

THE MEN WHO WOULD NOT MARCH



Captain Francis Phillips, doer of mighty deeds.

THE ROCK FROM WHICH WE WERE HEWN

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS was to me like Gilgamesh to the ancient Assyrians: a misty ancestral figure, a doer of Mighty Deeds in the fabled past. My Gilgamesh was a venerated great-grandfather; that both my father and his brother had "Phillips" as their middle names reflects the esteem in which Captain Phillips was held in my family and the pride with which his name was invoked in our household.

Nobody seems to have called him anything but Captain Phillips. This was true even of his fulsome obituary printed in 1920 in *The Methodist Churchman*, the South African Methodist Church's official newspaper, which contained no mention of any given name. Whatever its provenance, his title helped establish his epic stature in my thinking and I visualized him as a tall, bearded, Gilgameshian figure. On that score, as his picture probably taken in the 1860s shows, I was not wrong.

He was indeed a doer of Mighty Deeds, as will appear later in this account. And yet his only mighty deed about which I specifically remember being told was a version of that incident during the South African War, when General Smuts appeared on Captain Phillips's mine with a Boer commando and demanded that he be given dynamite. The courageous Captain, the family story went, had ordered the mine's stocks of dynamite to be hidden underground down the mine and stoutly refused to hand them over to Smuts, who had to ride away empty-handed.

During the first four or five decades of my life, I probably retailed this story to others who I wanted to impress with my lineage. Yet although something of a historian, with a good knowledge of South African history, I remained complacently ignorant of any other details about Captain Phillips. (If only I had asked my father more about his illustrious grandfather.) Then in the late 1970s, I was pleasantly surprised when, doing research for a masters' degree, I came across Captain Phillips's obituary in *The*

Methodist Churchman. It was fascinating to see that the veneration for him was not confined to my family.

Since it appeared in a denominational organ, the obituary concentrated heavily on Captain Phillips's activities in and service to the Methodist Church, noting that while he had been baptized and confirmed in the 'established Church', he had left it and joined the Bible Christians, a fundamentalist sect. They later united with the Methodists and in his later life Captain Phillips was a fervent Methodist, a Circuit Steward and a Local Preacher. This point has some bearing on the story being told here; it certainly had a major effect on the life of my family.

Besides retailing his religious convictions, the obituary also supplied some interesting biographical details, such as that he had been born in Lamerton in Devon, England in 1834 and that he had come to South Africa in 1874. It also referred to his "beloved and devoted wife" who had died in 1905, but failed to give her any names. Not until 30 years later, when this story began to be written, did I learn from Captain Phillips's death certificate – held in the quaintly named "Masters Office of the Orphan Chamber" in the Archives of the Western Cape – that his given name was Francis, and that of his wife was Rachel Ann. (They were married in the nearby town of Okehampton in 1857.) I ignored some crucial details of the obituary because they meant nothing to me at the time. Among other things, the writer recorded that Captain Phillips had been superintendent of the Namaqua Copper Company mine at Concordia in Namaqualand and that "under his wise supervision and with his wide knowledge of mining, the Concordia Mines developed and became a very valuable property"¹. I had never heard of Concordia and did even not file its name in my memory, something which I later came to regret.

My state of mind remained the same until 2004, when I fulfilled a long-held ambition to take a rafting expedition down the Orange River. My journey to the embarkation point at Vioolsdrif in Namibia took me past O'okiep, which seemed to be little more than an unattractive sprawl of buildings scattered across the semi-desert. It did hold some interest for me because my grandfather, Edward



The remnants of the huge beam engine in O'okiep – certain pointer to a strong local Cornish presence.

Polkinghorne Thomas, had come here from Cornwall as a Methodist minister in 1892.

I did not do more than glance at O'okiep* on my way north to the Orange River, but about five days later, when I was heading southwards again, I spent a night in a pleasant country hotel in O'okiep. It was when I saw the remnants of a huge Cornish beam engine, preserved as an historical monument, that I began to realise why there should have been a Methodist Church in this remote corner of the desiccated north-west Cape.

