

Chapter IV

Events during the transitional phase

1. Introduction

When General Piet Cronjé capitulated on 27 February 1900 at Paardeberg, with the result that 4 091 people were taken prisoner by the British, it could well have been the final act in the Anglo-Boer War, for it must have been clear, even at such an early stage of the war, that Lord Roberts' march to the two republican capitals would be unrelenting and could not be stopped. This was confirmed by a burgher of Heilbron, Cornelis van den Heever, who stated in an interview in 1962 : "Want voor ons hier weg is [na Brandwaterkom toe] kon jy vir 'n donkie vra of ons die oorlog sal wen en hy sou sy ore geskud het. Want dit was 'n hopelose ding nadat Blo[e]mfontein en Pretoria ingeneem is en die Engelse by duisende en derduisende ingekom het."¹ The war could at best be prolonged in the hope that some other solution could be reached. The British superiority in numbers and war equipment could not be equalled by the Boers. However, the war did not end after Paardeberg, nor did it end when Bloemfontein was occupied on 13 March 1900, or even when Pretoria fell on 5 June of the same year. It continued for another two years and three months after Cronjé's surrender.

It is well known that the continued conflict changed its form from conventional warfare to guerrilla warfare. Although this transformation did not take place overnight, it meant that in future the war would influence the lives of many more people than it had done before. Initially the cruel reality of war was only experienced in a few areas – northern Natal, the Free State -Cape Colony border and, to a lesser extent, Mafeking and its surroundings – and activities associated with war could be observed in the four harbour cities. The new phase brought war into almost every district

¹ C. M. van den Heever, A burgher from the Heilbron Commando -- according to an interview recorded by his grandson, N.C. Anderson, 1962. [Translated: "... because before we left (for the Brandwater Basin) you could have asked a donkey if we would win this war and he would have shaken his ears. Because it was hopeless after Bloemfontein and Pretoria had been occupied, and the English came in by the thousands upon thousands."]

of the two republics and also into many parts of the colonies. It was a war that spread over most of the countryside, towns and cities of southern Africa. In addition it also involved many more people than before, people of every colour and creed.

The reason why the governments of the Boer republics preferred to continue the battle must be examined, as many of their burghers did not agree with their thinking. Reflecting on the background and the qualities of the core of the Boer people, their intense quest for independence and their bitter sentiment towards the British – a sentiment that had been evident for more than half a century – stand out. Their ancestors, the Voortrekkers, left the Cape Colony and a few years later also Natal, with the express objective of freeing themselves from British rule and to be independent. And for many of the Boer people this anti-British sentiment had been kept alive for three generations. Their encounters with the British during the 1880-81 Transvaal War of Independence and again after the devious attempt made on their independence by Jameson's raid of 1895-96, merely reinforced this passion. To most of the republicans the concept of *independence* probably meant being *independent of the British* .

It should be kept in mind that either their forebears or they themselves had not long before left their European country of birth – France, Holland, Germany, Ireland or Russia – to settle in the Transvaal or in the Free State. They were, or stemmed from, pioneers with the inherent hardiness and perseverance that are characteristic of frontiersmen. The core of their belief was to have the freedom to make their own laws and live by them, without being governed by some foreign government.

Keeping control of the mineral riches of the Transvaal, despite all the progress that had become possible since the discovery of gold, was not a major reason for prolonging the war. The gold mines that had given rise to the *Uitlander* problem and had led to the urbanisation of the country, were probably perceived as a threat to the agrarian population of the republics. Proof of their willingness to part with the goldfields became clear during the final peace negotiations in 1902.² On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that the vibrant new city of Johannesburg and its satellite towns provided solid livelihoods for many young republicans, as well as for some

² J.D. Kestell and D.E van Velden, *Die vredesonderhandeling tussen die regerings van die twee Suid-Afrikaanse Republieke en die verteenwoordigers van die Britse regering wat uitloop het op die vrede wat op 31 Mei 1902 of Vereeniging gesluit is*, p. 71.

of their colonial cousins, including men such as Jan Smuts, Ben Viljoen, Danie Theron and Christiaan Beyers.

