"THE SUSPECTS ARE NOT TO BE TREATED AS PRISONERS OR CONVICTS" – A LABOUR CAMP FOR AFRICANS ASSOCIATED WITH THE BOER COMMANDOES DURING THE ANGLO-BOER WAR

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Abstract

Over the past quarter of a century much has been written on African involvement in the Anglo-Boer War and on the imprisonment of civilians and military combatants during this conflict. Not mentioned in these writings is the labour camp created on the Bluff, Durban, for Africans suspected of collaborating with the Republican forces. In this institutional biography the rationale for the creation of the camp as well as life in it – from its creation in April 1900 to its closure in early 1902 – is investigated. The central argument of the article is that instead of treating captured Africans suspected of collaborating with the Boer commandoes as prisoners of war or as traitors guilty of high treason they were channelled to the Durban harbour to carry out forced labour on the breakwater. In the process, during a period of acute labour shortages, these suspects were central to the development of the Bluff wharfside.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) has generated a wide-ranging and still increasing body of knowledge. However, a neglected aspect in this body of knowledge relates to the Prisoner of War (POW) camps, created by the British, both in Southern Africa and in parts of the British Empire. What was initially written on these POW camps was based on memoirs and diaries and published shortly after the termination of the conflict. These publications were generally aimed at readers in South Africa and the Netherlands.[2] The rise of Afrikaner Nationalism in the early 1930s brought about a new era in the historiography of Boer POW camps with publications by *Nasionale Pers* (National Press), which included the memoirs of former Boer POWs, seeing the light.[3] Subsequently, especially the popular Afrikaans magazine,

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2 See, for example, JN Brink, *Ceylon en de bannelingen* (Amsterdam & Cape Town, 1904).

3 See, for example, JN Brink, *Oorlog en ballingskap* (Cape Town, 1940); AJV Burger, *Worsteljare. Herinneringe van ds A.P. Burger, veldprediker by die Republikeinse magte tydens die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (Cape Town, 1936); GS Preller, *Ons parool. Dae uit die dagboek van 'n krygsgevangene* (Cape Town, 1938).

Die Huisgenoot, from time to time during the 1940s carried articles on Boer POW experiences.[4]

During the 25 years that followed very little was written on the POW camps for Boers. This changed during the 1970s with the publication of several diaries kept by Boer POWs.[5] Most importantly during this era the first serious academic study on the topic was also undertaken. In a doctoral thesis SPR Oosthuizen investigated the management, treatment and life of POWs during the Anglo-Boer War.[6] This ground-breaking work, which highlighted the large amount of archival material available in the form of official reports and POW diaries and memoirs, did little to initiate further research. It was to be a further quarter of a century before the research done by LA Changuion culminated in a thesis on life in the POW camps created in Southern Africa during the Anglo-Boer War, namely Greenpoint in Cape Town; Bellevue in Simonstown; Tin Town in Ladysmith and Umbilo in Durban. Changuion, by his own admission, focused almost exclusively on the Greenpoint, Bellevue and Tin Town camps. He argued that very little evidence existed on the Umbilo camp.[7] This shortcoming was subsequently rectified by a publication on the Umbilo POW camp.[8] Over the past decade or so the number of publications on the POW camps for Boers has gained momentum with academic works,[9] pseudo-academic works,[10] and more prisoner diaries[11] – the latter made possible by the emergence of desktop publishing technology – being published.

However, in none of the works on Boer POW camps has the existence of a camp for Africans suspected of collaborating with the Boer commandoes which existed on the Bluff – a peninsula that forms the southern border of the Durban harbour – been mentioned. Likewise, in the on-going debate among historians from various historiographical traditions on African involvement in the Anglo-Boer

4 LA Changuion, *Die lewe in die Suid-Afrikaanse Boerekrygsgevangenekampe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902* (MA, Universiteit van Pretoria, 2000), pp. 12-13.

5 T van Rensburg (red.), *Oorlogsjoernaal van S.J. Burger* (Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1977); MCE van Schoor (ed.), *Dagboek van H.H. van Niekerk* (Bloemfontein, War Museum for the Boer Republics, 1972).

6 SPR Oosthuizen, *Die beheer, behandeling en lewe van die krygsgevangenes gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902* (DPhil, Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat, 1975).

7 Changuion, *passim.*

8 JM Wassermann and AU Wohlberg, "The Umbilo Prisoner of War Camp during the Anglo-Boer War", *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 24 & 25 (2006-2007), pp. 214-239.

9 F Pretorius, "Boer Prisoner of War art", *History Today* 56(3), March 2006, pp. 31-37.

10 MCE van Schoor *et al*., *Die Bannelinge – A.B.O – Boerekrygsgevangenes 1899-1902 – 'n Gedenkbrosjure* (Bloemfontein, 1983); CJ Barnard, *Die vyf swemmers. Die ontsnapping van Willie Steyn en vier medekrygsgevangenes uit Ceylon, 1901* (Cape Town, 1988); C Groenewald, *Bannelinge oor die oseaan. Boerekrygsgevangenes 1899-1902* (Pretoria, 1992).

11 See, for example, J Oosthuizen (ed.), *Getrou…tot verby die einde. Dagboeke van A.A. Smit te Bermuda* (Vanderbijlpark, 1999); C Venter (ed.), *Die dagboek van krygsgevangene Stephanus Francois Hugo* (Bloemfontein, War Museum for the Boer Republics, 2000).

War which has generated a sizeable amount of literature in recent years, the camp on the Bluff is never mentioned.[12] Not even publications that scrutinised African involvement in the Republican cause,[13] the plight of Africans in Natal,[14] or the fate of Africans in concentration camps make reference to the camp.[15]

This article investigates an aspect of African involvement on the Republican side during the Anglo-Boer War, namely the incarceration of Africans during the aforementioned war in a camp on the Bluff, Durban. In presenting a concise biography on the institution which was, ironically enough, only separated from the Umbilo POW camp by the width of the Durban harbour, it is envisaged that the knowledge that exists on African participation on the Boer side during the war will be enhanced while at the same time a contribution will be made to the debate on African involvement in the conflict and the role of the city of Durban in the war.[16]

2. STRATEGIZING TO RECEIVE PRISONERS SUSPECTED OF COLLABORATING WITH THE BOER COMMANDOES

When the Boer commandoes invaded the Colony of Natal they soon occupied the whole of Northern Natal. This occupation provided a springboard for several incursions into the centre of Natal. In the consequent defensive and offensive measures by the British Army large numbers of Boers, including some *agterryers*

12 See, amongst others, P Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902* (Johannesburg, 1983); B Mbenga, "The role of the Bakgatla of the Pilansberg in the South African War", in G Cuthbertson, A Grundlingh and M-L Suttie, *Writing a wider war. Rethinking gender, race and identity in the South African War 1899-1902* (Athens, 2002), pp. 85-114; M Genge, "The role of the EmaSwati in the South African War" in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh and Suttie, pp. 136-158; SJ Maphalala, *The participation of Zulus in the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (MA, University of Zululand, 1979); SJ Maphalala, "The Zulus and the Boer War", *History Today* 50 (1), January 2000, pp. 46-51; J Lambert, "Loyalty its own reward: The South African war experiences of Natal's loyal Africans" in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh and Suttie, pp. 115-135; SV Kessler, *The black concentration camps of the South African War 1899-1902* (PhD, University of Cape Town, 2003).