The size of the beam engine indicated there had been a major mining operation in O'okiep, and wherever there were mines, there

*Named by the local indigenous population, the word O'okiep, according to Smalberger, has "one of two meanings in Nama, depending on the pronunciation: 'the place of the big tree' or 'little fountain' (p.104). Nama, like many languages, especially those of Asia, is a tonal language.

were bound to be Cornishmen. As I later learned, for 100 years in the 18th and 19th centuries, there was a mining boom in Cornwall and western Devon. The exploitation of their rich tin, copper and later arsenic deposits enabled these two counties to dominate the world's production of these minerals; and as the Cornish historian GF Goodridge² points out, not only their men but also their women, known as balmaidens (*bal* being an old Cornish word for a mine)³, and children were among the most skilled mine operatives in the world.

However, the Cornishmen who came to work on the mines of Namaqualand did not bring either their women or children with them. To carry out the function of balmaidens, the mines employed local Khoi women, which meant that they and white immigrant miners came into regular contact. And that contact did not stop at their workplaces.

By the later 19th century, the mineral lodes of the West Country

Khoi 'balmaidens' sorting ore on a Namaqualand copper mine.
Moffat Collection, National Library of South Africa.



of England were nearing exhaustion and much larger and more technically advanced mines were coming on stream in Chile, America, Australia and South Africa. The resultant collapse of the mining industries in England's West Country led to widespread unemployment and destitution, prompting a huge diaspora of Cornish people to mines in other parts of the world, particularly those in South Africa; a popular slogan of the time was "South Africa or Starvation"⁴. Just how big the migration was can be appreciated from a large photo-poster in the Redruth railway station in Cornwall. It catches a moment in the 19th century when a passenger train is being hauled by a steam locomotive around the bend into the station. The platform is packed with men while their womenfolk and children hang over a fence on an embankment above. The caption is "The Weekly Exodus to South Africa". Many of these men would have been heading to the copper mines of Namaqualand.

The influx of Cornish people into Namaqualand meant there was bound to be a Methodist Church in O'okiep, since Cornwall and indeed the whole West Country of England had been swept by the revivalist fire of Methodism's founder John Wesley, who in the 18th century had created mass hysteria with his preaching of hell, damnation and salvation to huge crowds who gathered even on hillsides to hear him. His evangelical zeal continued to burn brightly long afterwards in the West Country, as attested by the Methodist chapels all over Cornwall. My grandfather EP Thomas was baptized in the chapel at Chynhale* near Helston in 1868, and became a Methodist minister in his early twenties.

His first charge, in 1892, was the congregation of miners and mining officials in O'okiep, who worshipped in the church which still stands there. The date of its completion, 1883, is writ large on its pediment, although the date of 1870, inscribed on the foundation stone, indicates that there was a Methodist congregation here much earlier than that. One of the founding fathers of that church was Captain John Henwood, chief agent of the Cape Copper Company,

*The explanation for the sumptuous, unMethodistical chapel in this tiny hamlet is evident in the equally sumptuous sarcophagus in front of it; that holds the remains of William Bickford-Smith, whose invention of the mining safety fuse in the early 19th century earned him a fortune. He obviously used some of the fortune to build the Chynhale chapel, and indeed the entire hamlet of Chynhale was part of his estate.

who arrived in O’okiep in the 1860s. He was one of the leading lights in O’okiep and he and his family occupied a spacious home, one of the grandest in the town, provided by the mine. Probably because of their common Methodist background, the Henwood family became good friends with my great-grandparents, Captain Francis and Rachel Phillips; and the writings of John’s wife Jane played a major role in helping me to put together this story about Captain Phillips.