On the other hand, being a hardy people could also denote a degree of stubbornness in the general makeup of the republicans. President M.T. Steyn, as president and commander in chief of the Free State, a foreign trained jurist and former chief justice, is perhaps a fitting example. Throughout the war he stuck to his initial statement to his officers, declaring that if indeed they wanted war, then they could not simply turn around and come asking for peace as soon as matters soured – the war would be continued to the bitter end.³ He upheld this position throughout the war, notwithstanding all the adversities, until the very end when his health completely failed him. This stubborn trait was characteristic of many burghers who continued the fight and will form part of this study.

The British, for their part, did not believe that the hostilities would continue after the two republican capitals had been occupied. Roberts (on the recommendation of Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.R. Henderson⁴) was convinced of the strategic value of occupying of the enemy's capital. He set his sights on Bloemfontein and thereafter on Pretoria. That this same conviction was held by many British nationals can be concluded from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's view that the occupation of Pretoria heralded the end of the war.⁵

The majority of the republicans did not share the belief that the fall of their two capitals necessarily meant total defeat of their republics. They argued that the vast open spaces of their land had as yet not been occupied by their adversaries and this reasoning presented them with the opening to continue the war. Their capitals were relatively young cities and the seats of government were not necessarily inflexible. The capital of the ZAR had indeed been relocated twice before. The hostilities could certainly be prolonged, operating in the rural areas and employing smaller units. *Small war* was to be their means of achieving their goal.

³ W.J. de Kock, "President Marthinus Theunis Steyn, die siel van die vryheidstryd" in J.H. Breytenbach (ed.), *Gedenkalbum van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*, p. 244; M.C.E. van Schoor, "President M.T. Steyn: sy rol in die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902", in *Genl. J.B.M. Hertzoggedenklesing XXVIII*, p. 2.

⁴ L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 86.

⁵ A. Conan Doyle, *The great South African War*, p. 508.

2. Transition commences

The transition from conventional warfare to the more offensive guerrilla-type warfare did not – in fact it could not – happen overnight. A more offensive type of warfare had been suggested by certain Boer leaders even before their defeat at Paardeberg. Scholtz maintained that Generals Smuts and Hertzog, the two republican leaders who were conscious of military-theoretical matters, proposed an offensive strategy right at the outset. Generals De Wet and De la Rey wanted to disrupt British communications during the Boers' sojourn at Magersfontein, by using, small mobile commandos.⁶

After Cronjé and his force had surrendered at Paardeberg, De Wet and 2 500 men were still in the vicinity and on 7 March 1900 they tried to delay the British march to Bloemfontein at Poplar Grove.⁷ André Wessels claimed that 5 000 Boers were deployed over a wide front but that after French and his cavalry had flanked them large-scale desertion began.⁸ Three days later the reduced Boer force was once more unable to stop the advancing British at Abrahamskraal. Clearly the defensive style of warfare was no longer effective. De Wet was faced with despairing and despondent burghers and, deeply disappointed, he sent them home with orders to reassemble at the Zand River railway bridge on 25 March 1900.

After Roberts had occupied Bloemfontein, his rapid advance to Pretoria was delayed for several weeks due to a serious outbreak of typhoid within the British ranks. This unexpected respite gave the republican leaders the opportunity to organize an extended *krygsraad*, or military council, at Kroonstad on 17 March 1900. This was a crucial meeting where both presidents and all the important generals were present. First of all it was agreed that the republican struggle for independence should indeed be continued. Four additional resolutions were taken on future strategies. These were:

- a. That the Boers would forthwith operate in smaller, mobile units.*
- b. That the cumbersome wagon convoys would be abolished.*
- c. That the rank of corporal would be introduced for corporalships of 25 men.*

⁶ L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 20; C.R. de Wet, *Three years war*, p. 30.

⁷ A. Wessels, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902 - 'n oorsig van die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 26; J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902*, IV, p. 486.

⁸ A. Wessels, *'n Oorsig van die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 26.

