

# THE ORANGE FREE STATE'S STRATEGY TO CONTINUE THE ANGLO-BOER WAR IN JULY 1900: A LOST OPPORTUNITY?

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## *Abstract*

*More than 4 000 Orange Free State (OFS) burghers, inclusive of their most senior officers, surrendered in the Brandwater Basin in the Eastern Orange Free State (OFS) during the period 30 July to 9 August 1900. It was a military catastrophe from which the OFS would never recover. This contribution endeavours to provide new perspectives on the events leading up to the surrender by evaluating the various strategic options considered by the OFS military command during July 1900 to continue the war. It appears that two basic strategies were considered. An analysis of these provides new insights into the confusion prevailing in the Brandwater Basin, as well as the lack of effective and decisive leadership, the contradictory decisions and the concomitant conflicting orders.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After the British occupation of Bethlehem on 7 July 1900, the forces of the Orange Free State (OFS) and the remainder of its government withdrew to one of the last unoccupied areas of the OFS, the Brandwater Basin. Commandant FJWJ Hattingh and his commando, as well as the SF Haasbroek volunteer corps, were ordered to join the OFS forces in the Basin. As a result almost all the OFS forces as well as what remained of the OFS government were concentrated in the vicinity of Harrismith, Fouriesburg and Ficksburg, and by far the larger part of the OFS was left in the hands of the British forces. Another cause of concern for the OFS was that a significant number of its burghers had abandoned the war effort and were constrained under oath from further participation in the war. In addition the British war effort seriously damaged the OFS civil service in that almost all OFS civil servants were no longer serving in their posts.<sup>4</sup> And then, from 30 July until 9 August 1900, three generals and nine commandants and at least 4 314 burghers,

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4 See JH de Bruin, '*n Regshistoriese studie van die finale oorgawe van die Oranje-Vrystaat se konvensionele magie gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902)*' (Unpublished LL.D. thesis, University of the Free State, 2009), pp. 77-96.

surrendered in the Brandwater Basin, almost without firing a shot. The British also captured three artillery pieces, approximately 2 800 head of cattle, 4 000 sheep, 5 500 horses, and about two million rounds of rifle ammunition.<sup>5</sup> It was a military catastrophe from which the OFS would never recover.<sup>6</sup>

It appears that OFS officers were deeply divided on the question whether it would be feasible to defend and retain the Brandwater Basin. The deployment of specific officers and commandos to the area can probably be ascribed to two main reasons. Many commandos, for example those of Bethlehem, Senekal, Winburg, Ficksburg, Harrismith and Vrede, had an immediate interest to be stationed in the area to remain as close as possible to their home districts. A large number of wagons, stock and other private property was moved into the Basin with the OFS forces. Particularly the presence of many wagons provides evidence of the fact that the OFS forces at that stage were more of a conventional force than a mobile guerrilla force.<sup>7</sup> These wagons and horses were the property of both the OFS and of the burghers. The utilisation of private property as part of the OFS war effort was the direct result of the provisions of the *Krijgs- en Commandowet*.<sup>8</sup> Section 37 provided that burghers had to use their own horses, saddles, reigns and rifles during the war.<sup>9</sup> This Act also mandated field-cornets to commandeer wagons, tents, oxen and horses for the war.<sup>10</sup>

By mid-1900, the national strategy of the Boers had failed. The republican armies that had taken the offensive during the first phase of the war, were now in full retreat. But gradually a new Boer leadership emerged; a leadership that reassessed the strategic situation and sought fresh operational approaches. In the particular circumstances the OFS had two choices, namely to initiate peace negotiations with the British or to devise a campaign strategy that would restore its authority over British occupied OFS, and in the process re-commandeer OFS burghers who had forsaken their duties. This article deals with the campaign strategy eventually decided upon, its various iterations and the failure to communicate its amendments. Hopefully it will contribute towards the debate with regard to Boer generalship and

5 See, for example, LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history of the war in South Africa 1899-1902* 4 (London, 1906), pp. 300-343.

6 See also B Nasson, *The war for South Africa* (Cape Town, 2010), pp. 205-206.

7 Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), now part of the National Archives (Pretoria), ZAR Commandant-General collection (KG) 854: "Extract uit de Notulen van den Krygsraad, te Kroonstad vergaderd op Zaterdag, den 17de Maart 1900". See also WL von R Scholtz and IME Scholtz (eds), "Dagboek van C.J. Asselbergs", *Christiaan de Wet-annale* 5, 1978, p. 50.

8 Act 10/1899.

9 Conscripts from towns were excluded from the requirement of a horse.

10 Section 48 (Act 10/1899).

the politics of command during the Anglo-Boer War, with special reference to the OFS focus.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. TOPOGRAPHY OF THE BRANDWATER BASIN<sup>12</sup>

The Brandwater Basin forms a natural fortress with the Witteberge in the west and the Roodeberge to the eastern side. These two mountain ranges enclose the area in a half circle with Fouriesburg approximately in the middle. The main access routes to the area are over Generalsnek and Commandonek in the vicinity of Ficksburg and Fouriesburg. Retiefsnek and Slabbertsnek provide access to the area from Bethlehem.

The two routes through respectively Retiefsnek and Slabbertsnek join in the Basin and provide access to Fouriesburg. From Fouriesburg it was possible to travel along Slaapkrans to Nauwpoort,<sup>13</sup> in the vicinity of the present-day Clarens. The Slaapkrans route in its turn provided access to the area known as the Caledon Valley. In the vicinity of Slaapkrans the road forked, with a route to Nauwpoort and another route to Golden Gate. From Nauwpoort it was possible to travel in the direction of Golden Gate. The route through Golden Gate was less suitable for heavy traffic such as wagons and artillery. The routes over Witnek, Nelspoort and Bamboeshoek were mere footpaths unsuited for wagons and artillery. On the other side of the Basin, the Caledon River formed the border with Basotholand (now Lesotho).

## 3. WHY THE BRANDWATER BASIN?

The topography of the Brandwater Basin created a perception of safety. The concentration of the greatest part of the OFS forces in this area created a golden

11 See in general the article by I van der Waag, "Boer generalship and the politics of command", *War in History* 12(1), 2005, pp. 15-43, which focuses primarily on the Transvaal military leaders.

12 The following sources describe the topography of the area: Amery (ed.) 4, pp. 315-316; F Maurice (ed.) and MH Grant, *History of the war in South Africa 1899-1902* 3 (London, 1908), p. 293; HW Wilson, *After Pretoria the guerrilla war the supplement to "With the flag to Pretoria"* 3 (s.l., 1902), p. 20; PH Kritzinger and RD McDonald, *In the shadow of death* (London, 1904), p. 9; CR de Wet, *De strijd tusschen Boer en Brit de herinneringen van den Boerengeneraal Chr. de Wet* (Amsterdam, 1903), p. 121; PJ Delport, *Die rol van genl. Marthinus Prinsloo gedurende die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (MA, University of the Orange Free State, 1972), pp. 147-148; WL von R Scholtz, *Generaal Christiaan de Wet as veldheer* (Pretoria, 2003), p. 221; F Pretorius, *Die eerste dryfjag op hoofskmdt. C.R. de Wet* (MA, University of Pretoria, 1975), pp. 21-22; Oorlogsmuseum van die Boererepublieke (OMBR) (War Museum of the Boer Republics; Bloemfontein), Röhn collection: C Röhn, *Bo-op en tussen die berge*, p. 9.

13 Nauwpoort is spelled in two ways in the sources, namely Naauwpoort and Nauwpoort. For the sake of uniformity, it will be spelled as Nauwpoort in this article.

opportunity for the British forces to trap and besiege these forces. The successful completion of the war against the OFS would thus be greatly facilitated.