It was very likely in the Methodist Church that my grandfather first encountered my grandmother, Captain Phillips’s fifth daughter, Edith. He and Rachel had six other daughters and one son. Romance blossomed, although not of the whirlwind variety; they were not married until 1896, four years after his arrival in O’okiep, when he was 28 and she 29. In fact, one story I heard from my mother was that my grandmother Edith was told by her family: "You can’t marry him – he’s only a poor parson." True, but marry him she did.

Moreover, she had six sisters no doubt all vying for what must have been a very small pool of eligible men in that isolated corner of the world. One family story is that Helena, the youngest and prettiest of the sisters, infuriated them all by stealing their suitors when they came courting. Grandfather EP Thomas at least, eluded her wiles and plumped for grandmother Edith, who was not unattractive.

He and she appear to have had a good marriage until 1931 when at the age of 66, she departed this life while travelling by sea to South Africa from England where she had been having medical treatment. She was buried on the lonely Atlantic island of St Helena where Napoleon had been exiled and died. She herself died the best part of a decade before I was born and I don’t recall my father ever saying a word about her, so she was an unknown quantity in my life until I began to discover more about her when researching this book and through surviving photographs. The chart should make my family relationships clearer:

Captain Francis Phillips and Rachel Ann Batten (married 1857)

were the parents of seven daughters and one son





John and Jane Henwood, the siege diarist.

One point glaringly absent from Jane Henwood's diary is any mention of grandmother Edith's two infant children. One of them was my father, Garrett Phillips Thomas, who was then just two-and-a-half years' old and his brother, Frank Phillips Thomas, still a babe-in-arms. It seems hard to believe that Edith would have left them behind at such a young age, but had they been with her, Jane Henwood would undoubtedly have specified that fact. Her failure to take her children with her indicated that my grandmother's perilous pilgrimage was not meant to result in a long stay with her family in Concordia, even though she had not seen them for at least five years.

Jane Henwood was mistaken on one point. My grandmother had journeyed not from Peddie, but from Fort Beaufort, the Eastern Cape village to which my grandfather been posted after Peddie, in line with the Methodist practice of moving ministers to new parishes every three years. It would have taken my grandmother the best part of a week to travel the 1,500km between the isolated village of Fort Beaufort and Concordia; there was no easy overland route and as the accompanying map shows, they would have had to follow a hugely circuitous route via Cape Town.

The journey* would have started with travel in a horse-drawn buggy rattling over a rough road through wild country into the deep Fish River Valley, and then up and over the hills to the regional centre of Grahamstown, about 100km distant. From there she could have taken a train to Port Elizabeth and then embarked on a two-to-three day sea journey to Cape Town, changing there to a coastal steamer such as the German-owned *Gertrud Woermann* which took 36 hours to reach Port Nolloth. The penultimate stage of her journey should have been a day-long eastward rail journey of 150km to O'okiep, although as reported by Jane Henwood, fears of a Boer ambush halted their train in the veld overnight. There would have been no ablutionary nor sleeping facilities in the short-haul carriages, and by the time her train did get through to O'okiep the next day (2 April),

*Obviously I cannot be sure of her route, but I have reconstructed it here using the information and map entitled *Commemorating 150 Years of Railways in South Africa* published in 2010 by the Heritage Railway Association of Southern Africa, which shows that there was no railway to Fort Beaufort until 1904.

the Boers were already swarming over the countryside. Travelling in a buggy to cover the last 15km to Concordia, she and whoever picked her up from the O'okiep railway station would somehow have had to dodge them to reach her final destination.

After only one day's stay she headed home, as is evident from Jane Henwood's diary entry for 3 April: "Mrs Thomas came in from Concordia and left this evening to go by German boat". Although Ms Henwood noted the next day that "the line is broken and we are shut off now", it seems that the train which my grandmother boarded made it through to Port Nolloth, enabling her finally to reach her home in Fort Beaufort.

What was the purpose of that urgent, perilous 3,000km pilgrimage? Not a word of any answer to that question was ever breathed in my family.