*d. That stricter disciplinary measures – including court martials – would be applied.*⁹

Of these four resolutions the first two were critical in the successful transition to guerrilla warfare. However, one should not overlook the importance of the other two items in the Boer quest for success.

Burgher C. van den Heever recalled that soon afterwards they were told, firstly by President M.T. Steyn at Smaldeel station and later by General De Wet, that there would no longer be unnecessary loss of life, they would operate in small patrols, hitting here and there and escaping when the fighting became too furious. He recalled that Steyn even hinted at help in the form of intervention by Russia.¹⁰

This confirmed to the burghers that there was to be a different form of warfare, although it proved that complete conversion would take time. To delay the British march to Pretoria, the old, familiar, conventional warfare was still considered the correct strategy by most of the Boer leaders.

It was General Christiaan de Wet who was to become renowned for his audacious tactics and his implementation of the new form of warfare. In his memoirs he recounted that he realised that the answer lay in rapidity of action, quick in fighting, quick in reconnaissance but also quick at flight. He added that from then on his mission was the disruption of enemy supply and communication lines – no matter what the cost might be.¹¹ He soon proved his resolve in a series of smaller-scale attacks: Sannaspost on 31 March, Mostertshoek on 3 and 4 April and Jammersbergdrift on 25 April 1900.

However, it was the lighting attack on Roodewal station on 7 June 1900,¹² only two days after the capitulation of the ZAR's capital, Pretoria, that not only caught the world's imagination, but stirred the hornet's nest. For it was there that De Wet and his small commando outwitted the British guard and destroyed substantial supplies that were sorely needed by Roberts' forces in view of the approaching winter. This was a major blow struck at a time when uninterrupted supply was crucial for the success of the British plans. The strategic importance of this action and

⁹ P.G. Cloete, *The Anglo-Boer War a chronology*, p. 119.

¹⁰ C. M. van den Heever, A burgher from the Heilbron Commando – according to an interview recorded by his grandson, N.C. Anderson, 1962.

¹¹ C.R. de Wet *Three years war*, pp. 80, 115.

¹² P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 156.

Roberts' risk of having only one railway line via Bloemfontein to support his ever growing force is often underplayed against the sheer glory of the encounter. Perhaps the dramatisation of the attack can be ascribed to De Wet's own description of the exploding ammunition as the most beautiful fireworks that he had ever seen. De Wet was most certainly correct when he wrote that Lord Roberts was vexed with him,¹³ because similar to the situation after his looting of the supply convoy at Watervals Drift on 15 February 1900, the loss of the supplies placed the British force in a serious dilemma. Pakenham recounts that more than half a million pounds' worth of plum pudding, bully beef, blankets and cordite was torched at Roodewal.¹⁴ This victory was moreover a great boost to the morale of the retreating burghers in the Transvaal. This was truly timely because the occupation of Pretoria which was aggravated by the knowledge that their president was leaving the capital, had caused large-scale despondency and prompted wide spread laying down of arms.¹⁵

3. The first major laying down of arms

It is necessary to examine the reasons behind the large-scale laying down of arms and the abandonment of the war effort by substantial numbers of republicans. Burghers of the Free State abandoned their commandos and returned home in scores after the defeats at Paardeberg, Poplar Grove and Abrahamskraal. The impact of Roberts' proclamations and the occupation of Bloemfontein was likewise significant on the number of burghers who simply went home.¹⁶ After the relief of Ladysmith in Natal and notably after Roberts' entry into the ZAR, many burghers from the Transvaal republic followed suit. This first period of abandonment – or “handsupping” as it was called – which took place from March to June 1900, has been analysed in detail by the historian Albert Grundlingh. Several factors are suggested as reasons why the Boers forsook their duty, notably war-fatigue, low combat morale, scepticism and despondence, all of which led to a general spirit of defeatism. In addition Grundlingh discusses the poor discipline in the commandos and the lack of proper leave arrangements that prevailed in the Boer military structure. He also suggests that the series of proclamations and promises issued by the British,

¹³ C.R. de Wet, *Three years war*, p. 109.

¹⁴ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 436.