The British forces in Bethlehem were awaiting provisions and did not immediately follow up the successful occupation of the town. According to Captain CJL Gilson the OFS military command may have had the impression that the British forces were not able to execute major military operations in the area because the Basin was a considerable distance away from the closest railway connection. The failure to immediately follow up the successes at Bethlehem could probably have strengthened this perception.<sup>14</sup>

OFS officers were not in agreement as to whether they should retain their positions within the Basin. Their opinions on the Basin may be divided into two broad groups. The first viewed the Basin as a temporary refuge providing the opportunity to re-organise, to plan and, in particular, to obtain provisions for the continuation of the war in safety. The second considered the Basin as the last unoccupied area of the OFS which could serve as a defensive position against the advance by the British forces. This perspective was an important factor in the formulation of the campaign strategy and initially it also contributed to the attachment of greater value to the retention of the Basin. General Christiaan de Wet explained that he had withdrawn his forces to the Basin to provide food for his commandos, and to leave burghers with weakened horses or without horses in the area to protect the “wheat basket” of the OFS.<sup>15</sup> JN Brink, an adjutant of Commandant R Crowther, also referred to the concept of keeping open a wheat road from Ladybrand to the Vaal River.<sup>16</sup> The Basin was the last unoccupied part of the OFS after the battle at Bethlehem.

According to Brink the plan of the military council always seemed unclear.<sup>17</sup> JAJ de Villiers, an advocate, was of the view that burghers with weak horses should be left in the area.<sup>18</sup> According to O Hintrager, a German volunteer, and W Malan, a member of the Theron Reconnaissance Corps, it was decided that the OFS forces would be re-organised in the Basin.<sup>19</sup> Sources indicate that the OFS State President, MT Steyn, intended using the natural protection afforded by the Basin as fortress and to remain there indefinitely. For this purpose MT Steyn ordered the digging of trenches for the protection of the necks. This order is contained in the

14 CJL Gilson, *History of the 1st Batt. Sherwood Foresters (Notts. and Derby Regt.) in the Boer War, 1899-1902* (London, s.a.), p. 98. See also A Hunter, *Kitchener's sword-arm the life and campaigns of General Sir Archibald Hunter G.C.B., G.C.V.O., D.S.O.* (London, s.a.), p. 154.

15 TAD, Leyds 728/8: CR de Wet – SJP Kruger, 9 July 1900, received on 15 July 1900 (telegram). See also TAD, Preller 74, p. 249: JA Holtzhausen, “De trek naar Waterberg” (reminiscences, s.a.).

16 JN Brink, *Ceylon en de bannelingen* (Amsterdam, 1904), p. 81.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

18 MCE van Schoor (ed.), “Jacob de Villiers”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale* 8, November 1990, p. 11.

19 O Hintrager, *Met Steijn en de Wet op kommando een dagboek uit den oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* (Rotterdam, 1902), p. 33; HJC Pieterse (ed.), *Oorlogsavonture van genl. Wynand Malan* (Cape Town, 1946), p. 70.

reminiscences of burgher JA Holtzhausen. Commandant WJ Kolbe corroborated this account and referred to the beautiful deep trenches dug at Slabbertsnek after the battle at Bethlehem. According to Holtzhausen, De Wet ordered on his return that the preparation of trenches and defensive positions must be stopped immediately.<sup>20</sup> De Wet's order has to be seen against the background of the Kroonstad *Krijgsraad* decision of 17 March 1900, namely to henceforth resort to mobile (guerrilla) warfare.

H Olivier (the son of Commandant JH Olivier) states that State President Steyn told his father that Fouriesburg, which became the seat of government, had to be protected.<sup>21</sup> The reminiscences of Holtzhausen and Olivier are of particular importance in that they indicate that State President Steyn (as commander-in-chief) and General De Wet (as supreme commander), did not agree on all the details of the strategy for the continuation of the war. As far as Olivier was concerned, the State President was initially in favour of defensive positions in the Basin. This could explain some of the later confusion over the war strategy.

Lieutenant G Boldingh, a Dutch volunteer attached to the OFS State Artillery Corps, supported the concept of safe positions to protect women, children, stock and the wagons of persons who were fleeing before the advancing British forces. This was necessitated by people apparently moving behind the OFS forces for protection. The presence of these groups of persons and property<sup>22</sup> in the area could also be ascribed to the provisions of the *Krijgs- en Commandowet*.<sup>23</sup>

British intelligence indirectly confirms the reminiscences of Kolbe, Holtzhausen and Boldingh in that G Lagden, the British Resident Commissioner, reported to Lord Roberts on 11 July 1900 that thousands of heads of cattle were moved into the Basin to provide enough food for a prolonged siege.<sup>24</sup>

#### **4. MILITARY SUITABILITY OF THE BRANDWATER BASIN**

The question arises whether the OFS forces in the Brandwater Basin had sufficient strength to defend the Basin effectively, and whether these forces had sufficient ammunition and food to withstand a prolonged siege. No sources could be found

20 TAD, Preller 74, pp. 250-251. See also The National Archives (TNA; Kew), WO 105/18: G Lagden – FS Roberts, 15 July 1900 (copy of telegram) for a description of the positions. See also OM BR 6967/1: WJ Kolbe, "Leevensgeschiedenis van generaal W.J. Kolbe" [henceforth referred to as the Kolbe manuscript], p. 316; TAD, Preller 81, p. 104: LJ Malan, "Geschiedenis gemaak deur lede van Zastrand distrik"; OM BR 6024/1: CP Pretorius, *Gedachtnes boek van my gevangeschap*, p. 13.

21 TAD, Olivier reminiscences (A1237): "Herinneringe van mnr. Henning Olivier", p. 10. See also OM BR, 6024/1: Pretorius, p. 3.

22 Act 10/1899.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Boldingh, p. 12; TNA, WO 105/18: G Lagden – FS Roberts, 11 July 1900 (copy of telegram).

answering the question on ammunition. It will be shown below that the original force earmarked for the protection of the Basin was very substantial. Some sources do refer to the available food stock in the Basin.

Retiefsnek and Slabbertsnek were centres of great activity on 9 July 1900. The forces under De Wet took up position there and a great number of women, children and herds of stock arrived at this time. Lombard estimated the number of refugees as high as 6 000. A temporary hospital was also established in Fouriesburg for the treatment of the wounded.<sup>25</sup>

Brink was of the view that the Basin would not be able to provide enough food to sustain a military force under siege and that areas such as Witnek were not suitable for the accommodation of a defensive force.<sup>26</sup> This view was shared by Combat General PH Roux, who was of the opinion that a siege would continue for a number of weeks and that the Boers would inevitably have to surrender due to a lack of food.<sup>27</sup>

However, De Wet maintained the contrary. In the Basin there was a large stock of wheat and it would have to be defended. For this very reason De Wet withdrew to the region in order to re-supply his forces. Ver Loren van Themaat, attached to the Theron Reconnaissance Corps, wrote that during his stay in the Basin, there was not a shortage of anything.<sup>28</sup> Conversely Hintrager wrote on 15 July 1900 that they had nothing to eat for two days and that all their attempts to obtain food were in vain. Despite the prediction that the natural fortress would be their home for quite a while, there was no food stock and they literally lived from day to day.<sup>29</sup> Kritzinger and McDonald, attached to the Bethulie Commando, wrote: “The burghers thought that, once behind those heaven-high mountains, with all the passes in their possession, with abundant war supplies, and all the necessities of life, they would resist successfully every attack.”<sup>30</sup> Also C Röhn, a heliographist during the events, states that there would be sufficient food in the Basin for at least two years.<sup>31</sup> This was also the view of Commandant AM Prinsloo of Bethlehem.<sup>32</sup>

25 Brink, p. 82; PS Lombard, *Uit die dagboek van 'n wildeboer (s.l., s.a.)*, pp. 59-60; H Ver Loren van Themaat, *Twee jaar in den Boereoorlog* (Haarlem, 1902), p. 138; W van Everdingen, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika een beschrijving*, Tweede Tijdvak 2 (Delft, 1920), p. 6; OMGR 4128/42: S Haasbroek, “Die oorgawe van generaal Prinsloo”, p. 1. See also Pretorius, p. 25.