OVER A CENTURY LATER after these happenings, I checked into the O'okiep Country Hotel before venturing out in my car into the

My grandparents Edward and Edith Thomas in about 1904. My father Garrett Phillips is the boy on the right. His brothers were Donald and Frank.



magical late afternoon light of the semi-desert. On the road a signpost directed me to Concordia but when I got there, I found it even more unattractive and run-down than O’okiep and thus I did not do more than drive to the top of the main street and down again on my way out. Yet it was here that our Gilgamesh had carved out his fortune as the manager of one of the richest copper mines in the world. It was here, in Concordia, that he had his momentous encounter with General Smuts. It was here that he made the most fateful decision of his life. And I, looking on the place with disdain, had spent no more than five minutes in it.

Of course I did go back to Concordia several times after that brief first encounter and was able to become acquainted with some of its friendly people. Today it is an expanding township with a population of 9 000; although lacking a centre of economic activity, it serves as a dormitory to surrounding towns and mines. Unfortunately this means that unemployment rates are high, as is the resultant level of poverty, a strange paradox in a place where so much wealth was extracted from the earth.

IT WAS DURING THIS TRIP that I saw what I thought was a toe of clay protruding from under Gilgamesh’s robe. Among the reading material I picked up was an account of an episode about which I had known nothing apart from the dynamite-down-the-mine story. That was the invasion of that area by the mini-army of Boers under General Smuts. I learned for the first time that Springbok, the administrative centre of the district, had been captured by the Boers who had then attacked and besieged O’okiep, about 10km to the north. One incident in particular caught my attention: this was when the Boers packed a railway truck, pulled by a puffing-billy steam locomotive, with dynamite and tried to run it down the railway line into O’okiep and blow the place away. Fortunately for everyone concerned, the train ran off the rails and the dynamite failed to explode.

That story raised a question which did not occur to me at the time: where would the Boers have got such a large quantity – two tons in fact – of dynamite? Their fast-moving commandos would

not have carted wagon-loads of the stuff around with them. Nor could the dynamite have come from the mine in O'okiep, which they were never able to capture. The answer to this unasked question was provided by John Smalberger's *Aspects of the History of Copper Mining in Namaqualand*. Based on his master's dissertation, the book is still the most authoritative work on its subject matter. In a section about mining in Concordia, I came across a passage which startled me. "Little is known about the history of ... the village until the Twentieth Century," Smalberger wrote, and then went on:

It is known that Concordia surrendered without the firing of a shot during the South African War, thus allowing the dynamite stored there for the use of the mines to fall into Boer hands ...⁵

It must have been this dynamite which was used in the abortive attempt to blow up O'okiep. So Smuts had, after all, got the dynamite Captain Phillips claimed to have hidden down the mine. And the family story about Smuts being sent away empty-handed was a myth.

My immediate reaction was to turn to the consolations of philosophy. That just showed, I rationalised, the extent to which families were prepared to go to protect their good name. My philosophizing was soon transmogrified into amusement. After all, I asked, what would I have done? I imagine I am Captain Phillips when General Smuts rides up and pointing a pistol at my head, says: *Ek wil die dinamiet hê*. I reply (in English of course: I've only been in the country 25 years and I couldn't be expected to learn Afrikaans in that time): "Of course, General, how much dynamite would you like? Is there anything else I can do for you?" Handing over the dynamite ensures that I will live for almost another two decades and die in my bed on my estate in Cape Town instead of in the dust of Concordia with a Boer bullet through my head.

My flippancy however, was misplaced; the reality was very different.