¹⁵ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die “hendsoppers” en “joiners”*: die rasional en verskynsel van verraad, pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ C.R. de Wet, *Three years war*, p. 61; A.M. Grundlingh, *Die “hendsoppers” en “joiners”*, pp. 26-27.

the burghers' growing awareness of Britain's massive war reserves and finally the prospect of reaping material benefits by switching loyalty all played a role.¹⁷ Grundlingh adds that in some cases mass abandonment was even instigated by Boer officers, as indeed happened with the Edenburg Commando.¹⁸

In his summary Grundlingh asserts that demoralization of burghers was the main factor for this first wave of capitulation.¹⁹ This shows that there had already been a psychological impact on the Boers and even though it took place during the transitional phase, before the actual guerrilla war, it is significant in terms of this study. The seeds of doubt had been sown, seeds that may even have lain dormant in the minds of many who remained on commando or those who later returned to resume fighting. These seeds that could probably sprout later when circumstances altered. This predicament was clearly illustrated by Field Cornet H.S. van der Walt of Winburg in the Free State. In the prologue of his diary he described how he too wavered about returning to the war, until he received a divine message while reading in Jeremiah 48.²⁰

Many of those who abandoned the war effort, took an oath of neutrality when they handed over their weapons. This was one of the conditions included in a number of the proclamations that were issued by Lord Roberts. The aim was to convince the republicans of the futility of their struggle and reassure them of the reasonable attitude of the occupying force. The first proclamation was issued in February 1900 – even before the battle at Paardeberg had taken place – and was aimed at the Free State population in general. It demanded that citizens *desist from any further hostility* and it promised that such people would not be made to suffer, either in terms of their persons or their property.²¹ After the British occupation of Bloemfontein, Roberts issued his next proclamation on 15 March 1900, pledging that passes would be issued to allow the burghers to return to their homes. They would not be made prisoners of war nor would their property be taken from them.²² On 31 May 1900, after the British had crossed the Vaal River into the ZAR, Roberts issued a third proclamation aimed specifically at the burghers of the northern republic. It included the same basic promises as in the proclamation of 15 March, except that the section

¹⁷ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners"*, pp. 20-32.

¹⁸ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners"*, p. 35.

¹⁹ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners"*, p. 40.

²⁰ J.H. Coetzee, "H.S. van der Walt: Oorlogsdagboek" in *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 8, pp. 120-121.

²¹ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners"*, p. 26.

²² A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners"*, p. 27.

promising that property would not be taken from the people was omitted. This proclamation was followed by another on 6 June 1900 undertaking that burghers laying down arms and taking the oath of neutrality would be allowed to keep their livestock and would be issued with passes to move their livestock to winter grazing veld.²³ Grundlingh declares that these proclamations had a significant effect on the already demoralized Boers. He quotes Frederick Rompel who had described the promises made in the proclamations and stressed that the prospect of being home with his wife and family was very alluring to many a burgher.²⁴

The number of burghers who withdrew from the war during the four months from March 1900 until approximately July 1900 is estimated as being approximately 6 000 in the Free State and between 6 300 and 8 000 in the ZAR. This represented between 22% and 26% of the total number of burghers who were under obligation to perform commando service in the two republics, a significant portion of the already limited forces.²⁵

4. The last conventional battles

At 2 o'clock on 5 June Roberts triumphantly entered Pretoria and the *Vierkleur* was replaced with a silken *Union Jack*. But there was little over which to triumph. None of the Cruessot guns had been fired, the four forts were deserted, the government had absconded and taken their gold with them. The too-easy occupation of the capital probably made Roberts extremely optimistic, presumably concluding that by taking Pretoria he had in effect won the war. This belief might well have been correct, had it not been for the hardheaded resolve of the Free State leaders. Only four days before a group of ZAR generals, including the new Commandant-General Louis Botha, had telegraphed Kruger and Steyn declaring that in their opinion the war should be ceased. They referred to the collapse of their organisation and the widespread demoralization of the Boer forces as the prime reasons for their stance.