26 Brink, p. 83.

27 Free State Archives, A305: “De overgawe van Prinsloo”, p. 2.

28 Ver Loren van Themaat, p. 138.

29 JJ Oberholster (ed.), “Dagboek van Oskar Hintrager: saam met Christiaan de Wet, Mei tot September 1900”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale* 2, 1973, p. 79.

30 Kritzinger and McDonald, p. 9. See also P Pienaar, *With Steyn and De Wet* (London, 1902), p. 135.

31 OMGR, Röhn collection: *Bo-op en tussen die berge*, p. 9.

32 *Die Volksblad*, 16 June 1926: A.M. Prinsloo reminiscences. See also Grobler, p. 56.

Scholtz states that the Basin possessed sufficient food and water to withstand a prolonged siege.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately he cites no authority for this statement and does not deal with the writings of Roux, Brink and Hintringer which contradict each other on this matter. On the basis of the available sources it is not possible to determine beyond reasonable doubt whether the territory did indeed have enough food stock available to withstand a prolonged siege.

## 5. THE FORMULATION OF THE CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

### 5.1 The author of the campaign strategy

The only reference to who was responsible for the campaign strategy is made in the reminiscences of PH Roux and Boldingh.<sup>34</sup> According to Boldingh, a war council took place in the tent of the State President a few days after the battle of Bethlehem. The State President informed the meeting that the military force of Hattingh should join the OFS forces in the Basin. A further two forces would leave the Basin while one force would remain behind. Unfortunately Boldingh does not identify those present at the meeting.<sup>35</sup> Was the reference to a war council (“krygsvergadering”) correct, or was the War Commission (“Krygskommissie”) intended?<sup>36</sup> Boldingh had only recently arrived in the OFS and had just been introduced to its military system. His reminiscences should be read in conjunction with those of Roux. According to Roux the War Commission was responsible for the formulation of the war strategy.<sup>37</sup>

33 Scholtz, “Generaal de Wet”, p. 221; L Scholtz, “Die strategiese oogmerke van genl. C.R. de Wet tydens die eerste dryfjag, Julie-Augustus 1900”, *Historia* 22, 1977, p. 15. See also F Pretorius, “Kommentaar op ‘Die strategiese oogmerke van genl. C.R. de Wet tydens die eerste dryfjag: Julie-Augustus 1900’”, *Historia* 22, 1977, pp. 20-26.

34 There are no references to this matter in the Steyn Papers or in other consulted documents. It has to be borne in mind that on 10 July 1901 the British forces captured several members of the OFS government (President Steyn narrowly escaped), as well as all government documents, including Steyn’s papers (Amery (ed.), 5, p. 301). Most of the captured documents/papers were subsequently either lost or destroyed, because they have in general not found their way to any archive depots.

35 Boldingh, pp. 12-14. See also Van Everdingen, Tweede Tijdvak 2, pp. 6-8.

36 According to legislation, war councils were only supposed to function as military courts, albeit that in practice they were forums where military matters were discussed (both in the OFS and Transvaal forces). The War Commission was created by the OFS legislature shortly before the outbreak of the war in October 1899. Not much is known about its functions, but it seems as if the State President was *ex officio* the chairperson of the Commission, and that the Commission advised the State President on military matters, and even served as a war department. For more on these matters, see De Bruin, chapter 2, in particular pp. 17-27.

37 Free State Archives A305: Roux, “Boekie met aantekeninge oor persoonlike redes vir oorgawe & ervaring as gevangene: Paul Roux, 3 Nov 1900”.

If the initial campaign strategy was formulated by the War Commission, the strategy would have had to be made known to a meeting of the war council. A few sources do refer to a meeting as described by Boldingh, but do not describe the proceedings at the meeting. Hintrager states that a war council was held on 11 July 1900,<sup>38</sup> but he did not attend it. De Villiers refers to a war council held on 15 July 1900.<sup>39</sup> JAJ de Villiers's diary entries only commence on 12 July 1900 and it does not corroborate the Hintrager date. Relying on the statements of JAJ de Villiers and Hintrager, a possible conclusion may be that at least two war council meetings took place after the battle of Bethlehem and prior to De Wet's departure from the Basin. If additional meetings took place, it could be an indication that it was later decided to amend the campaign strategy, perhaps even only after there had been a consultation with the Transvaalers.

Kriek describes a war council meeting of officers that was held at this time on the farm of HS Viljoen, between Retiefsnek and Slabbertsnek,<sup>40</sup> but unfortunately does not mention a date. His reminiscences therefore only serve to confirm that a great war council meeting was held where a number of officers were present.<sup>41</sup> Brink also refers to a war council held at that time which resolved that all approach routes to Fouriesburg were to be guarded and that the Ladybrand Commando was to be dispatched to Commandonek to take up defensive positions.<sup>42</sup>

Roux and Malan refer to a war council where it was decided to appoint De Wet as chief commandant or commandant general.<sup>43</sup> In this regard Roux and Malan refer to the election of a chief commandant or commandant general. No other source indicates that such an election did take place. Commandant Kolbe refers to a war council meeting where both the State President and De Wet were present. Kolbe, Brink and Haasbroek refer emphatically to the discussion and possible formulation

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38 De Bruin, pp. 113-114.

39 Van Schoor (ed.), p. 12.

40 HS Viljoen was the member of the Volksraad for the district of Bethlehem, ward Witteberge. *Notulen der verrichtingen van den HED. Volksraad in zijne buitengewone zitting aanvangende op Donderdag, 21 September 1899.*

41 OMBR 6967/2: Kolbe manuscript, p. 316; Free State Archives A119/8: Kriek, p. 3. Kriek also states that Fourie was appointed to the rank of combat-general and that one Bester was elected as commandant in the place of Fourie. According to De Wet, Fourie was the Commandant of a part of the Bloemfontein Commando (De Wet, p. 55 (fn).). Below it will be seen that De Wet, at the time of the departure of the main force on 16 July 1900, indicates Joubert and Kolbe as Commandants of the Bloemfontein Commando. Opposed hereto is an annexure to an official report of Hunter, which mentions Joubert as the Commandant of the Modder River District, Bloemfontein (TNA, WO 32/7998: "Statement regarding the number of Boers surrendering in the Caledon Valley"). No further references to Bester and the clear contradictions could be found.

42 Brink, *Oorlog en ballingskap*, p. 81.

43 Free State Archives A305: "Boekie met aantekeninge"; Pieterse, p. 70.

of the campaign strategy during a meeting of the war council.<sup>44</sup> Röhn in his turn states that a campaign strategy was discussed at a war council meeting and that the decisions regarding the execution of the campaign strategy were properly taken.<sup>45</sup>

It appears that a war council meeting was held and that a campaign strategy was discussed. The War Commission probably drafted the campaign strategy (i.e. the operational strategy for the campaign in the OFS) and the larger war council probably only met to discuss the tactics attendant on the campaign strategy.<sup>46</sup> The War Commission was smaller than a war council meeting. For this reason it is possible to associate the meeting in the tent of the State President with the War Commission. The larger war council in turn may be associated with the meeting mentioned by Kriek.

The other possibility could be that the campaign strategy was the product of the larger war council and that the War Commission in essence had very little to do with it. The presence of the War Commission at this stage and the possible influence it may have had in the formulation of the campaign strategy cannot be ignored. Again it is impossible to make any conclusion regarding the author of the campaign strategy as a result of the destruction or loss of official OFS documents.<sup>47</sup>

Numerous sources describe the campaign strategy. They may be divided into two broad categories, namely those mentioning a sizeable force for the protection of the Basin and those referring to only a small guard force which had to leave the Basin in the event of a British advance.

