

Obituary: Brigadier R. S. G. Stokes

by J. K. E. Douglas

Brigadier Ralph Shelton Griffin Stokes D.S.O., C.B.E., M.C., who died in England on 24th February, 1979, at the age of 96 years, was one of the most colourful personalities in South African mining history. After the South African War, in which he served as a trooper, he joined the Crown Reef Mine as an assistant assayer (1902), and was to serve the mines of the Corner House Group intermittently for the next 57 years until his retirement in 1959. In his first few years, small encouragement was given to young men whose education had been interrupted by the war, and he seized the opportunity for study provided by an appointment as mining editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, which led to a two-year tour round the world and the publication of his book *Mines and Minerals of the British Empire*.

Stokes rejoined the Corner House Group in 1907 to work underground at the Robinson — the premier gold mine of the Rand, with an annual production of £1 000 000 and record low costs of 12s 7d per ton milled. In 1910 he was appointed Chief Surveyor of Crown Mines and later Underground Manager. In 1912 he left for America to become a field engineer to the International Nickel Company, and the valuation of the Arkansas Diamond Mine was his first task.

At the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, Stokes was in Alaska but managed to reach the trenches in Flanders as a sapper before the end of the year. He had five years' service, chiefly in the prosecution of mine warfare. He was demobilized in 1919 on the conclusion of the North Russian Campaign against the Bolsheviks, during which he served on General Ironside's staff with the rank of Colonel.

After the war, Stokes was appointed Superintendent of Mines at De Beers, and served for eight years in Kimberley before rejoining the Corner House in 1928 as Consulting Engineer. In 1936 he was awarded the Consolidated Goldfields Gold Medal — one of the highest awards in mining.

In the early thirties, there was considerable interest in the West Rand. Gold Fields had succeeded in securing options that covered nearly all the prospective mining areas revealed by geological survey. However, there was one small piece of ground outside that net. This was a narrow strip, 724 morgen in all, on the farm Blyvooruitzicht. Stokes, whose hunting instincts had been aroused, bullied the directors of Rand Mines into taking action. With a remarkable display of determination and tact, and also because he was on excellent terms with the Gold Fields' directors, he succeeded in acquiring this land, and thus was born in 1937 the Blyvooruitzicht Gold Mining Company, which was to play a most important part in the Central Mining-Rand Mines

Group. The fact that the Group acquired control of this mine was largely due to the farsightedness of Ralph Stokes, who saw what had to be done and did it in the nick of time. He was subsequently to become Chairman of this great company.

In 1937 Stokes was appointed President of the South African Chemical, Metallurgical and Mining Society, the former name of this Institute. His presidential address, 'Some Observations on the Economics of Rand Mining', was a classic. Last year Council noted that Brigadier Stokes, who had been elected an Honorary Life Member of this Institute in 1959, had completed 70 years as a member of the Institute, and sent him a congratulatory letter, which was graciously acknowledged by him in a letter that was printed in the *Journal* (vol. 79, no. 5, Dec. 1978, p. 133).

Stokes was also a member of the British Institution of Mining and Metallurgy (from 1919), and served as President of the Canadian Institute in 1954-55.

On the outbreak of World War II, Stokes rejoined the sappers and served as a captain in France before being selected by Field-marshal Ironside for special duties with the Narvik expedition. His subsequent service was in the Middle East as a brigadier at GHQ, with special responsibility for airfields in the Western Desert up to the invasion of Italy, when he was recalled to the War Office. Stokes must be one of the last of the few men who have fought in the three wars in which South Africa was involved in the twentieth century.

In 1944 Central Mining appointed Ralph Stokes chairman of their oil holdings, Trinidad Leaseholds. He was also appointed Technical Director of the Central Mining Corporation, and in this position played an important role in the acquisition of the Harmony Gold Mine, which is today one of the largest and most important gold mines in the Corner House Group.

The men who worked under Ralph Stokes found him a most satisfying leader, who was particularly interested in helping students on vacation jobs. His ABC of behaviour in dealing with any matter never failed: it consisted in being

Articulate
Brief and
Courteous.

Acknowledgements

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The remaining information was obtained from Mr H. Britten, who knew Brigadier Stokes personally.