

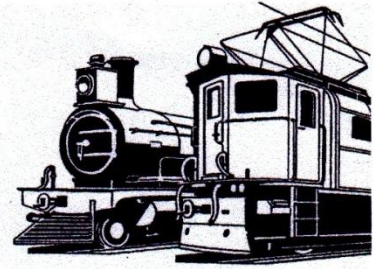
# Railway History Group

of Southern Africa,

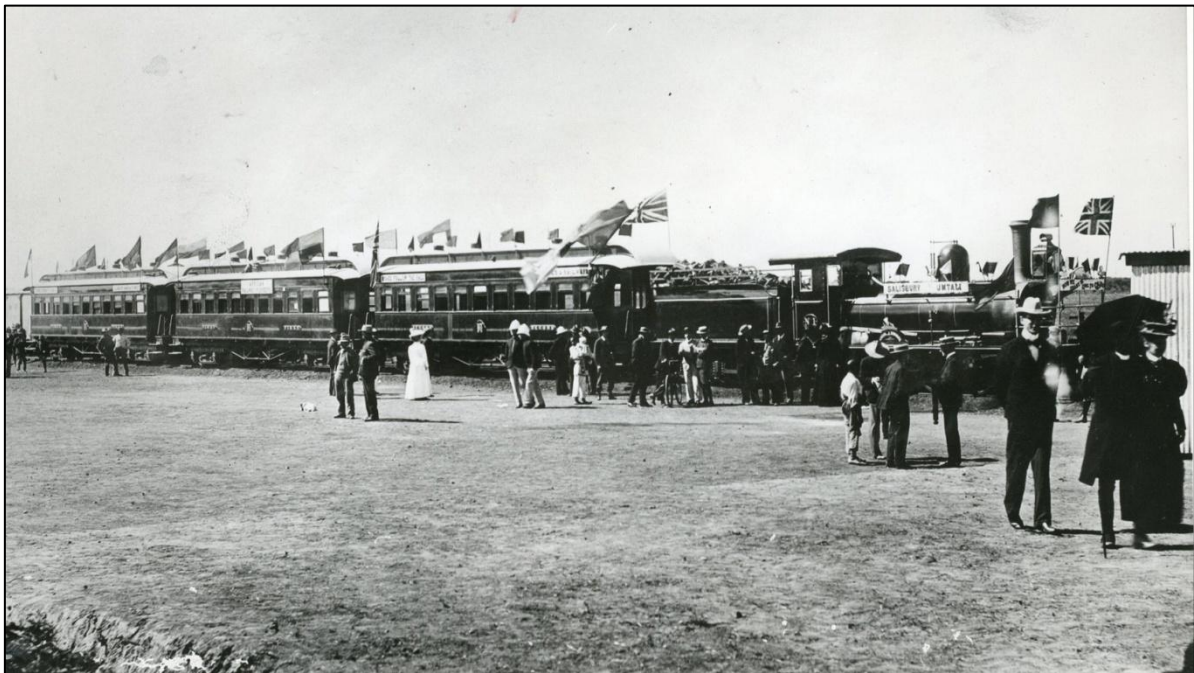
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## Bulletin No. 119 September 2013



*The first train from Salisbury to Umtali, photographed at "BBY" Station on 22 May 1899. Does anyone know where "BBY" Station was? The locomotive is Mashonaland Railways No. 1, named "Cecil J. Rhodes". It is an ex Cape Government Railways 4<sup>th</sup> class converted Joys. Although not clear, in the photo, the tender was filled with wood. The three coaches are a mystery. They have an unusual roofline and are unlike any other coaches in Southern Africa. Can anyone throw any light on them?*

*Photo: Kimberley Africana Library*

## Editorial

If you have not yet paid your subs, would you please do so.

The first Class 20E dual voltage locomotive has been completed, in China. Transnet ordered 95 of these locos. They will be used on the Sishen – Port Elizabeth route. For more info do a search on: Transnet Class 20E.

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# TWO BOER WAR ATTACKS ON TRAINS OF THE CAPE GOVERNMENT RAILWAY

## Part 1

By Allen Duff

In March 1900 the Boer leaders decided to start guerrilla warfare. Where numbers permitted convoys would be attacked and trains and railways and other infrastructure would be damaged or destroyed.

