

Emily Back: Uncovering a Forgotten Heroine



At the Emily Back Statue from left: Robert Forsyth, executive chairman of Recreation Africa Group of Companies; Rob Milne, author and historian who introduced the story of Emily; major John Pennefather, specialist historian on the Anglo Boer War; and colonel Pieter Steel, Australian Defence Attaché. Photo: Charl du Plessis (snap2art@gmail.com)

Kedar and its owners, Recreation Africa Group Of Companies, are calling on everyone who has any pictures, letters or any other historic articles or information about women and black people's activities in the Anglo Boer War, to contact their local liaison for this project, photographer and image restorer Charl du Plessis at 073 142 6407 or snap2art@gmail.com.



The historic Pieter Kruger house, to be dedicated to women and black people in the Anglo Boer War, with the Emily Back Statue enclosure on the left. Photo: Charl du Plessis (snap2art@gmail.com)

Rustenburg – A largely unknown 19-year old heroin of the Anglo Boer War was honoured for her bravery during a special occasion on Saturday, 8 October, at the Kedar Heritage Lodge, more than 117 years after the event.

A brass statue of Emily Back, designed by Nico Wessels and created by local artist Adam Madebe, was unveiled in front of the historic Piet Kruger house, adjacent to one of the Paul Kruger houses on the property.

On 22 July 1900, a contingent of approximately 200 mounted Australian troops (mainly Western Australian Bushmen) rode into a Boer ambush very close to the house where Emily lived as a governess of an Afrikaans family, a mere 18km from where her statue was now unveiled. They had no cover and were under heavy fire from all directions. Within the first 10 minutes, all but 10 of the 250 horses fell to the hail of bullets and many soldiers were wounded in the hours following that.

Emily, who saw the horsemen passing the house earlier and heard the fighting, borrowed a horse from a wounded Australian soldier she took in and bravely rode through the storm of bullets to attend to more of the wounded. She later rode off to seek extra medical assistance from a separated group of Australians, who was also under attack.

The only medical doctor in the contingent was however wounded himself, but she was informed that assistance was already sent for. She once again rode fearlessly back through the cross fire and attended further to the wounded. The number of soldiers whose lives she saved during the skirmish at Koster River (also known as Rooipoierspruit), will never be known.

Although even heralded by the Boers at the time, to whom she was well-known, as well as being referred to in Gen. J.C. Smuts' memoirs as "the girl who was an honour to South African womanhood", the letter of recommendation for her bravery from the Australian field officer, never reached its destination and Emily never received the proper recognition she deserved. She passed away in 1960.

Unveiling the statue was Colonel Pieter Steel, Australian Defence Attaché for Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, South Sudan and Africa at Large, and Major John Pennefather, specialist historian on the Anglo Boer War and member of The South African Military History Society.

Emily's statue is placed at a special location next to the historical Pieter Kruger house. Kedar Heritage Lodge is in the process of dedicating this house to the role of women and Black people (the latter involved in various roles on both the British and Boer sides) in the War. There are many little known facts about these people's roles, like that there were about 30 000 black people who took up arms on the British side to fight the Boers, serving mostly as scouts, messengers and blockhouse guards. On the other side, equally unknown was the British separate concentration camps for Blacks, where about 20 000 died (mostly children) due to illness, mal-nutrition and exposure.



The Emily Back Statue (designed by Nico Wessels) with its creating artist, Adam Madebe.



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SAPS Marikana: 014 572 3100/43
SAPS Rtb: 014 590 4112
SAPS Thlabane: 014 565 9171/54/59

AMBULANCE

Ambulance / Metro Control Room: 014 597 6612
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Trauma Rescue: 014 594 0689 / 0861 789 911
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SLANG NOODNOMMERS

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