Steyn was unwavering. According to Pakenham he replied bluntly in what was probably the most important telegram of the war: "We shall never surrender...". Jan Smuts, who was the first

²³ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners"*, p. 29.

²⁴ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners"*, p. 38.

²⁵ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners"*, p. 37.

to see Steyn's telegram, later declared: "He practically accused the Tranvaalers of cowardice."²⁶ At a *krygsraad* on 2 June 1900 in Pretoria – while Roberts was just on the other side of the hill – the determination of their southern ally carried the day. After the young Captain Danie Theron's bold speech, the ZAR military leaders decided to continue fighting. But they also decided not to defend Pretoria.²⁷ This fateful decision determined the way the war was to be conducted in the weeks that followed. Shortly before the British formally occupied the capital, the government officials and the aged President Kruger, as well as a considerable amount of gold from the state coffers, left Pretoria in an easterly direction.

While the seat of the ZAR government moved first to Middelburg, then further east to Machadodorp and finally to Nelspruit, the Boers fought several delaying actions. The battle of Donkerhoek/Diamond Hill on 11 and 12 June 1900, in the first range of hills east and northeast of Pretoria and eventually the battle at Bergendal/Dalmanutha on 21-27 August 1900, near Belfast, were both significant and have been widely reported. The latter is besides usually quoted as being the last conventional battle of the Anglo-Boer War.²⁸ During the two months that elapsed between these two battles, a number of very important events took place. In reality it was an extremely critical two month period and needs closer attention.

5. De la Rey and the western Transvaal

While the ZAR government paused at Middelburg it was decided that General J.H. de la Rey would strive to reactivate the Boers in the western districts of the Transvaal. He was not only to mobilize the scattered Boer forces, but to break the concentration of the British onslaught. On De la Rey's request it was agreed that the young state attorney, Jan Smuts, should accompany him and that the two of them would constitute a separate government for the western districts of the Transvaal.²⁹

A few important engagements followed in the western Transvaal. At Silkaatsnek, scarcely 30 kilometres west of Pretoria, De la Rey, who was still *en route* to the west, attacked a British

²⁶ Quoted by T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 432.

²⁷ J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, V, pp. 539-541.

²⁸ A. Wessels, *Die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 29; T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 455.

²⁹ G. Nattrass and S.B. Spies (eds.), *Jan Smuts, Memoirs of the Boer War*, p. 77.

camp on 11 July 1900, where he caused 67 casualties and captured valuable weapons and ammunition. Three weeks later, early in August 1900, De la Rey fell upon a force of colonial troops under Colonel C.O. Hore and the siege of Elands River ensued. It is generally believed that his aim was to divert the British force that was hunting for De Wet not far away. He indeed succeeded in achieving this object, and Kitchener was ordered to divert three of his brigades that were at that time hunting for De Wet, in an attempt to relieve the beleaguered Hore.³⁰

In Chapter VII the reason for this encounter will be considered from a different angle, namely the rebuilding of the Boer force in the western Transvaal. De la Rey used these victories as a tool to assist his campaign to reassemble the burghers of the western Transvaal. In this he was certainly effective because Grundlingh claims that within ten days he had convinced 1 200 burghers to take up their arms again and rejoin their commandos.³¹ A number of vigorous military actions, some resulting in dramatic victories, underscored the weakness of the British occupation of the western Transvaal. Until the end of the war, during the first few months of 1902, the western Transvaal region under De la Rey remained a vexation to the British.

6. The Brandwater Basin

Despite their president's firm stand on the continuance of the war, a position which was supported by De Wet's strong views on the matter, a large body of Free State burghers, with substantial quantities of equipment and livestock surrendered in the Brandwater Basin near Bethlehem, on 30 July 1900. They were under the leadership of Ex-Chief Commandant Marthinus Prinsloo.³² The circumstances surrounding this incident – which also took place in the period between the battles of Donkerpoort and Dalmanutha – are closely related to this research and need closer examination.

The crisis began when a substantial British force converged on the eastern Free State town of Bethlehem and the newly-elected Chief-Commandant De Wet chose to defend the town. Generals A.H. Paget and R.A.P. Clements attacked on 6 July 1900, but only succeeded in

³⁰ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 179.

