

**The British Advance and Boer Retreat Through  
Northern Natal, May - June 1900**

by

**Gilbert Peter Torlage**

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Supervisor : Professor S.B. Spies

Joint Supervisor: Mr N.D. Southey

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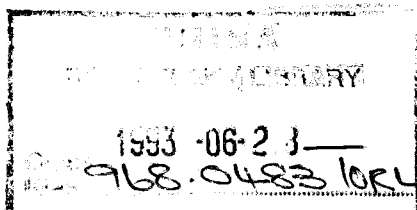
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### SUMMARY

This dissertation deals with the efforts of the British forces to regain control of northern Natal from the Boers, during the second quarter of 1900. In March Boer forces had dug themselves in along the Biggarsberg.

In early May a British force advanced on the Biggarsberg. Exploiting their numerical superiority and with a turning movement to their right, the British army forced the Boers to retire to the Drakensberg in the Majuba area.

There followed a period of re-organisation and preparation during which General Buller attempted to persuade the Boers to lay down their arms. When this failed he launched another attack on the Boer defence line. In quick succession the British force gained success at Botha's Pass (8 June) and at Alleman's Nek (11 June). These reverses forced the Boers to retire from their Drakensberg positions and they thereby relinquished all control of Natal to the British forces.



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## PREFACE

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge a debt of gratitude firstly to Professor C.J. Barnard who drew my attention to the fact that no serious overall study had been undertaken of the period under review. Furthermore, my thanks go to my supervisors Professor S.B. Spies and Mr N.D. Southey who encouraged me and provided invaluable comments, to the Transvaal Archives staff, the Talana Museum staff, Mrs Sheila Henderson who shared with me her detailed knowledge of northern Natal, Mr. Ray Steele who took me over the Botha's Pass and Alleman's Nek battlefields, my father-in-law Mr R.H. Bizley who helped proof read the manuscript and commented on aspects of my style, my wife Jenny who encouraged and accompanied me to some of the remote corners of Natal, and my sons James and Andrew for their patience.

## ABBREVIATIONS

Act	- Acting
Asst	- Assistant
Bde	- Brigade
Cav	- Cavalry
C.H.K.	- Carolina Historiese Komitee
Cmdt	- Commandant
Gen	- General
G.O.C.	- General Officer Commanding
H.C.C.	- Hoofkomitee van die Kommissariaat
H.T.D.-	- Hoof Telegraaf Diens
JHB	- Johannesburg
K.G.	- Kommandant-Generaal
K.R.R.	- King's Royal Rifles
No.	- Number
R.H.A.	- Royal Horse Artillery
R.F.A.	- Royal Field Artillery
R.V.R.	- Resident-vrederegter
S.A.L.H.	- South African Light Horse
S.D.	- Staff Diary
Sec	- Secretary
S.R.O.	- Scottish Record Office
Sts Secrs	- Staatssekretaris
T.A.	- Transvaal Archives
T.M.	- Talana Museum
Tel	- Telegram
V.C.R.	- Volunteer Composite Regiment
W.O.	- War Office
Wd	- Waarnemende

## Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Second Anglo-Boer War in 1902 a great many publications and academic studies have been published on that subject. Certain themes, personalities and periods of the war have been analysed in detail. Yet, some remain obscured and even in recent publications tend to be glossed over. One such aspect concerns the period after the relief of Ladysmith, when the Boers in Natal retired to the Drakensberg and Biggarsberg and the British force initially remained in and around Ladysmith. Subsequently, when the British force was ready, it moved northwards and forced the Boers to vacate the Biggarsberg and eventually also the Drakensberg. This campaign lasted from the beginning of March 1900 to approximately 12 June 1900. It is this campaign and the significant implications for both parties, regarding the conduct of the war, that forms the core of this dissertation. Despite the significant implications this campaign had, and the tens of thousands of men involved, even a recent publication such as Thomas Pakenham's The Boer War (1979), devotes only three quarters of a page to it.

I hope to achieve more in this dissertation than merely filling a gap in the literature on the war. It is my intention to illustrate that General Sir Redvers Buller adapted his tactics by this stage of the war and attempt to understand why he became more adventurous as opposed to much of his earlier campaign in the war fought in the Thukela valley. This aspect of the dissertation will, however, not be a detailed comparative study, although in terms of future research, there is scope for such a

project in order to understand Buller more fully in the wider context of the Second Anglo-Boer War. As regards the Boers, their dramatic decline in morale and discipline will be focused on, the implications this held at a variety of levels discussed, and an attempt will be made to understand why there was this change compared to their earlier campaign fought in the Thukela River valley. Again it will not be a detailed comparative study.