*Section of map "Hanover" compiled for the Field Intelligence Dept : Feb 1900*





The Scorched Earth policy of the British Army in the Free State & Transvaal severely reduced the food and forage which was available to the Boers and their horses. In the latter part of 1900 the Boer leaders decided that certain commandos would attempt to enter the Cape Colony. This invasion it was hoped would provide new sources of food & forage, draw off British forces from the Free State and Transvaal and cause a rebellion amongst Boer sympathisers.

One of the commandos was led by Commandant Pieter Hendrik Kritzing. The commando crossed the Orange River on 15 December 1900 west of Aliwal North at Odendaalstroom. From the Zuurberg/Steynsburg area the commando rode west and crossed the Midlands line of the Cape Government Railway (CGR) between Rosmead and Naauwpoort. [1] The commando of about 300 horsemen rode in groups. One group was under the command of Gideon Scheepers who decided to attack a train south of Sherborne station. Scheepers had considerable war-experience of track and train wrecking.



*Milestone 256 just south of the CGR's Sherborne station.*

Press reports give few details of the attack. [2] However, a report in the Cape Archives by H S Child the CGR's Naauwpoort District Locomotive Superintendent to the CGR's Chief Locomotive Superintendent, H Beatty, provides much detail.[3]

On 30 December 1900 Train 21 Down ( north to south) left Naauwpoort at 05:40 with 28 vehicles. The train was ambushed between 254 and 254¼ miles.

Distances given in the CGR's 1910 timetable indicate the location.[4] The CGR erected large mileage stones adjacent to the track. Some of these milestones are still *in situ* today. The disused CGR track-bed in the area of the ambush still exists. A deviation was constructed by the South African Railways (SAR) in the 1950s through the location, but much of the ambush area remains as in 1901.



*Allen, at the milestone for 256 miles.*

About 07:00 as the train passed through a cutting in a hillside, the Boers opened fire from both sides of the track. Driver Loveless tried to get away, but when the locomotive was between 253¾ and 254 miles, a bullet penetrated the vacuum brake pipe near the emergency valve in the guard's van. The ingress of air caused the train to come to a stand.

There were 40 men of the Prince Alfred's Guards (PAG) [5] on the train. An officer and four men were wounded. Pte W Palmer died the next day in Naauwpoort where he is buried. The PAG men were on leave and had limited ammunition. When their bullets ran out they surrendered. Also in the saloon coach were some women and children.

After the train stopped, the driver was taken off the footplate and the locomotive was uncoupled from the train. The reversing gear was set full ahead and the regulator opened wide. The locomotive then ran away in the direction of Rosmead. A lack of steam brought it to a halt near 247 miles. It was later taken into Rosmead by an armoured train. Except for a few bullet holes in the tender and the cab, the locomotive sustained no damage.





*CGR track-bed can be seen on the right where it passed through a cutting in the hillside. Train 21 Down was here when the attack started. Photo looking east.*

Before the locomotive was sent off, the saloon coach and composite van were uncoupled and the trucks drawn forward about 100 yards. The trucks were then set on fire and burnt out.[6] The Boers took the PAG rifles, freed the prisoners and rode off to the west.



*254 miles is at the slightly yellowish bush next to the CGR track-bed in the centre of the photo. Train 21 Down came to a stand still here. Photo looking south-east. Refer to the compass on the satellite photo.*

The loco crew and guard walked to Sherborne where they arrived about 07:30 and reported the ambush. Sherborne's banking locomotive [7] was sent to collect the two coaches, the passengers and the wounded.





UNITED STATES OF AMERICA			
OFFICERS, SERGEANTS AND MEN			
WHO DIED IN THIS DISTRICT			
IN THE ANGLO-BOER WAR 1899-1902			
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99	99	99	99
100	100	100	100

*The name of Prince Alfred's Guards Pte W Palmer is fourth from the bottom.*

On arrival at Sherborne they were informed that the armoured train which they had hoped would provide protection, had returned to Rosmead before proceeding to Middelburg. (The military feared an attack on Middelburg was imminent.) They were then escorted by infantry to the site of the ambush where they arrived about 15:15.