13 P Labuschagne, *Ghostriders of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) The role and contribution of agterryers* (Pretoria, 1999); F Pretorius, *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (Cape Town, 1999), pp. 282-322.

14 J Lambert, *Betrayed trust. Africans and the state in the Colonial Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1995), *passim*.

15 BE Mongalo, *The myth of a white man's war An historical perspective on the concentration camps for blacks during the South African War of 1899-1902* (MA, University of Potchefstroom for CHE, 1996), *passim*; A Wessels and AU Wohlberg, "Black people and race relations in the largest Anglo-Boer War concentration camp: Merebank, 1901-1902", *New Contree* 49, April 2005, pp. 33-47.

16 For a comprehensive overview of Durban and the Durban harbour during the Anglo-Boer War, see JM Wassermann and B Kearney (eds), *A warrior's gateway Durban and the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Pretoria, 2002), *passim*.

(mounted attendants), were captured as POWs. Initially these *agterryers* were imprisoned alongside their Boer compatriots as POWs. The first of such POWs arrived by train in Durban from the Natal front on 26 October 1900, roughly a fortnight after the war had started. According to *The Natal Witness*, the last batch of prisoners to board the *Patiala* "numbered two Cape boys and three blacks, who between them carried sackfuls of luggage".[17] In the course of the war a number of Africans and coloureds[18] who had served on the Boer side ended up in POW camps both abroad[19] and in Southern Africa. Striking photographs in this regard, depicting African POWS in India and Ceylon, appear in the work by Labuschagne on African auxiliary members of the Boer commandoes. Africans who found themselves in this situation were treated as *de facto* POWs alongside their Boer compatriots, but were expected to perform duties such as cleaning the camps.[20]

As the war continued a clear structural order evolved on how to deal with prisoners taken in the course of action by the British Army. Legitimate white citizens of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, the odd exception apart, were despatched as POWs. Those individuals who held allegiance to the Colony of Natal, and who had collaborated with the Boers in whatever manner, were charged with high treason and tried in special courts or by special magistrates or at times under martial law. In the process 409 Natalians, of whom the vast majority were Natal Afrikaners, were convicted of high treason. However, included in this number were 14 Africans. The heaviest sentence handed down to a Natal African for high treason was three years of imprisonment with hard labour.[21]

Africans in Natal could, however, also be arrested, charged and convicted under martial law for collaborating with the Boer commandoes. Examples of this are not uncommon and two would suffice: In the Durban prison was incarcerated J Maduna who had been sentenced to 18 months of hard labour on 22 March 1900 for aiding and abetting the Boers. And in the Pietermaritzburg prison was Ntshinqitshinqi who had been sentenced on 23 April 1900 to a year in prison for treason by the commanding officer of the Natal Army, General Redvers Buller.[22]

At least two possibilities therefore existed for Natal Africans suspected of having collaborated with the Boer commandoes; to be charged on counts of high

17 *The Natal Witness*, 27 October 1900.

18 In this article the collective term African will be used to refer to African and coloured suspects imprisoned on the Bluff, Durban. This is done as it proved almost impossible to distinguish between the two groups.

19 Personal communication, Elria Wessels, War Museum for the Boer Republics, 27 July 2010.

20 Labuschange, pp. 105-108.

21 For a comprehensive account of this, see JM Wassermann, *The Natal Afrikaner and the Anglo-Boer War* (DPhil, University of Pretoria, 2004), pp. 441-481.

22 Pietermaritzburg Archive Repository (hereafter refer to as PAR), Colonial Secretaries Office (hereafter refer to as CSO) 1647: Minute paper containing lists of persons confined in Natal prisons on charges related to treason, 14 May 1900 - 16 May 1900.

treason and brought before the special court or the special magistrate, or to be tried under martial law by the military for the same offence.

A substantial number of Natal Africans were in prison on suspicion of aiding the Boers but they were yet to be tried. By 6 February 1900, 16 Africans were incarcerated in the Estcourt prison on charges ranging from assisting Boer commandoes as guides and interpreters, giving false information to the British forces at Colenso, signalling to the commandoes, being in the company of suspected Natal rebels, deserting the Boer commandoes, looting cattle alongside the Boer forces and spying.[23] At roughly the same time there were 15 Africans, all arrested since the Battle of Elandslaagte on 21 October 1899, locked up in the Pietermaritzburg prison as suspected Boer spies.[24] By middle-May 1900, the picture was as follows: In the Estcourt prison were Mafiqa and Mulaqa, both accused of carrying messages to the Boer lines; in the Weenen prison were four Africans awaiting examination for being Boer spies; in the Ladysmith prison were 32 Africans incarcerated for having links with the Boers - three were suspected of an unknown offence, six were imprisoned for deserting the Boer lines, seven were accused of aiding and abetting the Boers, and 17 were accused of being spies. In Kranskop one suspect was admitted on 8 March 1900 for being a Boer spy while in Eshowe five Africans were arrested on suspicion of being spies for the Transvaal while two were in prison on suspicion of carrying information to the Boer lines. All the other Natal magistrates offered nil returns while Dundee, Newcastle, Umsinga and Upper Tugela did not provide returns as they were situated in the area occupied by the Boer commandoes.[25]

The question facing the military and the civilian authorities alike was what to do with these African prisoners. The options were simple - if they were Natal subjects they could be charged under the Colony's treason legislation or under martial law. If they were subjects of the Republics they could be sent to POW camps. However, what emerged was a third possibility – to be arrested on suspicion of collaborating with the Boers and then to be used as labour workers without at any stage having a trial in a court of law. In a nutshell, Africans arrested on suspicion of having collaborated with the Boer commandoes could not be sure how they would be treated by the military and civilian authorities.

In determining what to do with the "Africans arrested as spies", the General Officer Commanding Lines of Communication (GOC L of C), General James Wolfe-Murray, approached the Natal Colonial Government in April 1900 about employing the men "on some public work in the Colony where they could be prevented from

23 PAR, Prime Minister (hereafter referred to as PM) 17: Return of suspects at present confined in the Estcourt prison, 6 February 1900.

24 PAR, PM 17: List of suspects in Pietermaritzburg prison, 28 February 1900.

25 PAR, CSO 1647: Minute paper containing lists of persons confined in Natal prisons on charges related to treason, 14 May 1900 - 16 May 1900.

running away".[26] It seems that Prime Minister Albert (AH) Hime, who also held the portfolio of Minister of Lands and Works, had no objection against this idea. In fact, he supported the idea from the outset, the only concern being how and where to employ the men. Port Shepstone on the south coast of the Colony was mooted as a destination but in the end the firm suggestion was that the harbour works in Durban would be the best place to employ and guard the suspects. From his side Harbour Engineer Charles James Crofts jumped at the opportunity of securing labour and he indicated that employment for about 50 of these men could be found. Crofts, however, had logistical concerns, namely housing for the suspects. In his view the Durban prison was the best place as he had no quarters available to accommodate them. Crofts also presumed that the men would not have to be paid for their work.