Although this period has not been closely analysed in any one study, significant and varied sources do exist on it. The most detailed descriptions on this period appear in F.M. Maurice and M.H. Grant, History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902 and L.S. Amery, The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902. Both publications have their strengths and weaknesses. As they were written soon after the events, the authors had access to eyewitnesses. However, these individuals are seldom identified. Maurice and Grant's so called Official History was written by fellow officers and this inhibited a thorough criticism of their colleagues' strategic and tactical errors. This is a major weakness of the publication. The maps that accompany the text are generally, as regards topographical features and positions of the British forces, very accurate. The positions of Boer forces shown, need to be treated with caution though, as detailed documentary research and fieldwork have on occasion revealed these to be less reliable.

It is probable that Leo Amery, a reporter for The Times, felt himself less constrained than Maurice, a senior officer in the

military establishment, and his work is indeed more critical of British strategy and tactics. He was none the less writing from a particular standpoint, and states in his preface to volume two of his work that he wished to reveal the underlying story.

...the real and deeper causes of success or failure, to trace the influence of national characteristics and national organisation for war in the seemingly fortuitous sequence of events, and in the almost incomprehensible actions of generals and politicians. It is in realisation of those more deeply rooted causes of our past failures, quite as much as the indiscriminate adoption of methods found useful on the South African veld, that the best hopes of the reforms required to insure the safety and the full development of that which is already in part a great living reality, but in part remains a precious ideal - the British Empire.

In the sixth volume Amery asserts that the war was a test of Imperial unity.<sup>2</sup> Imperial idealism, coupled to military reform to ensure the survival of the Empire, are thus of crucial importance to Amery. The greatest weakness of both Maurice and Grant's and Amery's publications, are that they had few Boer sources, official or private, available to them.

Other valuable British sources are the reports and telegrams contained in the Lord Roberts Papers and the Staff Diaries. Regrettably the latter only covered the month of May 1900; the June ones appear to have been destroyed - probably during World War II. The Lord Roberts Papers are useful regarding overall strategy and tactics. They also provide a detailed insight into

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<sup>1</sup> L.S. Amery, ed., The Times History of the War in South Africa, II, pp. v-vi.

<sup>2</sup> Amery, VI, p.vi.



General Sir Redvers Buller's vacillations, concerning plans of future action. They do also provide some useful details of day to day activities, but are not helpful in terms of understanding the lower ranks' hardships and toiling. The Staff Diaries provide a more detailed record of individual units. Some diarists are much more detailed than others. These Diaries were of particular value in reconstructing the battle of Helpmekaar. Some of them also provide a relatively comprehensive insight into the demands made of the lower ranks. Further significant official sources are to be found in the British Parliamentary Papers (Blue Books). The reports provide a useful overview of events, they do highlight the successes of the British forces and particular individuals, such as Lieutenant-General H.J.T. Hildyard. Despite being written a few days after the events have occurred, they hardly reflect any self-criticism.

There are several other publications and documents which were of significant use in trying to piece together and flesh out specific events or the roles of certain elements or individuals in the army. C.R.N. Burne, With the Naval Brigade in Natal and T.T. Jeans, ed., Naval Brigades in the South African War 1899-1902 are most useful in piecing together the role of the naval guns. They are most detailed in places, allowing one to gain a good insight into the hardships they had to overcome in order to perform their duty. Valuable regimental histories of key units at Botha's Pass and Alleman's Nek are C.T. Atkinson, The Dorsetshire Regiment, II, A.H.C. Kearsley, War Record of the York and Lancaster Regiment 1900-1902 and H.W. Pearce, History of the

East Surrey Regiment I 1702-1914. Each provide useful minute detail, particularly Atkinson's account of the Dorsets critical role at Alleman's Nek. This account is further supplemented by a map and hand drawn sketches of the topography by Captain Rowley, who was present in the battle. As with the naval gun accounts, so too with the regimental histories, one is struck by their lack of self-criticism. This has to be borne in mind when utilizing these sources.

Lord Dundonald's My Army Life and the Dundonald Papers are valuable sources on the 3rd Mounted Brigade, which played a critical role at Helpmekaar and Botha's Pass and a valuable one at Alleman's Nek. But again, it is necessary to bear the lack of self-criticism in mind. E.B. Knox's Buller's Campaign with the Natal Field Force of 1900 has significant military information and is valuable in the sense that Knox, as an army surgeon, was not attached to any one of the fighting units and is therefore more likely to give credit where it is due. He too, however, does not in detail critically analyse the military engagements. My greatest regret concerning sources is that I was unable to uncover a detailed diary concerning the activities of the South African Light Horse. This unit played an important role at various stages and Dundonald's autobiography, as well as the Dundonald Papers, make mention of this. However, the detail is tantalisingly scanty.