³¹ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners"*, p. 49.

³² P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 175.

occupying the town the following day, after many Boers had abandoned their positions prematurely. The German artilleryman, Oskar Hindrager, who was present at the time, expressed his disgust at the lack of discipline and enthusiasm among the Free State burghers.³³

Pakenham describes the encounter with some understanding of the circumstances so far as the British were concerned. The converging troops, mostly from Scottish regiments, were doubtless relieved to see mountains once more – real mountains streaked with fresh snow – after weeks of tramping across the dry dusty Free State veld.³⁴ On the other hand, it is important to note the effect of this particular environment on the Boers. Bethlehem and its surrounding mountains can become extremely cold and harsh in mid winter and there was little shelter. At that time of the year it was certainly an unpleasant environment for the burghers. Oskar Hintrager confirmed this point in his entry of 3 July 1900, observing that during their night march towards Bethlehem it was icy cold and misty.³⁵ Furthermore, the winter's unpalatable sour-grass that is found in this high-lying region provided little nourishment for the hardworking horses and oxen. This issue will be clarified in a subsequent chapter. The fact that the wellbeing of their animals was of great importance to the highly mobile Boers, should not be overlooked.

After their half-hearted stand at Bethlehem, the Boers retreated southwards. Soon most of the Free State forces were concentrated in the geological basin known as the Brandwater Basin (see Map V-5). According to De Wet's description, it was enclosed by the *Roodeberge* or Red Mountains and the *Witteberge* or White Mountains with Fouriesburg at its centre. There were only six passes granting entry to, or exit from, the basin.

Originally the intention of concentrating the Boer forces was to defend themselves against the expected British onslaught. Did this make strategic sense, one might ask. Why did the republicans – under the command of the very man who propagated the idea of *small war* and *high mobility* – concentrate in this extremely confined position when logically they should have dispersed? Can some element of *safety-in-numbers* be detected? Considering the large number of burghers concentrated in the basin, the entire situation appears to contradict the decision taken on 17 March 1900 at Kroonstad, which was to continue with the war by making use of smaller

³³ J.J. Oberholster, "Dagboek van Oskar Hintrager – Saam met Christiaan de Wet, Mei tot September 1900" in *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 2, pp. 54-56.

³⁴ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 440.

³⁵ J.J. Oberholster, "Dagboek van Oskar Hindrager", pp. 52.

units. Moreover, the principles of guerrilla warfare – despite the fact that they had not been formulated by a Mao Zedong or a Fidel Castro at that stage – dictate that a guerrilla force under duress should disperse and should only concentrate again when they are ready to attack. In this case virtually the entire Free State force was confined in a strategically hazardous basin, despite being under severe pressure from their adversaries.

De Wet eventually realised the pitfall of this concentration and a *krygsraad* was called for 13 July 1900. It is important to note too that De Wet had lived through a similar situation at Paardeberg barely five months before. It is thus reasonable to assume that he would have been particularly wary of entrapment. Freedom of movement had always been a fundamental requirement as far as De Wet was concerned.

At the *krygsraad* of 13 July it was agreed that the concentration of burghers should break up and retire from the basin in three separate groups. No time was to be wasted in doing so. De Wet, accompanied by Steyn and his entourage, left on 15 July via Slabbertsnek.³⁶ Assistant Chief-Commandant Paul Roux and 2 000 men were to leave the very next day while at the same time General R. Crowther with 500 men would seek contact with the Harrismith commandos to the east of the basin. A small force under the ex Chief-Commandant, Marthinus Prinsloo, would comprise a rear guard.³⁷ However, when the time came Roux, Crowther and their men failed to implement the planned withdrawal and instead merely remained static in the basin.