Using the Durban prison as possible accommodation for the suspects proved to be a problem. Firstly, the number of suspects to be sent down by the military - 50 by the end of April 1900 – exceeded the available space in the prison. The second problem was that the suspected spies, if housed in prison, would "practically be convicts". This, Prime Minister Hime wanted to avoid and he made it clear that "(i) in fact I think it should be made clear to the natives that they are only placed there [in the Durban prison] to avoid their running away from the work for which they are being paid". At the same time keeping them in prison as "remand prisoners", Hime argued, was necessary as it would be impossible to prevent any escape at night unless the suspects were locked up.[27] From their side the Harbour Engineers Office supported the proposed arrangement of using the Durban prison as accommodation.[28]

However, these well-laid plans ran into trouble. The proposed accommodation arrangement in the Durban prison proved to be unfeasible. The Governor of the prison could not find place for the suspects in the remand section but he could house them in the convict wards or in the corridors. Harbour Engineer Crofts, in lieu of this obstacle, suggested that the suspects be placed on a disinfecting ship near Cato's Creek in the harbour. The problem with this accommodation was that it required guards during both day and night. In addition, it would also be a challenge to bring the suspects to work by boat. This alternative arrangement did not appeal to Hime who by now had second thoughts and wanted to completely avoid the suspects being treated as prisoners. He therefore held the view that they were not to be put in prison at all. Hime, beyond expressing the thought that the most important

26 PAR, Natal Harbour Department (hereafter refer to as NHD) II/I/27: Minute paper GOC of L of C to Minister of Lands and Works, 10 April 1900.

27 *Ibid*. Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested on suspicion of being Boer spies, 10 April 1900 – 15 April 1900.

28 PAR, NHD II/1/25: Minute paper regarding Africans arrested on suspicion of being Boer spies, 14 May 1900.

requirement was to keep a watch on the men so as to prevent them from deserting, failed to offer a solution to the accommodation challenge.[29]

In the meantime Hime continued to refine his policy regarding the suspected spies. He was adamant that they were not convicts and were not to be treated as such. At the same time they would, if gainfully employed, receive reasonable wages, to be paid for by the Colony of Natal and more specifically by the Minister of Lands and Works.[30] The military, however, had other ideas and the Provost Marshall instructed that they were to work without pay. This order was rescinded by General Wolfe-Murray who thought it not ideal that the suspects be imprisoned and made to work without pay.[31]

Wolfe-Murray therefore appealed to Hime that a fair wage be paid to the prisoners from which their expenses for food and accommodation were to be deducted. Hime used the opportunity to inform Wolfe-Murray that this was his point of view all along but that the Provost Marshall did not agree with this and ordered otherwise. He was therefore happy to follow through on the wishes of Wolfe-Murray but wanted the assurance that neither the Provost Marshall, nor any other officer, would give a contradictory order in future. This assurance Wolfe-Murray provided and Hime was guaranteed "that the arrangement will not be disturbed". Consequently Harbour Engineer Crofts could inform the Engineer of Construction that the suspects were to be paid 30 shillings per month minus the deductions for food and accommodation.[32]

As to the payment of wages the Provost Marshall now had no choice but to agree. He however pointed out that not only the cost for food and accommodation needed to be deducted but also the cost of maintaining the guards.[33] By adding this cost to the wages of the suspects it meant that in the end they would be paid 15 shillings only – the remaining 15 shillings of their wages being consumed by their upkeep.[34] The military thus persuaded the Natal authorities not only to employ the suspected spies but also to accommodate, pay and guard them.

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29 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested on suspicion of being Boer spies, 15 April 1900 – 19 April 1900.

30 PAR, NHD II/I/25: Telegrams Prime Minister AH Hime – Harbour Engineer C Crofts, 13 April 1900.

31 BT Kearney, "Chapter 11.2 Convicts", *History of the Durban harbour*. Unpublished manuscript, no date, no page numbers. The suspects must not be confused with the extensive use of convict labour in the harbour. Not only did the Natal authorities clearly distinguish between them in their records but they were also kept apart.

32 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 7 May 1900 – 25 May 1900.

33 PAR, NHD II/I/25: Telegram Provost Marshall – Chowder, 18 May 1900 and accompanying note from Provost Marshall, 17 May 1900.

34 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 7 May 1900 - 25 May 1900.

The logistics surrounding the remuneration, accommodation and guarding of the suspects were by now close to finalisation. The accommodation challenge was resolved with Harbour Engineer Crofts finding room for 20 suspected spies in ordinary quarters. By ordinary quarters he meant a separate building in its own location on the Bluff that would make escape difficult. However, he was convinced it would be impossible to prevent escape "unless they are treated the same as convicts so far as provisions and lock-up quarters and an armed guard goes".[35] What remained was to secure armed guards for the suspects. Initially it was hinted that the military would supply guards or at least pay for them. This proposal, however, unravelled after Harbour Engineer Crofts had spoken to the Commandant of Durban on the issue.[36] In the end the colonial authorities had to provide the guards which would be paid for by a deduction from the wages of the suspects. As a result members of the Harbour Works Native Police were roped in to do the guarding.[37]

Arming the Harbour Works Native Police proved a challenge as "a dozen assegais and knobkerries" could not be bought in Durban. Consequently the Undersecretary for Native Affairs asked various magistrates whether they by any chance had assegais and knobkerries they had confiscated. The Magistrate of Umgeni could provide 11 assegais and two knobkerries that were forwarded to the harbour by rail, while the Magistrate for Umlazi could supply three assegais and two knobkerries.[38]

At this juncture, with the administrative and logistical arrangements seemingly in place, one needs to reflect on how planning to force Africans to work in the Durban harbour as "participants in the war", "spies" and "deserters", to name but a few of the labels attached to the suspects, tallied with the rules of war as it existed at the time, namely the Hague Convention, of which Britain was a signatory.

Regarding spies, Article 30 of The Hague Convention is plain: "A spy taken in the act cannot be punished without previous trial." In terms of civilians charged with "the delivery of despatches destined either for their own army or for that of the enemy", Article 29 makes it very clear that such individuals are not to be considered spies.[39] Concerning POWs, Article 3 of Chapter II unambiguously states that both combatants and non-combatants, when captured, have a right to be treated

35 PAR, NHD II/I/25: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Minister of Land and Works, AH Hime, 14 April 1900.

36 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested on suspicion of being Boer spies, 15 April 1900 – 19 April 1900.

37 PAR, NHD II/I/25: Telegrams Prime Minister AH Hime – Harbour Engineer C Crofts, 13 April 1900.

38 PAR, NHD II/1/27: Minute paper regarding assegais and knobkerries for guards in charge of suspects employed in the harbour, 21 June 1900 – 22 July 1900.