## 5.2 The position of the Brandwater Basin in the campaign strategy

It is clear that the drafters of the campaign strategy were confronted with the choice whether to take up position in the Basin as chief objective or to deal with the Basin as a mere side issue in the campaign strategy. According to De Wet, he strongly disagreed with the proposal that positions had to be taken up in the mountains.<sup>48</sup> Wilson is of the opinion that De Wet realised that the capture of the whole OFS force and government in the Basin was indeed a possibility.<sup>49</sup>

44 OMBR 6967/1: Kolbe manuscript, pp. 317-318; OMBR, 4128/42: Haasbroek, p. 1; Free State Archives A119/42, p. 2: JN Brink – *Die Volksblad*, 17 June 1949 (letter).

45 OMBR, Röhn collection: “Bo-op en tussen die berge”, p. 10.

46 De Bruin, pp. 21-24.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.

48 De Wet, p. 122; NJ van der Merwe, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn 'n lewensbeskrywing* 2 (Cape Town, 1921), p. 62; CCJ Badenhorst, *Uit den Boeren-oorlog, 1899-1902 ervaringen en aanteekeningen van C.C.J. Badenhorst, ex-asst. hoofdcomm. de Westelike Afdeeling van den Oranje-Vrijstaat*, p. 37. See also Kritzinger and McDonald, p. 9; Free State Archives, A305: “De overgawe van Prinsloo”, p. 2; Van Everdingen, *Tweede Tijdvak* 2, p. 6; JD Kestell, *Christiaan de Wet 'n lewensbeskrywing* (Cape Town, 1920), p. 79.

49 Wilson 3, p. 22.

It appears that De Wet and some other officers were not in agreement whether to maintain positions in the Basin or not. Röhn states that he could gather from the conversations of officers that this difference of opinion could have serious implications for the future.<sup>50</sup> According to Grobler, AM Prinsloo was convinced that positions had to be taken up within the Basin.<sup>51</sup>

The question may be raised why maintaining positions in the Basin was considered at all. At this stage of the formulation of the campaign strategy, it must have been realised that the taking up of positions in the Basin could only lead to a siege of the OFS government and forces within the area. There would be little opportunity for escape. It appears that the expectation existed in Boer rank and file that a foreign power would intervene during the siege or that Britain's interests elsewhere in the world, such as China, would force Britain to shift its attention. A telegram from De Wet to the ZAR government, as well as the intelligence communication of the Resident Commissioner of Basotholand to the British High Commissioner, attest that De Wet was cognisant of developments elsewhere which could possibly force Britain to scale down its war effort in South Africa.<sup>52</sup>

It is possible that the objectives for the retention of the Basin had little to do with military objectives, but were rather the protection of women, children, stock and wagons.<sup>53</sup> Abandoning stock and wagons would result in the loss of private property by officers and burghers. Leaving behind a force in the Basin would provide peace of mind for the departing commandos. This is also mentioned by war correspondent Rubenkoning, who conducted interviews in Cape Town with prisoners of war from the Basin protection force. According to Rubenkoning they were so focussed on their desire to protect their property that they were trapped in the narrow and inescapable mountain passes.<sup>54</sup>

50 OMBR, Röhn collection: "Bo-op en tussen die berge", p. 8.

51 Grobler continues to state that the force would consist of Roux and M Prinsloo. The question arises to which Roux he is referring. Was it Combat General PH Roux or Commandant JP Roux of the Wepener Commando? Grobler, pp. 55-56.

52 See amongst others TAD, Leyds 728/8: CR de Wet – ZAR-regering, 9 July 1900, received 15 July 1900 (telegram); TNA, WO 105/18: G Lagden – FS Roberts, 11 July 1900 (telegram). See also TAD, Leyds 734: "Oorlogsbericht, Machadodorp 15 Julie 1900, 4 uur namiddag", p. 58; TAD, Leyds 734: "Oorlogsbericht, Machadodorp, 17 Julie 1900, 3 uur namiddag", p. 62; TAD, Leyds 734, "Oorlogsbericht, Machadodorp 19 Augustus 1900", p. 96. The State President indicated at the Volksraadsitting of 2 April 1900 that a war between Great Britain and Russia could become a reality. TNA, WO, 32/8092: "Translation of the minutes of the proceedings of the honrle [sic] Volksraad in the general sitting commencing on Monday, 2nd April, 1900, at 10 A.M."

53 See sections 37 and 48 (Act 10/1899).

54 *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijke Dagblad*, 30 September 1900.

### **5.3 The formulation of the campaign strategy**

It is important to emphasise that the campaign strategy as formulated reflected two alternative approaches to the importance of the Brandwater Basin for the continuation of the war. The first refers to the campaign strategy as it is reflected in a telegram from De Wet to the ZAR government on 9 July 1900.<sup>55</sup> The second refers to the campaign strategy as described by De Wet in his book.<sup>56</sup> The general campaign strategy contained in the reminiscences of De Wet is better known and is therefore discussed first. It should be stressed at the outset that the second campaign strategy was an amended version of the first one.

#### *5.3.1 The second campaign strategy*

In terms of the second campaign strategy, as described by De Wet, all the commandos, except for a small guard, had to move out of the mountains.<sup>57</sup> De Wet does not refer to himself as the author of the second campaign strategy but to an unknown person(s). Yet it is interesting that De Wet stated that all arrangements were in hand and that he left the Basin with every expectation that the generals would act in accordance with his instructions issued in consultation with the government.<sup>58</sup> However, the OFS government creates a different impression, namely that De Wet himself played an important role in the formulation of the second campaign strategy, even if in consultation with the government. Relying on NJ van der Merwe, the biographer of State President Steyn, it would appear that the State President was fully conversant with the second campaign strategy, even though he consented that the Ficksburg Commando could remain behind in the Basin.<sup>59</sup> The other commandos in turn were to be allocated to a force commanded by an assistant chief commandant. The second campaign strategy provided for three forces in total leaving the Basin.<sup>60</sup>

#### **(a) The first or main force**

Except for the small guard, the OFS military force would be divided into three smaller forces that were each allocated a specific operational area outside the Basin. The first force, under the command of De Wet and assisted by Assistant Chief Commandant PR Botha, was to move to Kroonstad and Heilbron as operational areas. Because the State President, as commander-in-chief, and De Wet, as supreme commander of the OFS forces, accompanied this force, it is described as the

55 TAD, Leyds 728/8: CR de Wet – SJP Kruger, 9 July 1900, received on 15 July 1900 (telegram).

56 See De Wet, pp. 122-123.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

59 Van der Merwe 2, p. 62. See also OMBR 3559/3: PH de Villiers-lewenskets, p. 2.

60 De Wet, pp. 122-123.

main force. This force consisted of the following commandos and commandants: Heilbron (Commandant LP Steenkamp), Kroonstad (Commandant F van Aard) and Bethlehem (Commandant AM Prinsloo). The following smaller and loose forces were attached to the main force: Boshof (Field Cornet CCJ Badenhorst), Griqualand-West (Field Cornet Van Zyl),<sup>61</sup> a group of Potchefstroom burghers and the reconnaissance corps of Captains DJS Theron and GJ Scheepers. The main force consisted of between 1 500 and 2 600 officers and burghers. The executive council and other members of the government would depart from the Basin under the protection of the main force.<sup>62</sup>

### (b) The second or Roux force

A second force under Assistant Chief Commandant PH Roux was to depart from the Basin a day after the departure of the main force. This force is referred to as the Roux force. The Roux force would consist of the following commandos and commandants: Bloemfontein<sup>63</sup> (one force under Commandant PJ Joubert and the other under the command of Commandant WJ Kolbe), Fauresmith (Commandant PJ Visser), Bethulie (Commandant FJ du Plooy), Wepener (Commandant JP Roux), Smithfield<sup>64</sup> (Commandant JF Potgieter), Thaba 'Nchu<sup>65</sup> (Commandant R Crowther), Rouxville (Commandant JH Olivier) and Jacobsdal (Commandant HPJ Pretorius). PH Roux was assisted by Combat Generals PJ Fourie and CC Froneman. In total the force consisted of approximately 2 000 officers and burghers. This force was to move to Bloemfontein and operate in a southernly direction.<sup>66</sup>

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61 No further particulars could be found with regard to this person.

