (?). A history of Nazi symbolism also referred to a similar battle flag, indicating that this was a common European device. It has hitherto been unknown to the writer, who admits he is no authority on British warfare, but has never come across the *bloedvlag* before despite reading widely.

Speculation: the VOC flag would have been a permanent feature of the site, an emblem of Dutch authority, and would have been flown from a substantial and equally permanent flagpole. The *bloedvlag* however, as a battle flag, would have only been flown when fighting was imminent, to inspire the troops. Mr Willem Steenkamp of the VOC Society advises that the purpose of the *bloedvlag* was to exhort the soldiers to fight to the last man. At Muizenberg certainly, they declined this invitation. For a temporary flag a short and makeshift flagpole is, and as a site, the middle battery is as good as any, since it was widely visible but out of the direct line of fire

More information is needed. We wish to erect a bloedvlag on the Battlements Site, and we need it to be accurate.

The VOC

The 1st British Occupation

The 1st occupation ended when the British returned control of the Cape to the Batavian Republic after the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. The Batavian Republic was the name of the new government of the Netherlands.

The 2nd British Occupation

In 1806 the British decided to re-occupy the Cape. The Dutch resisted. At the Battle of Blaauwberg (Blouberg) superior British forces defeated the Dutch army and regained control of the Cape. Again the pandouren displayed superior bravery. This action marked the final authority of the Dutch in South Africa. From now on the British were undisputed masters of the Cape, and many changes followed.

The Dutch Fort

Military Engineer L M Thibault arrived in Muizenberg on 3rd August 1795. In three short, busy days he completed one construction and began another. The bulk of this fort is believed to have been where the Labia Museum is now. The ground was cleared for some distance up the mountain when the house was built, and all trace of these fortifications has disappeared.

The British Fort

Lady Anne Barnard, wife of the British Governor, wrote in her diary that in 1796, one year after the Battle, she visited the fort on her way to Simon's Town. She recorded that the officers were out hunting but that the soldiers, who were engaged in building the fort, provided her with broiled beef and Constantia wine. An early braai! Over the next few years the work continued and the lower part of the fort was extensively remodelled, indeed, it was built from new. A careful assessment of the existing lower fort shows that it was built with considerable skill and care, over a lengthy period, and this indicates it was a British construction. The Dutch had no time to build anything significant, and no money to pay the skilled artisans and engineers required to build such a structure. Thousands of tons of rocks and sand have been positioned to create the fort, at great effort and expense.

In 1798 John Barrow, secretary to the British Governor Lord Macartney wrote that most of the works, batteries, lines, have undergone a complete repair, with many improvements, and others have been judiciously added by the British engineers. The pass at the foot of Muizenberg may now be considered as impregnable — it is the Thermopylae of the Cape, and from the several breastworks lately constructed along the heights, a chosen band of 300 riflemen ought to stop the progress of an army.

The fort was manned by the British until 1830, to guard against invasion by the French, their perennial enemies at the time. Advances in military

technology, especially the use of steam ships, meant that the Muizenberg Fort was no longer useful, and it was abandoned.

Knowledge of the British Fort is lacking. We do not know who built it, who designed it, what it cost, what guns were mounted, who manned it, where the garrison lived, how many men served the battery. Much research is needed. We suspect the military records were taken back to England at the time of the Union (1910) if not before.

Joshua Penny

An American citizen illegally press-ganged into the Royal Navy, Joshua Penny was a spirited and colourful character who wrote a brief autobiography in 1830. A native of Long Island, New York, he took part in the Battle of Muizenberg on the British side, deserted after that campaign, lived wild on Table Mountain for a year and ended his career trying to sink HMS Ramillies, flagship of Sir Thomas Hardy (Nelson's Captain) using a primitive submarine. The British arrested him as a terrorist.

Rust en Vrede (Rest and Peace)

The property on the West side of the Battlements is a large house called Rust en Vrede. The house was designed for Cecil John Rhodes by Sir Herbert Baker, a renowned architect, as Rhodes' holiday cottage, although it is in truth a mansion. Cecil Rhodes briefly used Rhodes Cottage next door for his holiday house, but he died in 1902 before Rust en Vrede was built. The property was then bought by Sir Abe Bailey, who completed the building in 1904.