39 *Convention with respect to the laws and customs of war on land (Hague II),* 29 July 1899 <www.http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/hague02.asp> Accessed on 26 July 2010, p. 8.

as POWs. And in terms of Article 5 POWs may be interned in any location and be "confined as an indispensable measure of safety". Article 6 in turn states that the state may utilise the labour of POWs but their tasks may not be excessive and may not have anything to do with military operations. POWs may also work for the public service for which they should be paid according to the tariffs for soldiers employed on similar tasks. If the work expected is in other sectors of the economy, "the conditions shall be settled in agreement with the military authorities". When used as labour the salaries of POWs paid should "go towards improving their position, and the balance shall be paid them at the time of their release, after deducting the cost of their maintenance". Article 7, however, proclaims that the government into whose hands POWs have fallen is bound to maintain them and treat them as far as food, accommodation and clothing is concerned on the same footing as the troops of the government that have captured them.[40]

The British military and the Natal Government were clearly in violation of the Hague Convention by punishing suspected spies by forcing them to perform labour without having ever tried them. Similarly, by treating civilians who had carried despatches as spies, they were again in contravention of the convention. Coupled with this, POW status was at no stage bestowed on the suspects – that is despite the fact that they were captured under war conditions. Despite this lack of POW status the suspects were in fact in many ways treated as such. As per Article 5 of the Hague Convention they were confined as a measure of safety and as per Article 6 they were employed in a non-military capacity with the blessing of the military while being paid a fair wage. Also, the deductions from their wages were used for their maintenance in terms of food and accommodation while clothing was provided. Thus, while being treated as POWs, the suspects were never elevated to that status and those suspected of spying were never tried. The suspects were therefore trapped in a twilight zone – logistically and administratively they were treated as POWs but legally they were not. They were thus suspects guilty of no crimes or offences forced to perform labour in the Durban harbour. This lack of status, as constructed by Hime and Wolfe-Murray, made it possible for the men to be exploited as forced labour, especially since this was how they were viewed from the outset.

What was envisaged for the suspects was not ordinary labour but labour equivalent to the ultimate punishment and humiliation normally reserved for convicts and prisoners who had to perform hard labour as part of their sentence, namely to work on the breakwater in the Durban harbour. This was the kind of punishment Prime Minister Hime had initially envisaged for Natal Afrikaners

40 *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.

convicted of high treason,[41] and which Boer POWs had to endure when they tried to escape.[42]

Thus when the local philanthropist and humanitarian, Harriet Colenso, enquired about the position and the treatment of the suspects the Colonial Secretary could give a succinct summary which at face value adequately dealt with the moral and legal dimensions of the situation: "They are men sent down by the military on suspicion of being Boer spies and by arrangement with the Colonial Government were given employment, 89 of them, in the harbour, where they could be prevented from running away. They are clothed and fed and given wages of 15 shillings a month."[43]

3. ARRIVING AS SUSPECTS AND THE TREATMENT AS PRISONERS

With accommodation and guards secured, and the moral and legal position in place, the military were requested by the Natal colonial authorities in the person of Prime Minister Hime to send the "20 natives" to the Engineer of the Harbour Works.[44] Initially the military could not adhere to this request as the number of available suspects was deemed insufficient.[45] Eventually, on 22 April 1900, after a delay of some days, 21 men were transported to Durban from Ladysmith by instruction of the Provost Marshal with an accompanying note stating: "These men must work under guard (no pay) they are all suspected of being Boer spies and may be called upon for trial at any time hereafter."[46] Clearly it took time for the orders from General Wolfe-Murray regarding payment for the suspects to filter down. For the first time it was hinted that the suspects could in future appear in court,[47] but eventually this never occurred.

On arrival the suspects were taken under guard straight from Durban station to the Point. From here they were removed to their quarters on the Bluff.[48] On their arrival three of the suspects were classified as old and infirm and were consequently

41 PAR, GH 1445: Minute paper Governor W Hely-Hutchinson – GOC L of C, 17 December 1899.
42 M Fischer, *Tant Miem Fischer se kampdagboek Mei 1901-Augustus 1902* (Pretoria, 2000), pp. 83-84.
43 PAR, A204: Colenso Collection 38: Letter Colonial Secretary – Miss H Colenso, 1 February 1901.
44 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested on suspicion of being Boer spies, 15 April 1900 – 19 April 1900.
45 PAR, NHD II/I/25: Telegram Provost Marshall – Harbour Engineer C Crofts, 17 April 1900.
46 *Ibid*. Note Provost Marshall – Harbour Engineer C Crofts, 22 April 1900.
47 *Ibid*. Telegrams exchanged between Provost Marshall and Harbour Engineer C Crofts, 20 April 1900.
48 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 20 April 1900 – 30 April 1900.

paid less than the agreed upon wages.[49] Several of the suspects were also suffering from diseases and were physically examined by the District Surgeon, Dr E Mountjoy Pearse.[50] The outcome of this was that a suspect suffering from inflammation of the glands in the groins and private parts,[51] and another who was afflicted by dysentery, was admitted to the medical care of the Durban Prison Hospital.[52]

From April 1900 onwards the ranks of the suspects arriving to work in the Durban harbour were constantly enlarged as individuals[53] and groups arrived, such as the 21 prisoners who were sent down on 18 August 1900[54] and the group that was received in January 1901.[55] By December 1901, the number of suspects imprisoned and employed on the Bluff stood at 215.[56]

Each of the suspects who arrived in Durban for forced employment had their own story to tell and similarly the British military had theirs why they were chosen for forced labour. From the available archival material it is possible to construct some of these accounts. One such individual is Somunpungo. Joseph Lombaardt Colling of the farm Zuurfontein near Ladysmith testified that he lost all his cattle to African scouts attached to the British military. Somunpungo, who resided on the farm of a neighbour, "saw the cattle being driven by the native scouts". The fact that this act of theft was observed by Somunpungo and that he could in future act as a possible witness was enough evidence to have him branded as a suspect and carted off to Durban. Colling, in a humane gesture, had the family of Somunpungo moved to his farm.[57]

Somunpungo was joined by two suspected Boer spies, Tom and Hortchic, who were sent down by the Provost Marshall "for labour on the breakwater".[58] On 30 November 1901, a further three suspects were sent down for employment in the Durban harbour. One of these was "a Basotho boy called Tietzman who have been employed as Scout and Cattle Herd by the Boers in the Orange River Colony".[59] These three suspects formed only the tip of the iceberg since at this stage Africans

49 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 7 May 1900 - 25 May 1900.

50 PAR, NHD II/I/25: Note EM Pearse, no date.

51 *Ibid*. Minute paper on suspected Boer African spies sent to Durban Harbour, 23 April 1900 – 1 May 1900.

52 *Ibid*. Memorandum Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 30 April 1900.

53 PAR, NHD II/7/24: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 21 June 1900.

54 PAR, Magistrate of Ladysmith (hereafter 1/LDS) 3/3/14: Minute paper Inspector WV Dorehill – Magistrate Klip River County, 18 August 1900.