ALTHOUGH I DID NOT GO to Namaqualand in search of family history in 2004, my visit there proved to be momentous on that

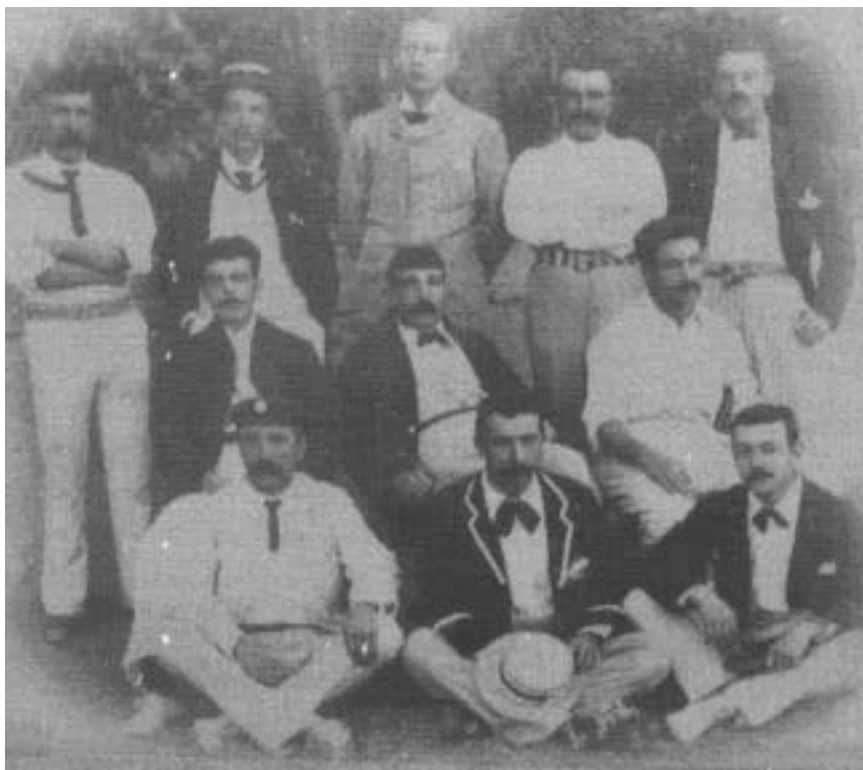
score. A chain of events began when, after spending the night in O’okiep, I made my way to the nearby village of Nababeep*, adjacent to the last remaining copper mine in the area (although even this mine closed in 2008), where I had been told there was a good museum. It was indeed good, although not overrun with visitors. That allowed me to get chatting to the curator, Karin Jannecke. She took me around the exhibits and suddenly I saw something which excited me hugely – a photograph of the O’okiep cricket team of 1891, one of the members of which, according to the caption, was Frank Phillips, son of Captain Phillips.

I knew from the obituary that this Frank Phillips was far too young to be Gilgamesh, but my conclusion that this must have been his son was based on the fact that there were several other Franks in our family, one of them an uncle. The young Frank Phillips in the photo also bore a close resemblance to my nephew Neville, and I jumped to the further (mistaken) conclusion that Captain Phillips’s name must have been Frank too. In fact the name of the cricketer in the photograph was not Frank either, but Sydney Francis. Perhaps he liked neither of these, and instead chose to be called Frank.

But seeing him and having apparently found the long-lost first name of Captain Phillips, constituted more flesh and blood which could be put on the Gilgamesh story and I badly wanted a copy of the photo. However, when I asked Ms Jannecke if that could be done, she was doubtful. I left my card with her and my contact details; I even wrote to her, in Afrikaans *nogal*, from Sydney. For a long time I heard nothing, until one day I received an e-mail from someone whose name was unknown to me but which included the highly desired photo as an attachment. Obviously Karin Jannecke had persuaded a friend – Olav Meyer, the manager of the mine at Nababeep – to scan and e-mail the picture to me.

While delighted by having this pictorial addition to such family archives as I possessed, I still was not stirred to go further into the Phillips family history. Things would have remained that way had not Glenn von Zeil, three years later, also visited the

*Nababeep can have three meanings in Nama depending upon pronunciation – ‘the place where the giraffe drinks’, ‘the water behind the little hill’ or ‘where the rock is carried’”. Smalberger, p.94.