62 De Wet, p. 122; Brink, p. 85; Free State Archives A305: "De overgawe van Prinsloo", p. 2; Pienaar, p. 139. See also Van Schoor (ed.), p. 37; JD Kestell, *Met de Boeren-commando's mijne ervaringen als veldpredikter* (Amsterdam, s.a.), pp. 58-59; Kritzinger and McDonald, p. 9; Boldingh, p. 13; JH Coetzee (ed.), "H.S. van der Walt: oorlogsdagboek", p. 124; Ver Loren van Themaat, p. 142; Amery (ed.) 4, p. 316.

63 The district of Bloemfontein consisted of a number of wards and field-cornetcies. According to Chapter XXIX of the *Wetboek van den Oranjevrijstaat* no provision was made for a number of commandants.

64 Chapter XXIX of the *Wetboek van den Oranjevrijstaat* does not refer to Smithfield as a district.

65 Chapter XXIX of the *Wetboek van den Oranjevrijstaat* does not refer to Thaba 'Nchu as a district. The district of Moroka did exist. According to Hunter, Crowther was the commandant of the Moroka commando. TNA, WO 32/7998: "Statement regarding the number of Boers surrendering in the Caledon Valley".

66 De Wet, pp. 122-123; Free State Archives A305: "De overgawe van Prinsloo", p. 2. See also Brink, pp. 87-88; Kestell, *Met den Boeren-commando's*, pp. 58-59; Kritzinger and McDonald, p. 9; Boldingh, p. 13. In contrast Amery mentions that the commander of the Bloemfontein Commando was Du Plooy and that Olivier was the Commandant of the Thaba 'Nchu Commando. Amery (ed.), 4, p. 316.

### (c) The third or Hattingh force

The third force was probably under the temporary command of J Crowther.<sup>67</sup> This force was to move in the direction of Bethlehem on the same day as the Roux force and join the force under the command of Hattingh. This force is referred to as the Hattingh force. The Hattingh force consisted of the following commandos and commandants: Ficksburg (Commandant PH de Villiers), Ladybrand (Commandant P Ferreira),<sup>68</sup> Winburg (Commandant S Haasbroek), Senekal<sup>69</sup> (Commandant GS van der Merwe), Harrismith (Commandant HA Truter) and Vrede (Acting Commandant Strijdom).<sup>70</sup> The orders to the Hattingh force were to operate in the north-eastern districts of the OFS.<sup>71</sup>

The attachment of the Winburg commando to the Hattingh force is of particular significance. It may be argued that M Prinsloo retained his position as commandant of the Winburg commando after he had resigned as Chief Commandant of the Drakensberg force.<sup>72</sup> The question that arises is therefore whether Haasbroek, as Commandant of the commando, was in an acting capacity, while Prinsloo was to command the small guard.

67 It is interesting to note that there were two Crowthers of note in the Basin. The first was Combat General J Crowther. According to Brink, he was elected in the place of Combat General IA de Villiers. Then there was a Commandant R (Bob) Crowther, who commanded the Thaba 'Nchu Commando. Brink, *Oorlog en ballingskap*, p. 58; De Wet, p. 122. According to Malan, R Crowther was a member of the Ladybrand Commando. J Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902* (Pretoria, 1990), p. 71.

68 J Crowther, until his appointment or election as Combat General, was the Commandant of the Ladybrand Commando. According to reminiscences of an unknown author, Chrisjan Muller was appointed as Commandant in the place of Crowther. OMBR 4310/3: "Dagboek van 'n onbekende persoon". The further entries in the diary do not refer to Ferreira. However, the official report by Hunter indicates that Ferreira, as Commandant of the Ladybrand Commando, was captured. TNA, WO 32/7998. "Statement regarding the number of Boers surrendering in the Caledon Valley". No further clarification of this contradiction was found.

69 Chapter XXIX of the *Wetboek van den Oranjevrijstaat* does not refer to Senekal as a district.

70 The names of Strijdom and Truter are added with reference to Kestell, *Met den Boeren-commando's*, pp. 70-74.

71 De Wet, p. 123; Free State Archives A305: "Boekie met aantekeninge"; Kestell, *Met den Boeren-commando's*, pp. 58-60; Amery (ed.), 4, p. 316. See also Kestell, *Christiaan de Wet*, pp. 79-80; Van Everdingen, *Tweede Tijdvak* 2, pp. 7, 32-33. De Wet mentions that Haasbroek was the Commandant of the Winburg Commando. However, Amery does not mention Haasbroek. Amery states that Crowther's force consisted of 500 burghers. With reference to the size of the commandos of Ficksburg and Ladybrand as was given by Roux as on 5 July 1900, it seems that Amery was wrong. It is difficult to ascertain the size of the Senekal Commando because Roux does not mention it. Roux does refer to the Winburg Commando which he variously indicates as consisting of 800 and 420 burghers. The larger number may possibly refer to the Winburg Commando and the smaller number to the Senekal Commando. The size of the Crowther force probably was significantly more than 500 burghers.

72 De Bruin, pp. 153-163.

It is necessary to consider Haasbroek's position at this stage. Questions regarding his position are similar to the status questions pertaining to Prinsloo.<sup>73</sup> Van der Walt states in his diary that Haasbroek approached him to join a volunteer corps, which he did. He refers to the corps as "De Vreije Corps"<sup>74</sup> (The Free Corps). CP Pretorius confirms these events and states that he and 30 burghers of the field cornetcy of Middel-Modderrivier (Middle Modder River) joined the volunteer corps. Pretorius agrees with Van der Walt that Haasbroek received the consent of the war council to create a volunteer corps.<sup>75</sup>

Boldingh describes the commando of Commandant Charles Haasbroek as a commando of burghers who voluntarily joined.<sup>76</sup> No reference could be traced of a Commandant Charles Haasbroek that was in charge of an OFS commando. The conclusion is that Boldingh made a mistake with the name and actually referred to Commandant Sarel Haasbroek. JAJ de Villiers refers to the commando of Haasbroek as a "loose" commando.<sup>77</sup> Haasbroek's son states that the Haasbroek Commando was directly answerable to the government and therefore not subject to any war council orders.<sup>78</sup> Other authorities confirm De Wet's description by referring to Haasbroek as the Commandant from Winburg.<sup>79</sup> For purposes of this discussion it is accepted that these authorities are not accurate and that Haasbroek did in fact command a volunteer commando and not the Winburg Commando. The commando of Van der Merwe is referred to as the Senekal Commando, not the Winburg Commando. The commando of Haasbroek is referred to as the Haasbroek Commando and not as the Winburg Commando.<sup>80</sup>

#### (d) The guard or Brandwater Basin force

According to De Wet a fourth force or guard existed consisting of burghers from the ward Bovenwijk Wittebergen, which was to remain in the Basin under the command of M Prinsloo. It is important to note that the ward did not exist in terms of Chapter XXIX of the *Wetboek van den Oranjevrijstaat*. Sections 2(A) and 2(S) did refer to the ward of Wittebergen (part of the Bethlehem Commando) and the ward Onder-Wittebergen (as part of the Winburg Commando). It is presumed that De Wet referred to the ward of Wittebergen as a subforce of the Bethlehem Commando

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73 *Ibid.*, pp. 163-168.

74 Coetzee (ed.), p. 122.

75 OMBR 6024/1: CP Pretorius, p. 3.

76 Boldingh, p. 14.

77 Van Schoor (ed.), p. 36.

78 OMBR, 4128/42: Haasbroek, p. 3.

79 See amongst others PHS van Zyl, *Die helde-album verhale en foto's van aanvoerders en helde uit ons vryheidstryd* (Johannesburg, 1944), pp. 242-243; Amery (ed.), 4, p. 316.