They picked up 21 trucks and hauled them to Sherborne. They then cleared the wreckage of two burnt-out trucks (including the underframes). The District Engineer left a gang to clear up while they proceeded to Bangor. There they awaited the arrival of Down trains 15,17 and 19. The driver of 17 Down reported having heard shots. The repair ganger and crew said that they "had been under fire for about 10 minutes." Mr Child and his party then returned to Naauwpoort where they arrived about 21:30.

#### FOOTNOTES :

[1] Naauwpoort was officially changed to Noupoot in the 1950s when the state standardised the spelling of place names.

[2] *The Journal*. 03.01.1901 Page 3, Column 2.

Published by Grocott & Sherry, Grahamstown.

[3] Cape Archives : CGR 2/1/78 Part II

This file contains financial accounts which list Boer damages and their cost to the CGR. The accounts fill three box files. The report on the Sherborne attack was found in the Midlands section. No other such reports have to date been found in any of the three files.

[4] 1910 timetable : Miles and chains from Port Elizabeth  
Rosmead Junction 243M 8C ; Bangor 245M 55C ; Sherborne 255M 35C ;  
Ludlow 259M 19C ; Carlton 263M 48C ; Naauwpoort Junction 269M 35C

[5] The PAG was recruited in Port Elizabeth.

[6] Details of damage to trucks. Most were partially burnt. Total £1600.

Cape (CGR) Sheep trucks - 7 (2 Burnt out entirely) ; Short B van – 1 ;

Cattle wagon - 4 ; OVS Sheep wagon - 1 (Burnt out entirely)

{OVS – Oranje Vrystaat Spoorweg}

Prison van – 1 ; L S B – 2 ; ZASM Box truck ; ZASM Flat

{Nederlandsche Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg-Maatschappij}

[7] A locomotive was based at Sherborne to bank trains up the Charlton Heights to Naauwpoort.

## PART 2

Flushed by British columns from the Camdeboo Mountains north of Aberdeen, a vengeful Commandant Gideon Scheepers and his commando rode east to the Graaff-Reinet / Klipplaat railway. On 12 July 1901 they looted and burnt the Cape Government Railway's (CGR) buildings at Aberdeen Road station.

On 14 July Commandant Wynand Malan left the Cape Colony for the Free State. The young Commandant Piet van der Merwe took over and joined forces with Scheepers. Intent on further mayhem, provisions and clothing, they rode west to the Beaufort-West / De Aar railway. Scheepers decided to ambush a train at Ganna siding (375 miles from Cape Town) north of Nelspoort.



*Aberdeen Road's corrugated-iron station building which Scheepers' commando burnt down 12.07.1901: AG 2559*

On 20 July 1901 train 509 Down (south to north) which was hauled by almost new CGR 6<sup>th</sup> Class locomotive No. 265, arrived at Nelspoort station at 23:35. After shunting a truck into the consist, the train departed at 23:45. It was a mixed train of 17 trucks, three bogie saloon coaches and a guard's van.

In the coaches were soldiers returning from leave. There was only the odd officer. The troops had rifles, but limited ammunition. In one compartment was a woman with children.

During the shunting Guard Trollip had seen a man going towards the front of the train. He had presumed that he was one of the soldiers, but he was a Boer who hid in one of the trucks.

Driver William Johnson – a CGR employee for 19 years – reported that all went well until the train approached the North Warning Board of Ganna siding when the locomotive struck



something on the left side and rolled badly for 10 to 15 yards. At the same time he heard “rifles firing over the engine” and he “put on extra steam”. About 50 to 60 yards later the vacuum gave out, the brakes came on and the train stopped. [It was later established that neither the locomotive nor any of the trucks and saloon coaches had derailed.]