Rust en Vrede is currently (January 2003) owned by the elderly Mrs Meikles of Zimbabwe, heiress to the Meikles hotel business. The most recent occupant, Captain Hampshire, husband of Mrs Meikles, died of old age in November 2002.

During the years that the Battlements site lay forgotten, the site was used by the occupants of Rust en Vrede. In the 1920s a tennis court was laid out on what is now called the parade ground, and many pleasant social tournaments took place in these historic surroundings. When the tennis court in turn fell into disuse it became a dumping ground for domestic and building waste from Rust en Vrede, and today the parade ground is thick with coal ash and building rubble.

Sir Abe Bailey

Sir Abe Bailey, KCMG, Bart (1867 — 1940) was an industrialist and a man of great influence in the young South Africa. One of the early Randlords, he made his fortune in gold and diamonds. He was a contemporary of Cecil Rhodes. He was knighted by King Edward 6th in 1930 (KCMG means Knight Commander of the Order of the Garter, an extraordinarily high British honour, and way above the usual knighthood).

Bailey s Grave

Sir Abraham Bailey decided that he wished to be buried overlooking his beloved house. Due to his enormous personal influence he was able to persuade the Union Government to grant him in perpetuity a strip of land rising upwards from Main Road towards Boyes Drive, and he and his family are now buried half-way up the mountain in a private shrine known as Bailey s Grave.

The strip of land that was granted to Sir Abe Bailey for this purpose has never been used for access to the gravesite, since the hillside is too steep and access from Main Road is impractical. Instead, 202 steps have been built down from Boyes Drive. The grave site is maintained by the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society with funds provided by the Abe Bailey Trust. However, the strip that was granted was taken from the battlements site, and today it can be seen that the parade ground is truncated by about 10 metres. It must remain a mission of the Historical Society to regain this important piece of the fort, which today is a mere portion of a huge and neglected garden.

Bailey s Cottage

Bailey s Cottage is a thatched building between the railway line and the sea, in front of the battle site. The site features on an early map (1802) as a gun battery, and indeed it would have been an excellent spot for a battery as it is built on a slight rocky promontory. Sir Abe Bailey built a sea-side angling cottage on the fort, which now forms the foundations of the building. There is speculation that the concrete pillar in front of the house once supported an angling platform or deck.

Information required: what was the pillar for?

The land has always belonged to the state; first the British Army and then the Department of Defence. Sir Abe gained access and built his cottage in the 1920 s, but when the 2nd World War broke out the use of the cottage reverted to the Royal Navy, who used it as an observation post. Post-war, the cottage was used to house naval officers, until as recently as 1999. In recent years the cottage fell into disrepair, and in December 2002 the Department of Public Works sold the building by public tender. The cottage was re-thatched at that time (January 2003) with *dakriet*, at the expense of Public Works.

Public Works also owned the double garage on the landward side of Main Road, opposite Bailey s Cottage. The land belongs to the City of Cape Town, but Public Works have a servitude over the land to support the garage. The servitude lasts until the council begins widening Main Road, a project that has been on the drawing board for many years. Rights to this building were sold with Bailey s Cottage. The Historical Society tried hard to gain control of this building, since it is perfectly positioned to act as a ticket office, but without success.

Archaeology

The Battlements Site is a recognized historical asset, and no-one may disturb the ground without an archaeological permit issued by SAHRA, the South African Heritage Resource Agency. A permit has been issued, to David Hart of the University of Cape Town.

Botany

Present on the site are three distinct botanical groups.

Milkwood Trees

Beside Main Road can be found the grove of Milkwood trees. These are protected by law and may not be cut or disturbed. Milkwoods are in fact reasonably common in the Cape. They provide excellent shelter from wind and rain, a fact known to many generations of bergies and their predecessors the strandlopers. The milkwoods have grown up since the fort was built. They are long-lived. The wood has no practical value, being soft.

Coastal Forest

Higher up the mountainside can be found dense stands of indigenous bush, about 3 — 4 metres high. There is a range of species found here.

Fynbos

Higher still, above the coastal forest and below Boyes Drive, can be seen the fynbos area. This is the only publicly accessible fynbos garden between Kirstenbosch and Cape Point. It needs work, and paths need to be laid out.