

Kenneth Graham Gillings (1947–2016)

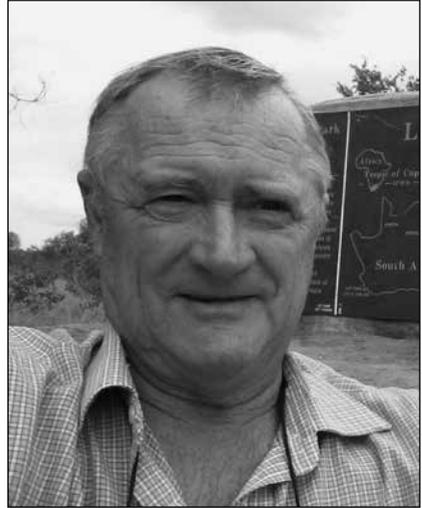
KEN Gillings, soldier, military historian, MOTH and unparalleled battlefields guide, died in a drowning accident while on holiday at Cape Vidal in December 2016.

The seed of Gillings' interest in history was originally sown in visits to his grandparents in Dannhauser when he was a small boy. It blossomed as a schoolboy at Westville High School under the tutelage of his history master Ron Warner.

His military career began when he underwent national service in the artillery at Potchefstroom in 1965. Posted to the Natal Field Artillery after nine months' training, he continued as a volunteer, retiring as Regimental Sergeant Major in 1988 after 23 years' service. Thereafter he served as Artillery Warrant Officer of 84 Motorised Brigade, then in HQ Unit of 8 SA Division (part-time forces). He was finally posted to HQ Unit of 74 Brigade. In retirement he became an active member of the Winston Churchill Shellhole in Westville where he was Old Bill at the time of his untimely death. He was also an honorary life vice president of the Gunners' Association of South Africa.

Gillings was friendly with Darrell Hall, managing director of the fruit-processing firm H.L. Hall & Sons (Pty) Ltd. Both were artillerymen, Hall having served in the Royal Artillery. Hall offered him a position as a representative for Dickon Hall Products in Natal in 1971 and he eventually retired as the firm's national sales manager in 2003. Thereafter he started guiding professionally as an accredited specialist military history guide.

Gillings' commitment to heritage saw him serving for seven years on the



Natal regional committee of the National Monuments Council and he was appointed to the Council's War Graves Division for some years. He chaired the KZN regional committee for the commemoration of the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 (for which he was given the Paul Harris Award by the Rotary Club of Westville) and was a member of the 1906 Bambatha Centenary Commemoration Committee. He was also a member of the Ladysmith Siege Museum Trust.

In his capacity as a tour guide, Gillings guided the International Churchill Society around the KwaZulu-Natal battlefields during a pilgrimage arranged by Sir Winston Churchill's granddaughter, the Hon. Celia Sandys, which included his daughter Lady Mary Soames. During the Anglo-Boer War Centenary Commemoration, he guided Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh and Jacob Zuma, then deputy president, around Spioenkop. He facilitated the erection of a memorial on the Isandlwana battlefields to N/5 Battery, Royal

Artillery, which was unveiled by the Master Gunner of St James's Park, Field Marshall The Lord Vincent in the presence of His Majesty, King Goodwill Zwelithini during the celebrations to mark the 120th anniversary of the battle in 1999.

Unsurprisingly, Gillings was a pillar of the South African Military History Society. He chaired its KwaZulu-Natal branch from 1989 to 1998, thereafter continuing to organise the programme of monthly lectures as well as its annual battlefield tour up to the time of his death. In 2005 he was granted honorary life membership of the Society.

Gillings had numerous articles published in the *Military History Journal* of the SA Military History Society as well as in the (UK) *Journal for Army Historical Research*. He contributed to the series of booklets, *Battles of the Anglo-Boer War*, published by Ravan Press. His last two works were *Discovering the Battlefields of the Anglo-Zulu War* in 2014 and in the following year *The Road to Ulundi Revisited*.

IFP president Mangosuthu Buthelezi praised Gillings for being 'a remark-

able historian, for whom I had great respect'. He said that he first met Gillings when the South African Military History Society hosted an international conference on the 130th commemoration of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. 'I was impressed by his insight into the battles of the Anglo-Zulu War and admired how he captured the pathos of the battlefield, without emotively favouring either side', he said.

Buthelezi had been honoured to be asked to write the foreword to *Discovering the Battlefields of the Anglo-Zulu War*, especially as the author had 'undertaken a monumental task of meticulous research'. He wrote:

I am haunted by the thought that we lost Mr Gillings the day after a statue of my great-grandfather, King Cetshwayo, was unveiled at the Castle of Good Hope. That event had led me to reread Mr Gillings book, and I had been delighted all over again by his attention to detail and obvious love for his work.

Gillings leaves his wife, Heather, a son and daughter-in-law, and a grandson.

JACK FROST