55 PAR, NHD II/7/24: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 24 January 1901.

56 PAR, NHD II/5/5: Harbour Engineer monthly reports, 1900-1901.

57 PAR, CSO 2871: Invasion losses enquiry commission claim by JL Colling, 6 September 1900.

58 PAR, NHD II/I/37: Memorandum Provost Marshall Johannesburg to Commandant of Durban, 16 September 1901.

59 *Ibid*. Correspondence Harbour Department and Commandant of Durban on the arrival of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 30 November 1901.

from the two Republics, rounded up by the drives aimed at ending the guerrilla activities of the Boer commandoes, replaced Natal Africans as the dominant group of suspects. Evidence for this is the fact that the number of suspects skyrocketed from 97 to 170 in September 1901 and to 215 in December 1901.[60]

All in all the number of suspects imprisoned on the Bluff showed small monthly fluctuations and from August 1900 to July 1901 remained at around 90 individuals. This changeability can be attributed to the orders issued, from time to time, by the GOC L of C that suspects whose cases were doubtful should be returned to their magisterial districts so that they could be investigated. The largest such group put up for release was the 34 men sent to Ladysmith during May 1900, a month after the camp had been created. Thirty one of these men were consequently cleared and allowed to return to their home districts in Northern Natal.[61] The exceptions were Silibal ka Uladhlo, a subject of Chief Ncwadi of the Witsieshoek District, Orange Free State, Umnengwa ka Magadenie, a subject of Chief Dumisa of the Utrecht District (Transvaal), and Klaas who came from close to the Vaal River in the Transvaal – all Republican subjects. They were returned to labour on the Bluff wharfside.[62]

After this initial release of a large number of suspects only the odd individual was allowed to return home.[63] Part of the problem was the inability, between the military and civilian authorities, to synchronise the evidence against the suspects. At the same time the labour demands of the civil engineering projects on the Bluff side of the Durban Harbour were being met by the suspects and to release them all would be to the detriment of these ventures especially when considering the acute existing labour shortages at the time.

In time the constant arrival of suspects routed to work in the Durban harbour posed a challenge to Harbour Engineer Crofts, both in terms of accommodation and of finding employment for them. By early December 1901, Crofts had 215 suspects housed in two buildings. The average available capacity for each prisoner by then was a mere 2,3 cubic metres, while the Borough of Durban by laws required 8,4 cubic metres. However, into these overcrowded conditions Crofts was forced to find room for even more suspects, a concern he expressed to the Commandant of Durban. Personally he thought it was wrong for the men to be in such overcrowded conditions with poor sanitation facilities and Crofts therefore planned to make arrangements for new buildings to be erected at once. In the light of the lack of accommodation Crofts indicated, in December 1901, that no more suspects could

60 PAR, NHD II/5/5: Harbour Engineer monthly reports, 1900-1901.
61 PAR, NHD II/1/25: Minute paper dealing with release of suspected spies, 18 May 1900 – 25 May 1900.
62 *Ibid*. Minute paper dealing with Klaas, 3 June 1900 – 10 June 1900.
63 PAR, NHD II/7/25: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 26 April 1901.

be taken in until the accommodation had been increased.[64] Meanwhile, for the first time Crofts also expressed concern that, due to the oversupply of suspect labour, he would not have enough work for them all. His fears were allayed by the Commandant of Durban who pointed out that since the war was winding down the number of suspects arriving would decrease rather than increase.[65]

What complicated matters for the harbour authorities was the fact that within the jam-packed conditions, complaints about the quality and quantity of food surfaced,[66] while fights among the suspects and dissent towards the authorities were not uncommon.[67] As a result Foreman Rob Askew was frequently called out at night to quell disturbances. In his absence the Harbour Works Native Police took to suppressing disturbances in a violent manner. The Commandant of Durban, Colonel O'Neill, who was constantly called upon to punish the suspects whenever they were deemed to have transgressed, finally became suspicious of the violent treatment the prisoners were receiving after Martin September, a recaptured escapee, had complained to him. This was not the first time the Commandant had received complaints "of ill treatment & violence from the native warders". O'Neill made it clear "that I cannot but think there is some ground for it", but was also quick to shift all blame onto the Harbour Works Native Police by claiming that "if it occurs it is done without the knowledge of the authorities…" The only action taken by O'Neill was to remind Harbour Engineer Crofts that the "natives sent down under Martial Law are not convicts", implying that such treatment was acceptable when convicts were involved.[68]

It was left to Foreman Askew to respond to the allegations of violence. He stated that he was careful not to hit the suspects or to allow the workmen to do so. To clear matters up Askew asked for an independent person to interview the suspects about possible ill-treatment. The statement by Askew, and his willingness to have the claims investigated, was enough to satisfy Colonel O'Neill and the matter was dropped there and then.[69] However, this was but a cover-up as violence as a means to control the suspects and to quash resistance continued to be used and

64 PAR, NHD II/I/37: Correspondence Harbour Department – Commandant of Durban on the arrival of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 2 December 1901 – 4 December 1901.

65 *Ibid*. Correspondence Harbour Department – Commandant of Durban on the arrival of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 30 November 1901.

66 PAR, NHD II/1/32: Minute paper regarding the treatment of African suspects employed on the Bluff, 15 May 1901 – 23 May 1901.

67 PAR, NHD II/I/37: Correspondence Harbour Department – Commandant of Durban on the arrival of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 2 December 1901 – 4 December 1901.

68 PAR, NHD II/1/32: Minute paper regarding the treatment of African suspects employed on the Bluff, 15 May 1901 – 23 May 1901.

69 *Ibid*.

as a result, on 27 November 1901, the Commandant had to reiterate the fact that the men were not to be treated as prisoners or convicts as they were neither.[70]

Like the Boer POWs the suspects were, in terms of identity, a motley crew. The reasons for being arrested on suspicion of having some connection to the Boer commandoes ranged from spying, cattle herding, deserting and being a possible witness to carrying despatches. While most of the suspects were originally from the Colony of Natal, in time their ranks were swelled by prisoners who came from both the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Not only did they differ substantially in age and health, but they also differed in terms of political consciousness and education with some being able to read and write.[71]

But the suspects had much in common. They were all African, male and accused of siding with the Republican cause. Furthermore, they were never more than mere suspects and hence were never tried for any offence related to the war; nor were they legally treated as POWs, and at the same time they were all forced to work in the Durban harbour while being housed in cramped and unsanitary conditions. Therefore, in every sense of the word, they were prisoners doing hard labour while at the same time being punished for associating, in some way or another, with the Republican forces. Incarceration on the Bluff thus served two purposes which both shaped the identities of the suspects – a punitive and an economic one.

4. THE SUSPECTS PERFORMING FORCED LABOUR IN THE DURBAN HARBOUR

Within the context as outlined above the suspects entered the working world of the Durban harbour. The harbour was the heart of the Colony of Natal,[72] consequently it always loomed large in both the political and the economic consciousness of Natalians.[73] As a result it was the largest continuing civil engineering project in the Colony and its labour demands constantly remained high and costly.

