

A 1896 Swiss Cover to Matabeleland

by Roger Heath

Ndebele warriors began the Second Rebellion against the British South Africa Company on March 25, 1896, and within a week 141 Europeans were killed in Matabeleland, an area now part of modern southern Zimbabwe. European settlers living in outlying areas went to the town of Bulawayo for safety; the farms and homesteads they left behind were mostly burned and destroyed. The settlers built a laager in the center of Bulawayo to protect the nearly 1,000 women and children who had made it to safety.

An estimated 10,000 Ndebele warriors were spread in a semicircle from the Khami River 12 miles west of Bulawayo to the banks of the Umguza River three miles to the northeast, the formation like the head of a bull with "horns" poised to strike from the sides. Over three weeks, mounted patrols went out to engage and test the native warriors who were armed with various weapons, including rifles, and who seriously outnumbered the available British South Africa Company forces.

In mid-April, native attacks began within 3 miles of Bulawayo, and it was feared a much larger attack would take place. With so few defenders relative to the size of the native force, the town was vulnerable. Consequently, the European/BSA Co forces decided to go on the offensive. On April 25, 1896 a group of 115 Mounted men and 210 Cape Boys charged towards the Umguza River and made contact with a large number of Ndebele warriors. The fighting was fierce, Trooper Rowland Venables Lovett, the addressee on this cover, was shot and evacuated to Bulawayo Memorial Hospital, where he died of his wounds April 29.

It wasn't until May 11 that a relief force of 600 Rhodesians led by Cecil Rhodes fought its way to Bulawayo, linking with the defenders and allowing mail and supplies to get through. Another relief force came in from the south on May 24. Within a week, British officers arrived to take command of the various volunteer units, with Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, later to be the founder of the Boy Scouts, as second in command. Hundreds of white settlers had been killed and an estimated 2,000 native warriors died. By August 28, at the end of negotiations, armed conflict ceased. The Ndebele turned in their weapons so they could begin their planting season, in exchange for the assurance there would be no further reprisals.

This cover was mailed to Trooper Lovett, April 15, 1896 from Territet, and bears no transit marks. However, I own another cover mailed one week earlier, April 8, that transited London April 9. Both covers have smudged receiving date stamps that appear to be Bulawayo, Rhodesia, May 18, 1896. This date places the arrival of the Swiss letters at the Bulawayo post office between the entrances of the two relief forces. Trooper Lovett died 12 days prior to the letters' arrival, therefore never had the opportunity to read them. They were not returned; maybe there were other family members in Bulawayo who received the letters in his place.

For his participation in this military action Lovett was awarded the British South Africa Company medal engraved on the reverse, "Rhodesia Trooper. R.V. Lovett, Grey's Scouts. Died of wounds 29 April 1896 received on the 25th McFarlane's Patrol. Buried Bulawayo."