*Below the station master's house :AG 2560*



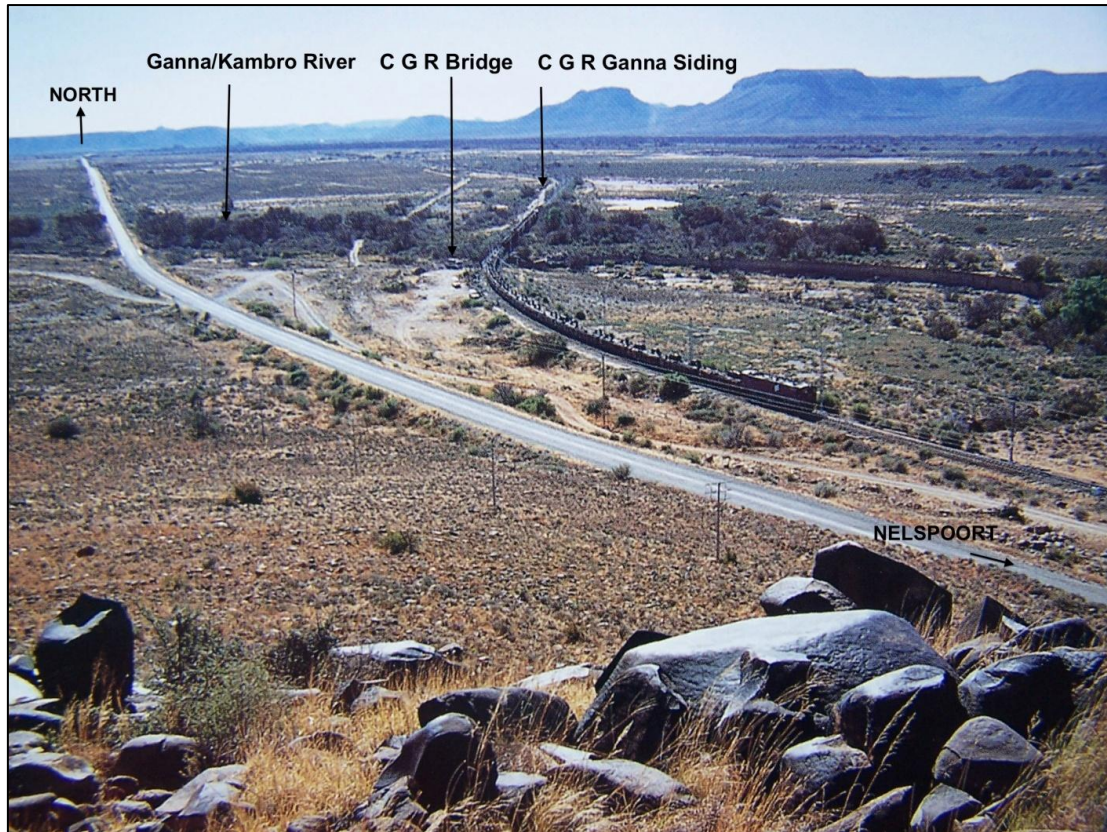
The driver climbed down on the fireman's side (the left / west side) and ran towards the rear of the train. On the way he warned soldiers on a coach balcony of the presence of the Boers. He told Guard Joseph Havelock Trollip (CGR employee for eleven years) that he thought there was a problem with the track – possibly a broken rail. The two men were then captured while inspecting the track about 50 yards behind the train. Moments later when the troops on the train started firing, the Boer captors made off.

Driver Johnson then started to creep back to the locomotive. The shooting became heavier so he dived into a furrow. He crept forward on his stomach.

After he had passed the coaches, he ran to the locomotive. Back on the footplate he was again captured. This time by Scheepers who instructed him to uncouple the locomotive, to open the regulator and to send the locomotive driver-less towards Krom River station. However, this was not possible as the fireman, Rabolini, had deliberately left the injector on and primed the boiler.

Scheepers then ordered two men to guard the driver in the adjacent veld while he joined his men who were looting the train. By this time the soldiers' ammunition was exhausted and the officer i/c had surrendered. Some of the Boers then set fire to the trucks, the saloons and the guard's van. They used straw, paper and paraffin.





Meanwhile the train-guard had walked west into the veld away from the train. After crossing the Ganna spruit (today the Kambro spruit) he cut back over a ridge to the railway. In the distance he could see the coaches burning. He reached Nelspruit station at 02:40 and raised the alarm.