80 De Bruin, pp. 153-168.

in view of the fact that he joins the ward to the Bethlehem Commando. According to State President Steyn this guard included the Ficksburg Commando.<sup>81</sup>

The guard force received orders to split up into three sections and to safeguard the access routes at Slabbertsnek, Retiefsnek and Nauwpoort leading into the Basin. These orders were aimed at the protection of the large number of refugees, stock and other property. Kestell also includes the guarding of Commandonek as one of the objectives of the guard force. The latter also serves to explain the consent given by the State President to the Ficksburg Commando not to move out from the Basin with Crowther, as averred by De Wet.<sup>82</sup>

The guard force consisted of a number of commandos and not only of a field cornetcy as alleged by De Wet. This appears from the letter of 3 August 1900 by De Wet to Prinsloo, in stating that M Prinsloo was appointed as acting commander of a few small forces that were to guard the mountain passes.<sup>83</sup> According to De Wet, it was ordered that the guard force may not have any wagons in order to facilitate its movement in the mountains where large numbers of British forces attempted to capture the access routes. Because of this, De Wet made use of a field cornetcy which was familiar with the area. De Wet stated that "den heer Marthinus Prinsloo" was to command the guard force.<sup>84</sup>

The question arises whether De Wet wanted to use the small guard force to attract the attention of the British forces and thus create an opportunity for the other commandos to depart from the Basin. Rubenkoning described the main force of De Wet as a "keurbende" (select group) and states that De Wet had very little confidence in Prinsloo and the commandos that remained behind.<sup>85</sup> Kestell confirms that the remaining commandos were used to deflect the attention of the British forces away from the departing main force.<sup>86</sup> According to Commandant AM Prinsloo, the State President was requested not to take all the stronger commandos from the Basin. The State President responded that the OFS forces were leaving Prinsloo behind with a guard and that it was his responsibility to survive.<sup>87</sup>

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81 De Wet, p. 123; Van der Merwe, 2, p. 62; Kestell, *Met den Boeren-commando's*, pp. 58- 59; Kestell, *Christiaan de Wet*, p. 80.

82 De Wet, p. 123; Van der Merwe, 2, p. 62; Kestell, *Met den Boeren-commando's*, pp. 58-59; Kestell, *Christiaan de Wet*, p. 80.

83 Free State Archives A90: CR de Wet – M Prinsloo, 3 August 1900 (copy of a letter).

84 Van der Merwe, 2, p. 62; De Wet, p. 123; Kestell, *Met den Boeren-commando's*, pp. 58-59; Kestell, *Christiaan de Wet*, p. 80.

85 *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijke Dagblad*, 30 September 1900.

86 Kestell, *Christiaan de Wet*, p. 80. With regard to the charge against De Wet that he wanted to use the guard to detract attention from his force, see Amery (ed.), 4, pp. 317-318; APJ van Rensburg, "Die skandkol wat nie wou toegroei nie", *Huisgenoot*, 8 August 1969, p. 20.

87 *Die Volksblad*, 16 June 1926: AM Prinsloo reminiscences.

De Wet was of the opinion that if the commandos moved out of the mountains, the British would not bother to maintain a huge force in the area.<sup>88</sup> The State President confirmed that the intention was that he and De Wet would first break through the enemy lines. As soon as this was accomplished, the enemy would take note of the breakthrough and follow in pursuit. This would ease the pressure on the mountain passes so that the break-out of Roux and Crowther would be facilitated.<sup>89</sup>

The strategy seems to have been that the departure of the State President, executive council and members of the government from the Basin would be kept secret. After a successful departure, notice that the State President and his entourage accompanied the main force would be leaked to the British. The presumption was that the capture of the State President and his entourage would be far more attractive to the British than the detention of merely the Basin guard force. Van Everdingen considers this action of the State President to be particularly brave.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, this presumption did not take into account that the law of nations required effective occupation before the conquest of a territory could be finalised. In order to be in effective occupation of the OFS, the British forces had to occupy Fouriesburg, Harrismith and Vrede, as well as the adjacent areas.

From the events that followed, it is clear that the forces in the Basin were not informed of the amended campaign strategy. The result was that the main OFS force was nearly trapped in the Basin. The division into two forces enabled the British to defeat a major OFS force and to occupy the towns in the area. This occupation, if effective, could possibly form the basis for an argument that the legal requirements for conquest were then met.

### 5.3.2 *The first campaign strategy*

It appears that the second campaign strategy was not fully known to all officers and burghers and that these officers and burghers did not execute the orders relevant to the second campaign strategy. The failure to execute orders is overlooked by numerous sources, which tend to focus on De Wet, Prinsloo or Roux. As a consequence an important aspect does not receive sufficient attention, namely the difference between the second and first campaign strategies. Hence it is necessary to explain the first campaign strategy and to indicate how it differed from the second one. Indications are that a number of senior officers had knowledge only of the first

88 De Wet, p. 123; OMBR, 4128/42: Haasbroek, p. 2.

89 Van der Merwe, 2, p. 62.

90 Van Everdingen, Tweede Tijdvak 2, pp. 7-8; Keulemans, pp. 14-15 (fn.) as contained in Boldingh. The notes of Keulemans appear as a commentary in the form of footnotes on Boldingh's description, *Een Hollandsche officier in Zuid-Afrika nagelaten geschriften van luitenant Gerrit Boldingh*. Keulemans is referred to as a separate source to differentiate clearly between the writing of Keulemans and Boldingh. Boldingh, p. 14; Pienaar, p. 138.

campaign strategy. This implies a failure to properly communicate the amended campaign strategy. This failure frustrated the OFS war effort in the Basin. It created the possibility for the British forces to besiege the two forces in the Basin and to occupy the area. The subordination of the OFS forces as well as the occupation of the remaining OFS territory was for the first time within reach of the British forces.

### **(a) The strategy described**

The first campaign strategy is described in a telegram by De Wet to the ZAR government and was explained by De Wet on 9 July 1900: The commandos of the Drakensberg<sup>91</sup> were ordered to the Basin and were on their way. As soon as they arrived, they would be ordered to move in two directions in order to destroy the rail communication.<sup>92</sup>

This strategy is explained by Kolbe. A military council was held where State President Steyn and De Wet were present, as well as Kolbe. The intention was that De Wet and the State President would depart for the north with 2 000 men. Prinsloo, with 2 000 men, was to remain behind to guard the passes into the Basin and to prevent the enemy from advancing to Fourniesburg. Roux, with 2 000 men, would later move to the west, to the vicinity of Brandfort and Bloemfontein.<sup>93</sup> Roux also stated the following: The War Commission decided that two forces would move out, one under command of De Wet and another under command of Roux. Prinsloo, in the meanwhile, would command the commandos of Ladybrand, Ficksburg and Winburg. It is significant that Roux stated in his rough notes that Prinsloo was appointed as assistant chief commandant.<sup>94</sup>

### **(b) The amendment of the campaign strategy**

The orders to Hattingh's force to move into the Basin, are confirmed in a number of diaries and reminiscences and by other sources. The commandos of Harrismith and Vrede objected to these orders and argued that their departure from their respective districts would subject these to plundering by the British forces and the black tribes. After correspondence regarding the matter, the State President made a concession by allowing a small force under the command of Acting Chief Commandant IJ Meyer to remain behind in the districts for its protection. The remaining Drakensberg force was, however, ordered to join at Nauwpoort as soon as it was possible.<sup>95</sup>

91 The commandos of Harrismith and Vrede commanded by Hattingh.

92 TAD, Leyds 728/8: CR de Wet – SJP Kruger, 9 July 1900, received on 15 July 1900 (telegram).

93 OMBR 6967/1: Kolbe manuscript, pp. 317-318.

94 *Ibid.*

95 Kestell, *Met de Boeren-commando's*, pp. 58-59; Boldingham, pp. 13, 15-16; TAD, Leyds 728/7: AB Roberts – G Meyer, 8 July 1900 (telegram); TAD: Leyds 728/8: CR de Wet – SJP Kruger, 9 July 1900, received on 15 July 1900 (telegram); *De Bazuin*, 24 July 1900. See also Van Everdingen, Tweede Tijdvak 2, pp. 6-7; Scholtz, "Generaal de Wet", p. 224.