The picture that sparked my quest – the O'okiep cricket team of 1891. Frank Phillips is seated on the ground on the right of the front row.

Nababep museum. Glenn, who hails from that area, is not only fascinated by its history, but has done some very good archival research and writing on it. Among other things he has transcribed the siege diary of Jane Henwood.

Ms Jannecke had told him about my visit, passing on to him the address of the stranger who claimed to be related to the Phillips family, and who therefore might be able to let him have further historical materials to add to his collection. After returning to Cape Town he wrote to me, setting in train an earthquake in my consciousness, which in a very short space of time dredged Captain Phillips from its depths to a point where he occupied my thoughts, day and night. The seismic jolt caused by Glenn's letter was the news that Captain Phillips had been court-martialled after the war.

Had I read Peter Burke's account of the siege of O'okiep⁶

which includes this fact, I would not have been so shocked. However, I had not read Burke or anything else on the South African War for close on 50 years; on the basis of my university studies at Johannesburg's Wits University, I saw that war as an unnecessary and destructive conflict, a miserable struggle out of which practically nothing good and a great deal of lasting harm had emerged and therefore I refused to read anything which might glorify or romanticize it. My steady avoidance of South African War literature accounts for my knowing nothing about Smuts's invasion of Namaqualand in 1902.

Although startled by Glenn's letter, I was burningly curious to know exactly what had happened and therefore was excited when I read that Glenn had in his possession copies of documents relating to the court martial. I could hardly wait to see them. Thus when arranging a month-long stay in South Africa in early 2008, I allocated the bulk of my time to Cape Town, with the primary objective of seeing Glenn and his precious archival material. I was not disappointed. His sleuthing in the South African National Archives had yielded marvellously detailed material on much more than simply the court martial. Perhaps an even greater treasure in his possession were photographs of Captain Phillips and his wife Rachel. This was the first time I had seen any pictures of them; that of Captain Phillips confirmed that he had indeed been a tall, bearded and imposing figure, this Gilgamesh.

Yet my preliminary dips into the court martial archive seemed to diminish his moral stature. As the leading authority figure in Concordia, he had been appointed by the British Army as Deputy-Commandant there when martial law was proclaimed throughout the Cape Colony in January 1901. He also became the military officer-in-charge, with the rank of Captain, of the 127-strong Companies No. 5 and 8* of the Namaqualand Town Guard Battalion (NTGB) raised in Concordia. He valued his military title less than

*Various figures were given for the strength of these units. Captain Phillips put their number of men at 140, Kotzé in *Die Anglo-Boere Oorlog in Namakwaland* asserts there were 250 (p16) while Kieran in his *Defence and Relief of O'okiep*, gives a figure of 110 (p51). British Army records, incorporated into the Roll of Honour printed in this book, also put the figure at 110, but this does not take into account the men, about 17 in all, who left Concordia before the surrender and whose number would have brought the total up 127.

that of mine captain; on the plea that at the age of 68, he found military duties added to those of his mine managership too onerous, he resigned his commission in May 1901. He also wanted to resign from the position of Deputy-Commandant, but "this was not approved, and he consented to continue on in this appointment," wrote a British General, Sir Henry Settle, concluding that "...the allegation that these duties were imposed on is unfounded"⁷. Sir Henry made no attempt to explain that magnificent *non-sequitur*.

BECAUSE THE TOWN GUARD is so crucial to what happened in Concordia in April 1902, its composition calls for closer attention. Town Guards, largely black or coloured, had been formed by the British Army in towns and villages all over the Cape Colony from 1901 onwards. In the words of the Afrikaner historian André Wessels:

The reason that blacks and coloureds were ready to join the British under arms was the historic mistrust or antagonism (or even in some cases, hatred) that they felt towards the Boers; not always without good reason. The race prejudices of the white Afrikaners also had something to do with this.⁸

Fearful populations willingly joined the Town Guards since they saw them as one means of defence against the racist violence of marauding Boers. This seems to have been the case in Concordia where local men were furnished with uniforms and rifles by the British Army, but it seems they were neither paid by nor formally incorporated into the Army. The majority were mine labourers who were known as "coloureds".