*Ganna/Kambro spruit. CGR stone bridge pillars – note furthest pillar – heightened with concrete by SAR after 1910.*



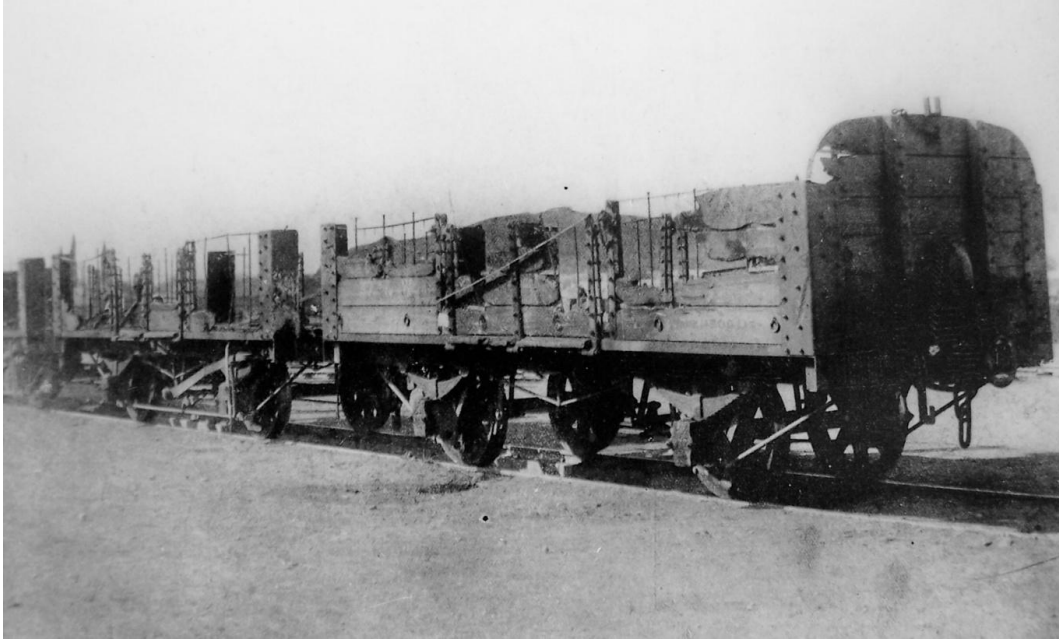
Meanwhile driver Johnson's captors had become befuddled with looted liquor. This enabled him to sneak away at about 03:30 towards Nelspoort station.



*Burnt-out coach bogies and trucks staged at Beaufort-West. AG 15024*

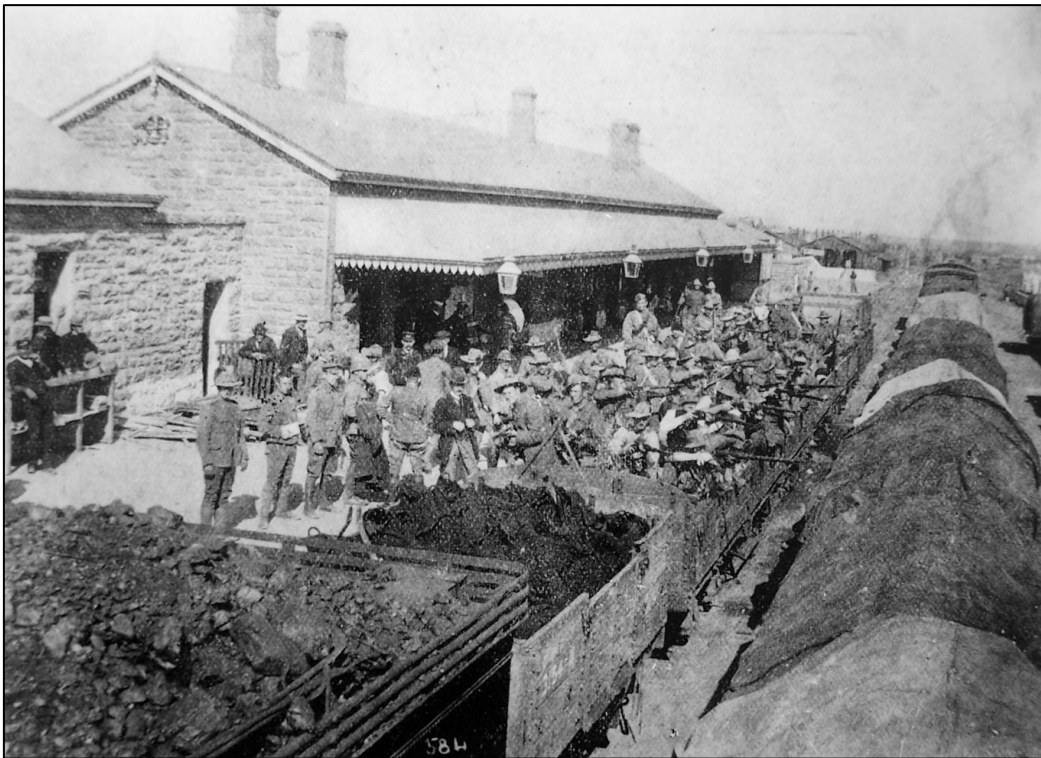
The armoured train – with driver Geraghty - on patrol south of Nelspoort had been alerted. While advancing north of Nelspoort the armoured train met driver Johnson about 200 yards from Ganna. Those manning the armoured train could see a Boer throwing a box into the burning guard's van and other Boers in the veld. The gun on the armoured train was so mounted that it could not turn 180 degrees. Rifle-fire then drove off the Boers.