The failure of Hattingh's force to execute the orders of the State President possibly led to the amendment of the first campaign strategy which resulted in the second one. This amendment of the campaign strategy was summarised as follows by Kestell: When the State President and De Wet later moved through Slabbertsnek, it was ordered that General Hattingh should first remain at Langberg, and that General Crowther, on the same day as General Roux, should move to the vicinity of Witkop. There they should resort under command of Chief Commandant Hattingh who was protecting the districts of Vrede and Harrismith. This all came to nothing as a result of the objections raised by the officers as soon as the State President departed.<sup>96</sup> Once again, there was a lack of military discipline.

De Wet by implication referred to an amended campaign strategy. This appears from his war report of 16 August 1900: "Since I moved from Bethlehem approximately two weeks ago, our commandos were divided into three. It was hoped to further damage the rail and telegraph communication lines and to fight the enemy on all fronts."<sup>97</sup> It is clear that De Wet envisaged three forces that were supposed to leave the Basin. JAJ de Villiers refers to a war council meeting held on 15 July 1900 shortly before the departure of the main force under De Wet. Such an amendment could have been discussed here.<sup>98</sup> Unfortunately, JAJ de Villiers does not provide more information on the matters discussed at the meeting. Apparently neither Roux nor Kolbe, both senior officers, were informed of this amendment.

### (c) Officers, burghers and government officials

It appears that only the first campaign strategy was known to the officers remaining in the Basin after the departure of De Wet. Boldingh states that he attended a war council meeting where the first campaign strategy was possibly formulated. Boldingh's name as secretary appears in the minutes of a war council meeting. This meeting took place shortly after De Wet's departure. According to Boldingh, 2 500 men were to remain behind in the necks and that the Vrede and Harrismith commandos were to join the guard in the Basin, all under the command of Marthinus Prinsloo.<sup>99</sup> Brink states that De Wet would move out and that the remaining commandos would be divided into two, respectively commanded by Roux and M Prinsloo. According to the resolution of the war council attended by De

96 Kestell, *Met de Boeren-commando's*, pp. 58-59. See also WL von R Scholtz, p. 224.

97 TAD 734, p. 91: *Extra Oorlogsbericht Machadodorp, 15 Augustus, 9 nam.* Verification of these reminiscences are also found in the reminiscences of Röhn, who stated that De Wet took positive measures to execute his plan. He ordered that his military force should leave the mountains in three subforces. OMBC, Röhn collection: *Bo-op en tussen die berge*, pp. 9-10. It is important to note that Röhn makes no mention of the smaller guard. From this the inference may also be made that the Basin guard is included in the reference to three forces. The other alternative is that Röhn simply failed to mention the fourth force, namely the guard force.

98 Van Schoor (ed.), p. 12.

99 Boldingh, p. 13.

Wet, Roux would move in a southerly direction with 1 500 men.<sup>100</sup> Sarel Haasbroek refers to the resolution of the war council to the effect that Roux would depart three days after De Wet's departure, and four days after that, his father, Commandant Haasbroek. Prinsloo was to remain with the remaining commandos.<sup>101</sup> The memoirs of Kriek also confirm the first campaign strategy in saying that it was known that it had been decided that the President and De Wet would leave on 15 July 1900 in the direction of Kroonstad and Heilbron and that a few days later Roux would exit at Witnek in the direction of Winburg and Brandfort.<sup>102</sup> P Pienaar, attached to the telegraph services at this time, states: "Prinsloo was left behind with over four thousand men, with order to stand his own."<sup>103</sup> Slegtkamp writes that J Hindon (both Slegtkamp and Hindon were attached to the Theron Reconnaissance Corps) visited him in hospital and informed him that the corps of De Wet had to leave in the direction of Kroonstad and that General Prinsloo, with an estimated 4 000 burghers, were to protect Fouriesburg.<sup>104</sup>

Preller, the editor of the Hindon memoirs, states that a war council meeting took place where De Wet had a new organisational plan approved in terms of which the commandos would move out one by one in different directions in the Free State after which they would later be re-united in the north.<sup>105</sup>

These disparate statements are difficult to explain. It is important to note that Hindon left the Basin with the main force and Slegtkamp remained behind with the other forces. In addition, the Slegtkamp statement, according to Hindon, illustrates knowledge of the first campaign strategy, while the Preller account shows some knowledge of the second one. It is therefore possible that the first campaign strategy at the time of the visit to Slegtkamp in hospital, was the formulated campaign strategy and that the amendment was effected shortly afterwards.

WJ Hefer, a member of the OFS Artillery Corps, writes that first De Wet and then Roux would leave the Basin and that Prinsloo and the remaining commandos would stay behind to guard the neck at Nauwpoort.<sup>106</sup> Kritzinger and McDonald make no mention of the order to Crowther to join Hattingh.<sup>107</sup> Holtzhausen states

100 Brink, *Ceylon en de bannelingen*, p. 85; Brink, *Oorlog en ballingskap*, p. 55. See also Free State Archives A 119/42: Brink, p. 2.

101 OMBR 4128/42: Haasbroek, p. 1. JAJ de Villiers, a member of the executive council and acting state attorney at the time of the events in the Basin, also states that Haasbroek could act independently outside the area. Van Schoor (ed.), pp. 36-37.

102 Free State Archives A119/8: Kriek, p. 4.

103 Pienaar, p. 138.

104 TAD, Slegtkamp collection (A 235): Slegtkamp manuscript 1, pp. 136-137. The latter is based on hearsay evidence but it is included because it corroborates primary evidence in this regard.

105 GS Preller (ed.), *Kaptein Hindon oorlogsavonture van 'n baas verkenner* (Pretoria, 1916), p. 133.

106 Hefer, p. 255.

107 Kritzinger and McDonald, p. 9.

that persons such as Prinsloo,<sup>108</sup> Fourie,<sup>109</sup> Le Roux<sup>110</sup> and Commandant Haasbroek were left behind by De Wet to protect the access routes to the Basin.<sup>111</sup>

After the departure of the main force, Botha, its commander and a *confidante* of De Wet, telegraphed to his brother, the ZAR commandant general, that a commando of approximately 5 000 men was left in the mountain passes.<sup>112</sup> Botha does not state the purpose of leaving the force behind. The inference could therefore be drawn that this force either had to protect the access routes or that they were to divide into two forces and leave the area; or, that one force with Roux would leave and that the other under command of Prinsloo would stay behind to guard and protect the access routes against British attacks. JAJ de Villiers wrote in his diary on 12 July 1900: "Our object now is to leave all those behind whose horses are not in good condition and to organise two commandos of 1 500 each to go down."<sup>113</sup>

These accounts contain irreconcilable differences. Yet they also have much in common, for instance the force under Hattingh, to which Crowther was attached, is not mentioned in any of the accounts. The persons whose accounts were referred to, were intimately involved in the events in the Basin. Roux (an assistant chief commandant), Kolbe (a commandant), Brink (an adjutant of Crowther), Kriek (adjutant of PH de Villiers) and Boldingh (secretary of the military council) stayed behind after the departure of the main force and were tasked to execute the campaign strategy. It may therefore be reasonable to accept that they were conversant with the campaign strategy. This is especially so in the case of Roux and Kolbe.

