

While perusing the magnificent library at Mount St Mary's Seminary Greenmeadows, among the excellent war history section I came across an extract from the book "The New Zealanders in South Africa 1899-1902", by D.O.W. Hall, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, N.Z. 1949. This incident concerns the action in which my father, William James Aitken was severely wounded by a Boer Martini Henry bullet. — written by Fr. Jim Aitken br of Desmond uncle of Patricia.

~~It~~ reads: "After a brief halt at Standerton, the column on June 1st, trekked on eastwards towards Piet Retief. There were several skirmishes in which cattle, wagons, and occasionally prisoners fell into the hands of the British troops. From Goedgevonden a reconnaissance party of 100 New Zealanders rode out to Paardplaats, where they came into collision with a strong enemy force. Under Lts R.D. McD. Williams, and F.J. Ryan, a party of about fifteen New Zealanders was sent into the bush to try to locate the enemy. From a hilltop, they saw the Boers, with their cattle and wagons below them in a steep-sided ravine. Misled by a white flag on a waggon, the New Zealanders left their horses under cover, and advanced along the ravine, until they were met by a furious fire from the enemy hidden in the bush. Lt. Ryan was killed, and Lt. Williams ordered the men to get their horses and escape individually. Many of the horses were hit, and the men were forced to take shelter again among the trees. A New Zealand doctor then came in under the white flag, and the Boers, now moving about freely in in the bottom of the ravine, saw the New Zealanders,

who, with no chance of escape, had to surrender."

William James
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As I recall from memory, my father related the incident in terms like this. "We saw the white flag, and went in to accept the Boer surrender. When we were well into the ravine, all hell broke loose. We were caught 'with our pants down', with hardly any cover. I was lying alongside Frank Ryan, our Lieutenant. A short distance away, was a stream, down a bank. He decided that we should, in turn, make a break for the shelter of the bank. He looked up to survey the terrain, and said something like - 'My God Bill, I don't like it', and was shot in the head and killed. I decided to make a dash for the bank. I had almost made it, when I got winged in the hip, the bullet eventually lodging in the groin. I lay there in the water for a very long time in great pain. Eventually Doctor O'Neill came in under the flag, and brought me out. He draped me over a horse, pulled out a flask of brandy, and said, 'Get this into you, Aitken.' I was taken to an operating hospital several days' journey, in a bullock cart. They had jacked up a rope for me to raise myself up whenever the driver called out, 'look out Bill, rocks ahead'. The jolly bullet was still embedded in the groin of course, so it was one hell of a journey".

Mr. J. Aitken → speaking → In 1961 a very happy reunion was held in Calvary Hospital when my father visited Doctor O'Neill, then in his nineties. This was the first time they had met since the above incident some sixty odd years ago. Doctor O'Neill

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died in Wellington, about two weeks later. He was Col. E.J. O'Neill, C.M.G., D.S.O. m.i.d. Served in WW1 in New Zealand Medical Corps in Egypt, Gallipoli, France, and England. Commanded 1st Field Ambulance, and 2nd General Hospital. In WW2 he served as a surgeon in the Navy, 1939-41.

My father served in WW1 in France as a Staff Sgt. with the Engineers, and joined the R.N.Z.A.F. in WW2, guarding Wigram aerodrome, at the age of 65. As he said, "A man has got to do something!" He sure did!

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J.R. Aitken.