*Burnt trucks from Ganna Siding. AG 15022*

Driver Johnson stated that when a prisoner, a Boer (Hendrik Johannes Botha – refer below) had snatched his watch from his pocket. The next day Johnson found his watch on the coal in the locomotive's tender.



*Troops – probably local militia - entrained at Beaufort-West for Nelspoort.*

Also found the next day was a Martini Metford rifle - with a bent barrel and a broken stock - near the fifth truck behind the locomotive. It was probably used by the Boer – the one the guard saw next to the train at Nelspoort – to break the vacuum pipe to stop the train at Ganna siding.





*Beaufort-West based armoured train. Gun limited to a 90 degree firing range. AG 15027*

Mr Bedggood [Traffic Manager Beaufort-West] arrived at Ganna at 11: 45. He reported *inter alia* that the locomotive had not derailed and was not damaged.

No vehicles had derailed. All wood-work had burnt to cinders.



*The three British graves behind the Post Office at Nelspoort*

Mr Bedggood also reported : “We buried the three killed and one Boer at Nelspoort and brought [on an ambulance train] the 18 wounded to Beaufort-West since which one died about an hour ago was (sic) informed the remainder were doing well.”



*The grave of the Boer – reburied in the Murraysburg cemetery - who was killed during the Ganna Siding attack.*

Six soldiers were killed or died from wounds and 21 were wounded. Sergeant A Jeary, Privates A G Tanner and J Welsh (not confirmed) were buried behind the Nelspoort Post Office at the station. [1] On the Boer side Hendrik Johannes Botha was killed. He was not buried at Nelspoort, but on the farm Kruidfontein. He was reburied in the Murraysburg cemetery in the 1960s as his grave obstructed a district road deviation.

The District Locomotive Superintendent (De Aar – Arthur Mac Nay) inspected all the vehicles of 509 Down. All were burnt and only frames remained. Two or three trucks which were “not fit to run”, were “cast clear of the rails” and left at Ganna. The damaged bogies and other trucks were hauled to Beaufort-West and staged in the yard. [2] The line was cleared for traffic by 14:30 on 21.07.1901.



On 12 October 1901 the Assistant General Manager, McEwan, wrote to the General Manager (GM), T R Price : "I understand that you have concurred in the Chief Loco Superintendent's recommendation that the driver [Johnson] of the train should receive a watch suitably inscribed and £10 cash; the fireman [Rabolini] [3] to receive a watch and £5 cash. I would recommend that guard Trollip be placed in the same position as the fireman". On 15.10.1901 the GM instructed the Chief Railway Storekeeper to issue the watches.

On 18 December 1901 Driver Johnson in Beaufort-West wrote to T R Price, GM of the CGR

"Believe me your gift of the watch is deeply appreciated and more so in your having arranged that it should be handed to me by General Settle in presence of the whole garrison.

This honour, I really do not deserve, as not for a moment can I overlook the fact that what I did, was my duty.

I have the honour to be Sir  
Your Obedient Servant  
Driver William Johnson".

However, the concern of management for the employees of the CGR did not end there. GM T R Price wrote to Mrs E H\* Milliard, wife of the station master at Nelspoort : (\*Her husband's initials - per Victorian custom!)

"....you placed at the disposal of the authorities your house for the purpose of attending the wounded and personally gave great assistance yourself ..... the thanks and appreciation of the Department as well as the Government. If you will send me particulars of the damage to your linen and mattresses, I shall have pleasure in giving instructions either for the same to be replaced or for you to be recompensed to the extent of such damage.