According to U Dhupelia, one of the chronic grievances of the white community in the Colony of Natal was the scarcity of labour. There was a demand for African labour from many sources, including agriculture, the Durban harbour and the gold and diamond mines further afield. As a result fulfilling the labour needs

70 PAR, NHD II/1/25: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Secretary Lands and Works, 23 November 1902.

71 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 20 April 1900 – 30 April 1900.

72 C Bender, *Who saved Natal? The story of the Victorian Harbour Engineers of Colonial Port Natal* (Durban, 1988), p. 141.

73 EG Hobson, *The effects of Durban harbour on Natal's Politics, 1874-1898* (MA, University of Natal, 1961), *passim*.

was directly linked to the need for a "native policy" that would satisfy the demand for workers. Consequently, in the era prior to the Anglo-Boer War, several different measures were taken to resolve the labour shortages. These included the reserves created by Theophilus Shepstone, the creation of the *Ibahlao* or call-out system whereby different chieftains had to supply government with labourers for public works projects and the importation of indentured Indian labourers.[74]

The commencement of the Anglo-Boer War made matters worse for the Durban harbour as far as securing labour was concerned. Thousands of Natal Africans found work, both formally and informally, with the British military whose wages and benefits, which included food and clothing, and the treatment as racial equals could not be matched by the harbour. The South African Constabulary, for example, paid Africans £4 10s a month and they received the same clothes and rations as whites.[75] Warwick points out that skilled labourers such as wagon drivers could in Natal and the Cape Colony earn no less than 90 shillings a month.[76] Even the minimum payment by the military of £2 a month with rations and clothing provided, was much higher than the 10-30 shillings African labourers earned elsewhere in Natal.[77]

The high wages offered by the military allowed Natal Africans to complete a contract and then return home for a period before rejoining the British forces. These *togt* (migrant) labourers could thus sell their labour when they wanted to at a high wage while avoiding giving up their independence for longer contracts. As a result, in the estimation of the Secretary of Native Affairs for the Colony of Natal, FR Moor, 70 000 Natal Africans sold their labour to the military in one way or another in 1901 alone.[78]

All in all the military swooped up most of the labourers in Natal seeking short-term contracts and as a result freight ships in the Durban harbour waited to be discharged and were under heavy demurrage, while the ships at the wharfs could not be cleared due to a shortage of labour. What exacerbated the labour shortage was the wartime boom experienced by the Durban Harbour as one of the major logistical supply lines for the British war effort. Labour-wise matters were aggravated by the reopening of the mines and industries on the Witwatersrand at the end of 1901. A consequence of the above was that wages paid to African labourers continued to rise as the demand outstripped the supply. Forwarding and landing agents operating

74 For a detailed overview of the debates about African labour in Natal leading up to the Anglo-Boer War, see U Dhupelia, "African labour in Natal: Attempts at coercion and control 1893-1903", *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 5, 1982, pp. 36-48.

75 JM Wassermann, "African labour" in Wassermann and Kearney (eds), pp. 380-389.

76 Warwick, pp. 137-144.

77 *Natal Witness*, 21 September 1901; Warwick, p. 143.

78 Wassermann, "African labour", pp. 380-389.

in the Durban harbour therefore paid a labourer as much as 40 shillings per month while also providing housing and food, excluding meat.[79]

The direct impact of the labour shortage on the harbour, as a civil engineering project, was acknowledged by Harbour Engineer Charles Crofts when he wrote: "I find it quite impossible to engage free labour at twenty five shillings a month and rations…and I should strongly advise that the rate be increased to thirty shillings and rations."[80] In a second letter penned during this period Crofts complains that the labour that was secured was in small numbers, arrived late "and are practically useless to me as they are nearly all *umfaans*".[81]

The shortage of workers, as experienced by all sectors of the economy, meant, according to Warwick, that the governments of Natal and the Cape Colony became more directly involved in mobilising labour.[82] In the case of Natal one such direct involvement was the employment of suspects as forced labour in the harbour. Against the backdrop as outlined above the arrival of the suspects was a godsend in a time of scarce labour. In fact, they were almost the perfect labour source – prisoners suspected of having collaborated with the enemy with almost no rights. As a result it was easy to control and exploit them, while to boot they paid for their own food, accommodation and guarding. The total cost to the Natal Government was but 15 shillings a month, a very attractive option, when compared to the 40 shillings plus food and accommodation other labourers in the harbour could earn. [83]

In the context of the acute labour problems experienced, Harbour Engineer Crofts was especially happy for the first 21 suspects to arrive as he did not have as many men as he required on the Bluff where "some bush clearing [needed] to be done near Cato's Creek which I think would be suitable work for them".[84] Crofts soon adjusted his expectations upwards and found more substantial work for the growing number of suspects. From July 1900 onwards the suspects started labouring on the Bluff wharfside of the harbour, their task being the back-breaking work of pushing up the trucks containing stone used to reclaim land and construct a wharf.[85] This was part of the inner works on the Bluff side of the Durban harbour which started in 1899, and which included the planned building of a 323 metre timber wharf as well as the reclaiming of land for this purpose.[86]

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79 *Ibid*.
80 PAR, NHD IV/1/5: Letter Harbour Department – District Engineer Durban, 17 October 1901.
81 *Ibid*. Letter Harbour Department – Assistant Engineer Pietermaritzburg, 28 October 1901. *Umfaans* are young or adolescent boys.
82 Warwick, pp. 137-144.
83 Wassermann, "African labour", pp. 380-389.
84 PAR, NHD II/7/23: Letter Chief Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 26 May 1900.
85 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 30 July 1900 – 1 August 1900.
86 Bender, pp. 134-135.

At this point in time the suspects were sharing their workspace with large numbers of free African workers who were servicing the ships berthing on the Bluff wharfside to take in coal. Harbour Engineer Crofts and the Commandant of Durban found the situation in terms of security an undesirable one and the guards were ordered to keep a clear space between the suspects, the ships and the free labourers. The rationale for this was to prevent problems such as suspects escaping. However, keeping the two groups apart proved impossible since the suspects, in completing their duties, had to pass through the ranks of the free labourers engaged in coaling operations.[87] This predicament was soon resolved when the suspects, from August 1900 to December 1901, became the dominant labour grouping on the Bluff wharfside. For the 17-month period from August 1900 to December 1901, suspects, on average, comprised 25% of the total labour force of the Harbour Works Department. For the same period, suspects, on average, constituted 74% of the labour force active on the Bluff wharfside. At times, like in August and September 1900 and September and December 1901, they constituted upwards of 80% of the total number of workers involved in the civil engineering projects on the Bluff. Only in February 1901, when considering the daily averages for the labour returns for the Bluff for the 17-month period under review, did the percentage point of labour for suspects dip below 60%.[88]

During this time the suspects were involved in land reclamation and wharf building.[89] More specifically a rubble retaining mound was finished, while piling for the 323 metres of wharfage and three retaining walls were also completed.[90] The enormity of the forced labour the suspects had performed becomes clear when the construction activities for one month, May 1901, when the suspects constituted 72% (88 men) of the labour force on the Bluff, is considered. In his report on the work done at the south breakwater for the mentioned month, A Stephenson indicated that the following were undertaken: "54, 5 ton. blocks put in area of N.S. Break; 45 Large sacks of concrete (each 1¼ ton); 71 Small sacks (each 4 cut); 40 pockets of concrete (each 1 cut); These being put down to level the foundation; 18 [?] received 100 casks of cement; 20 wagons of crushed stone received; 300 ft [92 meters]. Breakwater staging taken up."[91] What this evidence points to is that most

87 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 30 July 1900 – 1 August 1900.