Pakenham, who relates these events from the British point of view, remarks that at that juncture Lord Roberts had taken off his “kid-gloves” and had begun to employ a strategy of farm burning and destruction of property as punishment for the Boer wrecking of trains and destroying of telegraph lines. “So, as Hunter’s columns had tramped on to the Roodebergen, they left a new kind of signature ... a pillar of black smoke to add to the red dust.”³⁸ It is a moot point just how much of this new threat to their families and their property was known to the burghers who were huddled in the basin and what effect did this awareness have on their sagging spirits. Hintrager reported on 13 July that according to newspaper reports General Rundell was also burning farms elsewhere in the Free State.³⁹

³⁶ J.J. Oberholster, “Dagboek van Oskar Hindrager”, p. 80.

³⁷ E. Wessels, *Veldslae Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, pp. 144-145.

³⁸ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 440.

³⁹ J.J. Oberholster, “Dagboek van Oskar Hindrager”, p. 72.

Pakenham categorically states that it was a tactical mistake by De Wet and Steyn, the two people best qualified to prevent the collapse of morale of the Free State burghers, that they were first to leave the Brandwater Basin. He argues that their absence left a vacuum which was soon filled by leaders who considered that the time had come to capitulate.⁴⁰

After De Wet's departure the burghers were, however, not left in peace to plan their strategy of surrender. Although Hunter dallied at Bethlehem for a week before striking out for the mountains, the situation changed dramatically on 23 July 1900. The British troops attacked several passes and Hunter's 5 inch guns commenced regular shelling. The situation deteriorated to the extent that by 28 July 1900 of the six passes into the basin, only the one at Witsieshoek remained open.⁴¹

It is understandable that by this time the morale of the trapped burghers was at a very low ebb. This gave certain officers the chance to act. With the fiery De Wet safely out of the way ex-Chief-Commandant Marthinus Prinsloo was re-elected to his previous position. And on 29 July 1900 he negotiated a surrender with General Hunter.

De Wet raised many questions on this episode in *Three years war*. He pointed an accusing finger at Prinsloo for orchestrating the "definite act of treachery". He also speculated about the involvement of ex-Commandant G.S. Vilonel, who was a sentenced prisoner at the time, in the negotiation process. Lastly he criticised General Paul Roux's attempt to try and reverse the surrender, calling it an absurd escapade, which probably "afforded much amusement to the English General."⁴²

On the other hand Pakenham maintains that the call: "*Huis toe*" [let's go home] had been intermittently heard ever since the capture of Bloemfontein. "Now it became the *cri de coeur* of the volk. All they wanted was to be allowed to take their wagons and go home."⁴³

When the Harrismith and Vrede Commandos followed suit and also surrendered no less than 4 314 republicans (including 3 generals and 6 commandants) were taken out of the Boer force. This loss – following the 4 093 prisoners taken five months earlier at Paardeberg – as well

⁴⁰ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 443.

⁴¹ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, pp. 441- 443.

⁴² C.R. de Wet, *Three years war*, pp. 130-131.

⁴³ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 443.

as the numerous smaller captures and the large-scale abandonments discussed above, placed the Free State forces in a very precarious position by the end of July 1900. On British side the cost of Brandwater Basin was 33 dead and 242 wounded.⁴⁴

However, from the British viewpoint, what should have been a brilliant victory for Roberts was tarnished by the significant fact that De Wet and Steyn had absconded. This was the signal for *the first De Wet hunt* to be launched.

7. The hunt for De Wet begins

As soon as the British command realised that De Wet, President Steyn and his staff had left the Brandwater Basin on 15 July, Generals Paget and Broadwood were immediately dispatched in pursuit. This began what was to become known as *the first De Wet hunt*.⁴⁵ According to Pakenham “... the main [British] advance had now become of secondary importance to the task of hunting down the twin leaders and symbols of Boer resistance, Steyn and De Wet.”⁴⁶

After five days on the march De Wet was involved in another significant incident, one which would have far reaching repercussions in the months to come. His brother, General Piet de Wet – who according to Hintrager had been acting strangely since the affair at Lindley⁴⁷ – approached his brother on a farm near Heilbron, asking him whether he considered it worthwhile to continue the war. Christiaan de Wet answered his brother furiously with the words: “Are you mad?”, turned away from him and entered the house.⁴⁸ Piet was later to play a major role in convincing Boers to lay down their arms. Thus the ways of two brothers parted, each to strive for his conviction during the months to come.