I have the honour to be,  
Madam,  
Your obedient Servant  
T R Price  
General Manager."

The ladies who assisted Mrs Milliard were also thanked.

Mrs S Milliard replied :

"I did no more than anyone would have done under the circumstances; I only regret I was unable to do more, to relieve the poor fellows sufferings at the time. I fully appreciate the kind feeling which prompted your sending the wire.

I am dear Sir  
Yours truly  
S Milliard  
Nelspoort station  
26<sup>th</sup> July 1901"

FOOTNOTES :

Based on reports in the Cape Archives : CGR 2/1/235 Ref. A79/32511 and informed by *Commandant Gideon Scheepers and the search for his grave* by Taffy and David Shearing. Published 1999. pp. 103 – 107.

AG Photos - reference is Cape Archives.

[1] Sgt AM Jeary, Cape Colony Cyclist Corps. Died at Ganna Siding.  
 Sgt AG Tanner, Imperial Yeomanry 10 Battalion, Base Co.  
 Died at Ganna Bridge.  
 Third grave (not confirmed) : Pte J Welsh, South African Light Horse.  
 Died at Ganna Bridge.

Died of Wounds and buried at Beaufort-West :

Pte E McLennon Imperial Yeomanry 12 (13?) Battalion, Staff. 09.08.1901  
 Cross-plaque : Tpr P McLermon Imperial Yeomanry 45<sup>th</sup> 10.08.1901  
 5.

Sgt AL Smart Imperial Yeomanry 15 Battalion, 56 Company. 23.07.1901  
 Tpr F White Imperial Yeomanry 18 Battalion, 75 Company 21.07.1901  
 Cross-plaque : Tpr Frances White 76<sup>th</sup> Died 22.07.1901

[2] Vehicle List (from correspondence between the Traffic Manager Beaufort-West and the Traffic Manager Cape Town.)

CGR Rolling-Stock

Short Van 360

Trucks 3727; 3294; 9858 Docks to Kimberley. Coal

Truck 3097 Cape Town to Kimberley. Cement

Truck 9962 Cape Town to Naauwpoort. Stores. Erroneously at first reported as carrying horses. The error arose because the word "stores" was illegibly written on the vehicles list.

Truck 3396 Cape Town to De Aar. Tranships.

Trucks 8653;2004 Cape Town to North. Baggage etc

ZASM Rolling-Stock (ZASM - Nederlandsche Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg-Maatschappij.

ZASM rolling-stock in the Cape and Natal colonies when the war started, was utilised by the CGR and NGR.)

Truck 6242\* Beaufort-West to Port Elizabeth. Wool. \*Gondola type

Truck 4691 Beaufort-West to De Aar. Tranships

Truck 6630 Beaufort-West to De Aar. Empty. Riddled with bullets, but otherwise all right.

Truck 6025 Beaufort-West to Victoria Road. Tranships.

Truck 2169 Docks to Modder River. Oats.

Truck 10372 Docks to Orange River. Oats.

Trucks 3565;7885 Docks to Mafeking. Mealies.

Saloons 38; 593; 568 Cape Town to North. Troops.

Truck 2547 Nelspoort to Richmond Road. Tranships.



A later telegram confirmed Truck 2547 was attached to the train at Nelspoort for Richmond Road. The guard gave the number of this truck - from memory - in error as 2459. The guard's record book having been burned.

Later a dispute arose between the CGR GM and the High Commissioner over whether the ZASM stock should be returned to the Imperial Military Railways (IMR) for repair. There is extensive correspondence on file - with regard to payment for damages to rolling-stock - between the IMR and the CGR. The CGR argued damages were to IMR's account. The dispute was resolved when

"the High Commissioner recognises that all rolling-stock destroyed or damaged as an act of war by His Majesty's enemies would be paid for by the Imperial Military Authorities." It is not known if the rolling-stock was repaired.

[3] Inscription on the watch awarded to Fireman H F Rabolini :

Presented to Fireman HF Rabolini by the CGR as a mark of appreciation of ??? when his train was attacked by Boers at Ganna Siding July 1901.



*These photographs are in the Knysna Museum. Rabolini (the spelling on the watch) was descended from Italian families who in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were bought to Gouna (near Knysna) to start a silk-worm industry which never got off the ground. Hence the error in the wording i.e. the confusion of Ganna with Gouna.*