Without doubt the most important Boer sources are the telegrams in the Leyds Collection. Falling into much the same category as

the Leyds Collection, are the Kommandant-Generaal telegrams. Not only are these telegrams a fairly detailed record of day to day events but they also give a significant insight into the inner emotions and stresses the Boer forces were undergoing. In this latter respect they are far more revealing than the official British sources of their own emotions and stresses. This in itself is possibly a comment on the operation of a professional, as opposed to an unprofessional army. Regrettably very few telegrams exist for the period from the end of May to early June 1900. This is possibly the result of one or two circumstances. It was at this time that the South African Republican government left Pretoria and moved to the eastern Transvaal because Lord Roberts's forces were on the point of taking possession of the capital. The likelihood therefore exists that there was no one to receive the telegrams, or they may not have been stored. At the same time, on the Natal front, events occurred with great rapidity, with the British breaking through at Botha's Pass (8 June) and Alleman's Nek (11 June). All this occurred some distance away from telegraph stations and it is possible that only few telegrams were sent or the very rapidity of events may have dictated other priorities, such as ensuring that arms, ammunition and provisions did not fall into enemy hands rather than communicating with headquarters. As a result of this paucity of source material, it is necessary to rely quite heavily on British sources in an effort to reconstruct Boer actions. A most regrettable shortfall that the Boer telegrams, and in fact their primary sources in general have, is that they invariably fail to describe precisely where individual units and artillery pieces

were. Furthermore, it is difficult to establish with some precision how many men and artillery pieces were present in particular engagements.

The archive of the Carolina Historiese Komitee has several useful sources, and in particular the diary of J.H. Janson. This source helps fill some gaps left by the telegrams and reveals conditions of individuals, especially as regards the Botha's Pass and Alleman's Nek engagements.

The as yet incomplete multi-volumed, general history of the Anglo-Boer War by state historian J.H. Breytenbach, Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902, is a valuable contribution to the literature on the war. In a sense it is a complementary companion to Maurice and Grant's and Amery's works, in that it draws heavily on Boer primary sources. Therefore, for the first time, researchers have ready access to the Boer side of the story. One of its weaknesses is that it is written to some degree from a Boer point of view, in counter-balance to the Maurice and Grant and Amery works, which are written from the British point of view. Breytenbach, in criticising British tactics, at times makes use of dubious sources such as W.B. Pemberton, Battles of the Boer War and O. Ransford, The Battle of Spion Kop, to sustain an argument.

C.J. Barnard's Generaal Louis Botha op die Natalse Front 1899-1900 is a well researched and balanced publication which covers the build-up to the core of this dissertation. It illustrates the

key role Louis Botha played in the Thukela campaigns. Another useful publication is the dissertation by F.J. Grobler, 'Die Carolina-Kommando in die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902'. It is of particular value as the Carolina commando, along with the Lydenburg commando, which is frequently mentioned in it, were the main Boer units involved in the battles at Botha's Pass and Alleman's Nek. Regrettably, however, the descriptions and analysis of these two engagements is very brief.

Other sources which provide limited information from the Boer viewpoint are E.C. Anderssen, Die Verlede Herleef, C.H. Muller, Oorlogsherinneringe, R.W. Schikkerling, Commando Courageous, B. Viljoen, My Reminiscances of the Anglo-Boer War and E.J. Weeber, Op die Natalse Front. Generally only the occasional snippet can be gleaned from these books.

Another important source to a study of military events such as this one is an inspection of the actual terrain itself. Indeed to understand more fully, appreciate, interpret written records of military actions and be able to comment on events, it is necessary to study the topography and locate the remains of trenches, gun emplacements and such like. To this end careful personal inspections were made of the sites at Helpmekaar, Scheepers' Nek, Van Wykskop, the Botha's Pass area and the Versamelberg near Alleman's and Joubert's Neks. More superficial inspections were made of the intervening, less significant features. Fortuitously most of the important sites have not been adversely affected by human activity. Many of the trenches and

gun emplacements described in the literature were located and this made the reconstruction of events so much easier. Only at Helpmekaar has a Boer trench become overgrown by wattle trees.

The information gleaned from the field trips, together with that from documents, has enabled me to compile the maps which are included.

A slightly flexible approach has been adopted to the spelling of names. As a general rule, the most recent spelling utilised on the state's Survey and Mapping 1:50 000 maps has been adopted. Thus for instance Mafeking becomes Mafikeng and Laing's Nek becomes Lang's Nek. The latter of these names was altered as the result of descendants of the person after whom the nek was named drawing attention to the fact that it was incorrect. Where the name used to describe a topographical feature is completely different in historical literature to that appearing on the map, then the one used in the books and documents is adopted. The spelling of the river Thukela (Tugela) presents a slight problem. On the maps it is spelt as given in brackets. However, in most academic historical literature the former form has been adopted, which spelling has been followed in this dissertation as well.