It would appear that Hattingh did have knowledge of the amended campaign strategy and that the amendment was probably made after De Wet had departed the area. Why officers and burghers in the Basin were not informed of the amendments, is uncertain. As far as the statements of the persons mentioned above are concerned, it appears that none of these had any knowledge of the amended campaign strategy, with the exception of Potgieter and Grobler (and by implication Holtzhausen as well). The content of the Grobler and Potgieter alternatives is discussed next.

#### (d) Other alternatives

There may in all probability also have been a number of smaller variations of the second and first campaign strategies. Furthermore, the State President gave

108 Unfortunately Holtzhausen does not state which Prinsloo. AM Prinsloo, according to De Wet, left the Basin with him, and that infers M Prinsloo here.

109 Combat General PJ Fourie received orders to leave the Basin with Assistant Chief Commandant PH Roux.

110 No reference to a Le Roux could be found. The presumption is that the reference is to Roux and not Le Roux. Both Assistant Chief Commandant Roux and Commandant Roux (Wepener) were attached to the second force or Roux subforce.

111 TAD, Preller 74, p. 251: Holtzhausen reminiscences.

112 TAD, Leyds 758/1: PR Botha – L Botha, *s.a.* (telegram).

113 Van Schoor (ed.), p. 11.

the Ficksburg Commando consent to remain behind in the Basin. According to PH de Villiers he maintained that, because of the particular circumstances of his commando, it would not be possible to abandon the Basin. Consequently the State President consented that the Ficksburg Commando need not leave the area. Under the second campaign strategy, this commando was allocated to the Hattingh force. It is interesting that De Wet did not know about this permission that had been granted by the State President or the War Commission.

PH de Villiers does not state whether the objection was against the second or first campaign strategy.<sup>114</sup> This concession fits into the larger picture of the first campaign strategy because the positions at Retiefsnek, Slabbertsnek and Nauwpoort would have very little value if the British forces were allowed to enter the Basin unhindered from Ficksburg. As far as the second campaign strategy is concerned, it would have had little value to leave the Ficksburg Commando in place. It was clearly stated that should the British endeavour to occupy the passes, the Basin guard force should retire from the area.

Amery states that the commandos of Rouxville, Haasbroek and a part of the Bethlehem Commando (probably the Wittenbergen ward) were detailed to the Basin force.<sup>115</sup> In terms of the second campaign strategy, and according to Roux, the Rouxville Commando was allocated to the Roux force.<sup>116</sup> JAJ de Villiers and Haasbroek confirm that there was a connection between the Haasbroek Commando and the Basin force.<sup>117</sup>

### *5.3.3 The second campaign strategy accepted without any further ado*

Good grounds exist why it cannot be accepted that the first campaign strategy was a strategy well known to officers and burghers in general.<sup>118</sup> The surrender on 30 July 1900 and more particularly the attendant allegations of treason do not justify the fact that different versions of the campaign strategy may be regarded as irrelevant. Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been devoted to the different versions of the campaign strategy in historical sources dealing with the surrender.

Thus Van Everdingen refers to Roux and Boldingh, but initially uses the second campaign strategy as a point of departure. Without any further explanation, he then uses the first campaign strategy as basis for his discussion.<sup>119</sup> Maurice and Grant, as well as Amery, use the second campaign strategy, with smaller amend-

<sup>114</sup> OMBR 3559/3: PH de Villiers life sketch, p. 2.

<sup>115</sup> Amery (ed.), 4, p. 316. See also Boldingh, p. 14. Amery also presupposes that Haasbroek was the Commandant of the Winburg Commando. The reference here ought to read the Haasbroek Commando.

<sup>116</sup> See 5.3.1(c) and (d), *supra*.

<sup>117</sup> Van Schoor (ed.), pp. 36-37; OMBR 4128/42: Haasbroek, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> See 5.3.2, *supra*.

<sup>119</sup> Van Everdingen, Tweede Tijdvak 2, pp. 7, 32.

ments, as point of departure.<sup>120</sup> Delport refers to a contradiction between the second and first campaign strategy. Delport did not consult the Roux memoirs or the relevant De Wet telegrams and relied only on the references of Van Everdingen to Roux. Relying on the Roux account contained in Van Everdingen, Delport concludes that the second campaign strategy should take preference because, after all, De Wet conceptualised the strategy and commanded the Free State forces.<sup>121</sup>

Delport concludes, without motivation, that the statement of Boldinh regarding the first campaign strategy is incorrect. He then states that the difference of opinion on the number of forces which would move out, is not of determining interest, but definitely the position of the Harrismith and Vrede Commandos and the size of General Prinsloo's force.<sup>122</sup> Delport accepts that the second campaign strategy was the correct one because De Wet summoned Hattingh's force to the Basin. Hattingh did not arrive on time and Crowther consequently had to join Hattingh. This conclusion seems to be correct. Yet Delport does not refer to any of the De Wet telegrams.<sup>123</sup> Hence Delport fails to realise that De Wet's first telegram provides clear evidence that the original first campaign strategy made provision for only two departing forces. The differences between this telegram and De Wet's book require further analysis.

Other sources, such as APJ van Rensburg, accept the first campaign strategy without mentioning that it differed from the second campaign strategy.<sup>124</sup> WL von R Scholtz refers to the amendment of the original campaign strategy and states that this was necessitated by the failure of the Hattingh force to immediately move to Naupoort.<sup>125</sup> F Pretorius also does not refer to this aspect. He focuses on the second campaign strategy and does not refer to the views of other sources on the first campaign strategy. It should be kept in mind, however, that Pretorius focusses primarily on the first drive against De Wet during the guerrilla phase.<sup>126</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

By mid-1900 the character of the Anglo-Boer War was changing. New Boer generals gradually came to the fore, and the changes with regard to the Boer generalship in due course led to a change in strategic thinking. But lessons had to be learnt the

120 Maurice (ed.) and Grant, 3, p. 295; Amery (ed.), 4, p. 316.

121 Delport, p. 153.

122 *Ibid.*, pp. 150, 153-154.

123 *Ibid.*

124 Van Rensburg, pp. 18-19.

125 WL von R Scholtz, p. 224.

126 Pretorius, *Die eerste dryfjag...*, pp. 25-28. See also 5.3.2, *supra*. For an adapted English version of F Pretorius's MA (referred to in footnote 12, *supra*), see F Pretorius, *The great escape of the Boer pimpernel Christiaan de Wet – the making of a legend* (Pietermaritzburg, 2001).

hard way. In July 1900 the OFS military leaders were forced to consider ways to continue with their republican struggle against overwhelming British forces.

The discussion of the campaign strategy of the OFS and its various iterations, in the absence of official documentation, had of necessity to rely on secondary sources which differ in material respects and are difficult to reconcile or to explain. Memoirs published a long time after the end of the war, had to be approached with greater care. Furthermore, terminology like War Commission or war council or Military Council meeting may cause uncertainty especially where they are used in memoirs without any elaboration.

Nevertheless, knowledge of the first campaign strategy appears regularly in these sources, while only a few writers exhibit any knowledge of the second one. Hence it may not be unreasonable to conclude that the first campaign strategy was better known by officers in the Basin. This implies that officers remaining in the Basin after the departure of the main force were intent on executing the first campaign strategy. This included the order that the Roux force was to leave the Basin, while the greater Basin force in turn had to take up defensive positions with the purpose of protecting women, children, stock, food and other property against a British attack.

The first campaign strategy did not contain a proper contingency plan discounting the possibility of a British conquest of the Basin. This was a serious defect. The horses of the burghers were exhausted and not fit for further use in the war. In addition, British proclamations threatened officers and burghers who continued the war with treatment as rebels instead of prisoners of war. The numerous carts, oxen and wagons accompanying the commandos would greatly benefit the British war effort. The campaign strategy should have provided for the destruction of this property instead of simply leaving it behind.

There are indications that the first campaign strategy was amended at the eleventh hour. Why this amendment was not properly communicated, remains a mystery. The fact of the matter is that the lack of proper communication resulted in lost opportunities for which the OFS forces paid a very heavy price.