More British units were soon employed in the hunt. Among their leaders was General Sir C.E. Knox, a man with whom De Wet was destined to cross swords many times before the end of the war. Lord Roberts was indeed serious, so serious that he detailed his Chief of Staff, Lord Kitchener, to take overall charge of the hunt on 2 August 1900. De Wet and Steyn were gradually

⁴⁴ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 444.

⁴⁵ F. Pretorius, “Die eerste dryfjag op Hoofkmdt. C.R. de Wet” in *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 4, pp. 29-31.

⁴⁶ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 437.

⁴⁷ J.J. Oberholster, “Dagboek van Oskar Hindrager”, pp. 40-45.

⁴⁸ C.R. de Wet, *Three years war*, p. 133.

forced into the northern districts of the Free State, to the banks of the Vaal River. Lord Methuen was ordered to deploy his force on the northern banks of the Vaal, in order to trap De Wet. The entire manoeuvre involved many critical encounters and it was only after a close battle in the hills west of Parys on 7 August 1900 that the last of the Free Staters managed to cross into the Transvaal at Schoemansdrif.⁴⁹

Christiaan de Wet eventually escorted President Steyn northwards as far as the Crocodile River. On 18 August 1900 Steyn, accompanied by several Free State officials, continued eastwards to meet the aging President Kruger at Watervalonder.⁵⁰ De Wet then began his epic return home to the Free State.⁵¹

8. The ZAR finally embarks on guerrilla warfare.

While De la Rey was reassembling the ZAR forces in the western Transvaal, periodically confronting the British, and while De Wet was still trekking through the countryside on both sides of the Vaal River, the bulk of the ZAR forces were on their way to the east, along the Delagoa railway line. The battle at Dalmanutha – the last conventional battle – only commenced on 21 August 1900, a mere three days after De Wet and Steyn had parted company. This battle continued until 27 August and the very next day Kruger and Steyn moved from Watervalonder to Nelspruit, which town then became the official seat of the ZAR government. It was here that the discussion held at Watervalonder was confirmed and the decision to continue the war was taken. Steyn convinced the ZAR government to continue the war by using the enemy's ammunition and eating their food. Although Roberts had annexed the ZAR on 1 September 1900 and Kruger had left the republic on 11 September 1900, the decision to continue fighting was endorsed during a *krygsraad* at Hectorspruit.⁵²

At this point the ZAR government's support for their burghers ceased. Surplus food supplies and 24 field guns, including the first of the Long Toms, were destroyed at Hectorspruit.⁵³

⁴⁹ F. Pretorius, "Die eerste dryfjag op Hoofkmdt. C.R. de Wet" in *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 4, pp.118-134.

⁵⁰ F. Pretorius, "Die eerste dryfjag op Hoofkmdt. C.R. de Wet", p. 187.

⁵¹ F. Pretorius, "Die eerste dryfjag op Hoofkmdt. C.R. de Wet", pp. 187-189.

⁵² F. Rompel, *Marthinus Theunis Steijn*, pp. 106-107.

⁵³ F. Pretorius, *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899 - 1902*, p. 38.

Schikkerling described the scene of the destruction and how those men who were planning to carry on managed to salvage limited quantities of essentials.⁵⁴ The weak and the faint of heart and those without horses were sent over the Mozambique border into detention camps.⁵⁵ Burghers started moving in small groups towards the north and the northwest.⁵⁶ While some managed to reach higher lying areas and travelled via Lydenburg in the direction of Pietersburg, others had to face the dangers of the fever-ridden, parched Lowveld and eventually trekked over Heanertsburg to straggle into Pieterburg.

Hardly a year had passed since the ultimatum of 11 October 1899.

⁵⁴ R.W. Schikkerling, *Commando Courageous (A Boer's diary)*, 16.9.1900 - 18.9.1900, pp. 67-68.

⁵⁵ O.J.O. Ferreira., *Viva Os Boers*, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁶ J.W. Meijer, *Generaal Ben Viljoen, 1868-1917*, p. 172.