88 PAR, NHD II/5/5: Harbour Engineer monthly reports, 1900-1901.

89 PAR, NHD II/5/7: Harbour Engineer annual report for 1899-1901 to Minister of Lands and Works, April 1901.

90 PAR, NHD II/5/19 and II/5/8: Harbour Engineer annual report for 1902, 25 April 1903.

91 PAR, NHD II/5/5: Harbour Engineer monthly report, May 1901.

of the manual labour undertaken on the Bluff wharfside for the second half of 1900 and the whole of 1901 had shifted onto the shoulders of the suspects.[92]

How important the labour of the suspects had become in the continuation of construction in the harbour during the war is revealed by the statistics contained in the annual reports compiled by Harbour Engineer Crofts. For 1900, on average 484 African labourers, which included 68 suspects and their 11 guards, were employed on the Bluff wharfside.[93] In the report for the following year the number of suspects rose to an average of 125, all working on the Bluff alongside 14 convicts, 47 free labourers and 25 whites.[94] In fact, at its height, in December 1901, 215 suspects or 85% of the workforce on the Bluff wharfside were African suspects imprisoned for having some connection with the Boer commandoes.[95]

In the light of the above it would therefore be fair to agree that the camp established on the Bluff, Durban, for African suspects was first and foremost created to satisfy the labour needs that arose at the time and which were brought about by the war. For that reason it is very different from the camps for Africans studied by Kessler on which he concluded that they were not created to satisfy the needs for labour.[96]

5. RESISTING IMPRISONMENT AND FORCED LABOUR

Throughout their imprisonment the suspects challenged their situation in various ways. By October 1900, roughly seven months after they had arrived as prisoners, they asked Harbour Engineer Crofts when they would be able to go home. Crofts himself was also curious to know, but not out of concern for the plight of these men, but because "in that case it will be necessary for me to make arrangements with our labour contractors to have a gang ready to take their place". The response from General Wolfe-Murray, possibly considering the guerrilla warfare tactics being adopted by the Boers at this stage, was: "I do not think that these natives should be permitted to return till the state of affairs is more pacified, and of that I see little light at present."[97]

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92 Ironically enough, as the suspects were labouring away in the Durban harbour, large numbers of Boers were passing through the selfsame harbour as POWs. What the suspects could clearly see from their vantage point on the Bluff was POW ships such as the *Catalonia, Chicago*, *City of Vienna* and the *Armenian*, bound for camps in Ceylon and India, leaving the Durban harbour.

93 PAR, NHD II/5/7: Harbour Engineer annual report for 1899-1901 to Minister of Lands and Works, April 1901.

94 *Ibid*. Harbour Engineer annual report for 1901, circa 1902.

95 PAR, NHD II/5/5: Harbour Engineer monthly reports, 1900-1901.

96 Kessler, p. 457.

97 PAR, NHD II/I/27: Minute paper regarding the employment of Africans arrested as Boer spies, 22 October 1900 – 24 October 1900.

Against the background of this statement, and their imprisonment without trial while having to perform forced labour, the suspects resisted their situation in numerous ways. The most commonly used manner was to feign sickness and in doing so withhold their labour. In early February 1901, the hottest month in sub-tropical Durban, Engineer Crofts asked the Commandant of Durban to have four prisoners examined by either the District Surgeon or some other medical man. One of the suspects, Klaas, was described as being "out of his mind" while "(t)wo of these boys have, to my knowledge, been several times to the Goal Hospital and shortly after their return refuse to work and state that they were sick".[98] Crofts clearly understood the resistance technique adopted and a month later this caused a minor crisis. On 4 March 1901, the overseers reported that 19 suspects claimed that they could not work as they were ill.

Based on their identification numbers, these men not only represented some of the earliest suspects, but also relative newcomers such as number 93. It seems that some of the men like number 37, Vicantain, number 38, Bloemfontein and number 39, Zilini, who, based on their identification numbers, had arrived together and had organised themselves into a smaller resistance group within the larger group that reported sick. The request from the timekeeper to the Chief Warder at the Durban prison was to "ask the Doctor to examine them all and send all who are malingering back, and I will deal with them accordingly". The suspects were consequently examined by District Surgeon Butwell who declared them all, barring one, fit for work. In his view they were "malingering". To complete this process took a week and the reaction of the timekeeper to this provides an indication of how important the suspects had become in the labour workings of the Durban Harbour Department: "Please [Harbour Engineer] instruct, what to do in the matter, as some of these men have been off work for nearly one week, and the chargeman on the Bluff complaints of being short handed on account of the three men being constantly away."[99] In fact, the "malingering" among the suspects was so successful that the daily average of suspects involved in labour on the Bluff dropped to its lowest point ever, 50%, meaning that the malingering was in all probability much more effective than the official documents revealed.[100]

Harbour Engineer Crofts did not have an appropriate answer ready as another nine men were soon afterwards "malingering". Eight of these men were from the original group of 19 who had previously been sent back by District Surgeon Butwell. However, this time around the suspects stood firm, "refusing to do any work". Although in every sense under civilian control the military, in the person of the Commandant of Durban, had the task of maintaining law and order

98 PAR, NHD II/7/25: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 7 February 1901.
99 PAR, NHD II/1/30: Minute paper on malingering of suspects, 4 March 1901 – 7 March 1901.
100 PAR, NHD II/5/5: Harbour Engineer monthly reports, 1900-1901.

and discipline among the suspects, Engineer Crofts, feeling that they were not able to manage the individuals which were accused of "malingering", asked the Commandant of Durban to "deal with these men as their refusal to work upsets our work on the Bluff very much". Consequently six of the suspects involved were sent to the Durban prison – including suspects number 59, Klaas, and number 5, Sutiwana,[101] two prisoners who, due to their actions, stood out above the rest of the suspects.