Since that term will be used throughout this work, it needs some explanation. Although it is not legally impermissible, its use is officially frowned on in South Africa because it was a racial designation under the apartheid regime and entrenched the discrimination against, and economic disadvantage of this group; there is also the Black Consciousness argument that anyone who is not white should be called "black". However, in non-official, colloquial terms, that term usually refers to black Africans while the word "coloured" is still widely used as a designation for the group

numbering between four and five million, who are descended from a wide range of ethnic ancestors including whites, black Africans, Indonesian slaves and prisoners (brought to the Cape by the Dutch colonists), slaves from the Indian sub-continent and particularly the indigenous Khoi.

In Namaqualand, the mixed-racial ancestry of the coloured population was very recent; white miners had not let any of Namaqualand's sparse grass grow under their feet when it came to establishing sexual and even marital arrangements with Khoi women who, according to Dickason in the book *Cornish Migrants to South Africa*, not only "made more obliging wives but were more loyal. A reminder of [these arrangements] is that today ... Tre, Pol and Pen persist in communities of coloured folk living on the mines and in local townships"⁹. The word "coloured" is used for this group in this work to make it clear that these were not black Africans.

Like others of mixed ethnic lineage in the Cape Colony, their home language rapidly became Afrikaans and in fact, as is proclaimed in the excellent Museum of Slavery in Cape Town, it was the coloureds as much as white Afrikaners who constructed Afrikaans as a language distinct from Dutch. Indeed to this day Afrikaans is much more widely spoken in Namaqualand than English.

Despite the white blood in the veins of many of the coloured labourers in the Town Guard, these part-time soldiers were to demonstrate that they did not play war by the white man's rules: these were "the men who would not march."

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS'S immediate military superior during the war was Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel WAD Shelton, a career officer in the British Army whose rank as Major Shelton was temporarily changed while he commanded the British forces in Namaqualand. He was headquartered in O'okiep. When the Boer forces under Smuts invaded the copper fields of Namaqualand in late March 1902, Shelton had ordered the forces in the smaller centres in the area, including Concordia, to withdraw with their stores and supplies to O'okiep.

A superficial reading of the documentation discovered by



Honorary Lieutenant Colonel Willington Augustus David Shelton.

Glenn von Zeil seemed to indicate that Captain Phillips's response to this order was characterized by deceit and cowardice. Apparently reluctant to obey the withdrawal order, he had persuaded Shelton to let him and his Town Guard stay in Concordia, after giving an assurance that they could hold the place for a month and had ample supplies, arms and ammunition. But Phillips then almost immediately proceeded to surrender the place to Smuts "without a shot being fired" (a phrase endlessly repeated in all accounts of the incident), and by so doing allowed the Boers to lay their hands on 30,000 rounds of ammunition and even more serious, the mine's stocks of dynamite, which came near to causing a catastrophe in O'okiep. Nowhere in the legend had Gilgamesh been depicted as being guilty of this kind of disgraceful conduct.

But as I began to look closely at the archive, I found evidence of a major conflict between Phillips and Shelton. Its genesis lay in the fact that while O'okiep had been fortified, stocked and garrisoned to ensure that it did not fall into Boer hands, the same was not true of Concordia. That village, with its rich copper mine which Captain Phillips had managed for two decades, had been left practically defenceless. Acting on orders from his superiors in the British Army, Shelton was prepared to abandon it in order to concentrate all his forces in O'okiep. That Phillips believed that Concordia and its mine were just as deserving of protection as O'okiep, and that Shelton and his superiors had no intention of providing such protection, lay at the heart of the struggle between these two powerful men. The discovery of that conflict threw new light on the whole episode.