Klaas, or Andreas Klaas, as he claimed his real name to be, managed to play the system successfully. He arrived on 1 May 1901 having been accused of riding transport for the Boer forces. Klaas reported sick the following day and remained in hospital until 31 May. He was then returned with a note from the Chief Warder of the Durban prison who deemed him insane. This claim was supported by the views of other suspects. During the next four days Klaas caused immense trouble on the Bluff by refusing to work. Consequently Harbour Engineer Crofts asked the Commandant of Durban to deal with him.[102] A window of opportunity to do this opened for the Commandant when the GOC gave the order to send suspects whose cases were regarded as doubtful back to their home districts. As a result Klaas was sent to Ladysmith so as to be released to his home district.[103] Klaas, however, proved to be a problem to the authorities in Ladysmith. On being questioned he stated that his real name was actually Andries Nakana who resided near the Vaal River in the Transvaal. Since nothing pointed to him being from the Ladysmith District he was returned, under escort, to Durban. Klaas, whose name now became Mahalimana ka Matemba, and who now claimed to be of Shangaan descent, was back in Durban to work as a suspect, his attempt at feigning madness and illness having failed.[104]

Another of the serial "malingerers" claiming to be sick was suspect number 5, Sutiwana.[105] He found himself in trouble when he was accused by Foreman Rob Askew, in charge of the Bluff works, of assault. Apparently Sutiwana was called upon to do some work but he took no notice of the order. When the instruction was repeated he again paid no attention. The African policeman nearest to him then told him to turn around as Askew was talking to him. In reaction Sutiwana picked up a stone and flung it at the policeman. Further trouble was prevented by the intervention of a second policeman who held him down. Consequently Sutiwana was brought before the Commandant of Durban who, under martial law, sentenced him to 14 days imprisonment with hard labour.[106] It seems that such violent reaction

101 PAR, NHD II/1/30: Minute paper on malingering of suspects, 4 March 1901 – 7 March 1901.
102 PAR, NHD II/1/25: Minute paper dealing with Klaas, 3 June 1900 – 10 June 1900.
103 *Ibid*. Minute paper dealing with release of suspected spies, 18 May 1900 – 25 May 1900.
104 *Ibid*. Minute paper dealing with Klaas, 3 June 1900 – 10 June 1900.
105 PAR, NHD II/1/30: Minute paper on malingering of suspects, 4 March 1901 – 7 March 1901.
106 PAR, NHD II/1/37 Correspondence regarding suspect Number 5, Sutiwana, 23 November 1901 – 12 February 1901.

towards the authorities was not uncommon and an anonymous suspect who constantly refused to work was at a later stage accused of attempting to strike Foreman Askew.[107]

Using sickness as a strategy to avoid work must have served to mask real health problems such as when a case of dysentery was reported.[108] Nevertheless, in terms of health, the suspects proved to be remarkably resilient when considering their circumstances, since at the most only three deaths occurred. On 5 September 1900, a suspect named Mini, died on the Bluff[109] while the deaths of two suspects, which could have included Mini, was mentioned in the report for the period 1899-1901.[110]

A different way of resisting imprisonment and the associated forced labour was to escape. On 11 February 1901 two suspects, "Philip. Height 5ft.6in, two small earrings in ears, pimpled face, bad knees, wore light slate coloured trousers and blue shirt, very black complexion" and "William. Height about 5ft.9in, wearing moleskin trousers and blue shirt, light coloured features", escaped from the Bluff. Both these suspects spoke English and could read and write. From the available evidence it is unclear whether they were eventually recaptured but it would not have been overly difficult for the escapees to be absorbed into the cosmopolitan mix of war-time Durban. Not long afterwards a suspect named Ganiwe escaped. He was eventually apprehended some kilometres from the Bluff camp.[111] On 15 May 1901 another three suspects escaped. Suspect number 100, named Jurle, "about 5'10" age about 30. Wearing dark clothes received here 13th April 1901" who was from De Jagers Drift on the border between Natal and the Transvaal, and suspect number 46, Unesutu, from the Middelburg District in the Transvaal who was "about 5'8", age about 27. Wearing dark clothes and boots, received here 12 June 1900", managed to get away. The third escapee, Martin September, was recaptured the same day.[112]

Martin September, however, when brought before the Commandant of Durban, Colonel O'Neill, raised several issues including ill-treatment and violence at the hands of the Harbour Works Native Police.[113] In his response Foreman Rob Askew blamed September for what had happened to him because he was constantly advising other suspects to escape while he also, on two occasions, fought against

107 PAR, NHD II/7/25: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 13 February 1901.
108 PAR, NHD II/2/26: Correspondence between Harbour Engineer C Crofts and Commandant of Durban, 2 December 1901 – 21 December 1901.
109 PAR, NHD II/7/24: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 5 September 1900.
110 PAR, NHD II/5/7: Harbour Engineer annual report for 1899-1901 to Minister of Lands and Works, April 1901.
111 PAR, NHD II/7/25: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 12 February 1901.
112 PAR, NHD II/1/32: Minute paper regarding the treatment of African suspects employed on the Bluff, 15 May 1901.
113 *Ibid*.

other suspects. He had also, at another time, challenged two of the workmen to fight against him. From the statement made by Askew it seems that all these incidences had been ignored and the only time violence was inflicted on September was when the policemen had to use their knobkerries to subdue him when he was resisting his recapture. This explanation was enough for Colonel O'Neill to dismiss out of hand the complaints made by September.[114]

6. CLOSURE OF THE CAMP AND CONCLUSION

From early 1902 onwards the suspects were systematically released from imprisonment on the Bluff. On 5 February 1902, Harbour Engineer Charles Crofts asked the Commandant of Durban to arrange for the removal of the remainder of the men. In his view the best workers had already been taken away and those who remained behind were "utterly useless for hard work so that we can do practically nothing with them and they are taking up quarters which could be available for free native labour".[115] Although the reasons for the release are not explained in the official documentation the war was slowly grinding to a conclusion which made it legally and morally very difficult to keep the suspects imprisoned. The final removal of the suspects in February 1902 coincided with the opening of the Umbilo POW camp across the harbour.[116]

Charles James Crofts was awarded the Natal Medal for his role in the Anglo-Boer War for two reasons: Firstly, for his judicious dredging which improved the average channel depth of the Durban harbour at low tide to just less than 20 feet. The second reason was for his general role in keeping the harbour functional as a lifeline during the conflict.[117] Bender, in his work which memorialises the harbour engineers who created the Durban harbour, likewise eulogises the contribution of Charles Crofts. Mentioned, although not in the same vein, are the engineers, consultants, port captains, pilots, tug masters, divers, Masulah boatmen and those who worked in the boiler rooms of the incoming ships. But this is as close as he gets to honouring ordinary labourers – free and convict alike – who had made all the harbour engineers who they were.[118]

To the above list must be added the names of the suspects accused by the British Army of collaborating with the Boer commandoes, and who were, in the case of Natal Africans, not tried for treason or for contravening martial law and, in

114 *Ibid*. Minute paper regarding the treatment of African suspects employed on the Bluff, 15 May 1901 – 23 May 1901.
115 PAR, NHD II/7/27: Letter Harbour Engineer C Crofts – Commandant of Durban, 5 February 1902.
116 Wassermann and Wohlberg in Wassermann and Kearney (eds), pp. 114-117.
117 Bender, p. 128.
118 *Ibid*., p. 148.

the case of Republican Africans, not treated as POWs but relegated to help building the Durban harbour by means of forced labour.