## Chapter 2. REST AND RE-ORGANIZATION

At 17:00 on 11 October 1899 the ultimatum handed by the South African Republic's Secretary of State, F.W. Reitz, to the British Resident in Pretoria, expired. Consequently the two Boer republics were formally at war with Great Britain. Prior to this diplomatic breakdown, all parties concerned were already preparing for this eventuality. As a result, according to Breytenbach, the Boers were able to mobilize 32 000 to 35 000 men at short notice.<sup>1</sup> At this stage the British forces in South Africa were smaller, consisting of only 27 054 men of all ranks, including both imperial and colonial soldiers. The majority of these - 15 811 men - were in Natal, while the Cape had 9 795 and southern Rhodesia 1 448.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the outbreak of war, the War Office had been of the opinion that as in 1881, the Boer offensive would consist merely of raids made by between 2 000 and 3 000 burghers at a time and that these would easily be repulsed. This however, was not the case, as the military aims of the Boers were to neutralize those forces threatening their sovereignty,<sup>3</sup> and therefore to strike with significantly greater numbers in certain areas.

As the Boer leadership expected the largest attacks by their opponents to come from Natal, the biggest concentration of

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<sup>1</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, I, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> F. Maurice, History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902, I, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Breytenbach, I, pp. 154-155 and 408-409.

commandos was centred around the northern triangle of that colony. At various Drakensberg passes, mainly opposite Ladysmith, there were between 6 000 and 8 000 Orange Free State burghers. A little further north, at Botha's Pass, were the German Corps and Johannesburg commando, numbering approximately 1 200 men. Still further north, near Volksrust, was the South African Republic's Commandant-General P.J. Joubert with 10 000 to 12 000 burghers. At Wakkerstroom were the local commando and that from Ermelo, totalling 1 800 to 2 000 burghers and at Doringkop, opposite Dundee, lay the Utrecht, Vryheid and Piet Retief commandos, numbering between 1 500 and 2 000 burghers. The Boer force poised to enter northern Natal thus numbered between 20 500 and 25 200.<sup>4</sup>

Guarding the northern borders of the South African Republic were the Waterberg and Soutpansberg commandos, while on the western front the Boers had concentrations of burghers at Bultfontein (Marico and Rustenburg commandos) and a little further south were the Potchefstroom and Wolmaransstad commandos, near Schweitzer-Reneke (Bloemhof commando) and at Polfontein was General P.A. Cronje's force (precise numbers unknown).<sup>5</sup> Maurice gives the Boer total strength on the western front as 7 500 men.<sup>6</sup> This is probably a little high as there is a general tendency by Maurice to give slightly inflated Boer numbers. At Belmont there were a

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<sup>4</sup> Breytenbach, I, pp. 156 and 158-159; L.S. Amery (ed.), The Times History of the War in South Africa, II, pp. 123-124.

<sup>5</sup> Breytenbach, I, pp. 386-392 and 408-409.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice, I, p. 50.



few hundred burghers, while along the southern Free State border there were only approximately 2 500 burghers, positioned to guard the river crossings at Aliwal North, Bethulie and Norval's Pont. The border was sparsely held, as the Boers did not expect an attack from the south.<sup>7</sup> The Boers were therefore trying to hold a very long line, with approximately 35 000 men.

None the less, by 2 November 1899 their initial objective had, in part, been achieved. After a series of skirmishes and battles the Boers had laid siege to Mafikeng (Mafeking), Kimberley and Ladysmith. As a result, approximately half the British forces stationed in southern Africa at the outbreak of the war were partially neutralized. It was now essential to force their capitulation in order that the burghers surrounding the towns could take the necessary steps to resist anticipated British reinforcements.<sup>8</sup> But this proved easier said than done for the individual burgher who, although innovative, tenacious and elusive in his fighting methods against an enemy on the move, proved more reluctant to confront him in well prepared positions. Therefore one drawback of the sieges on Boer strategy was to tie down valuable burghers. This gave the British authorities much needed breathing space, allowing them time to send out massive reinforcements which would soon tilt the numerical balance in their favour.

The Boer leadership was anxious to bring about the surrender of

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<sup>7</sup> Breytenbach, I, p. 437.

<sup>8</sup> Breytenbach, I, p. 408.

the besieged towns, so that as many burghers as possible would be free to take further appropriate action against the British. This anxiety was well founded, for as soon as war was formally declared, the War Office took immediate steps, according to previously formulated plans, to send a large Expeditionary Force to South Africa. It took the British a few days to organize the transport and make all other necessary arrangements. Despite this, troopships were departing from mid-October 1899, and by the end of November, most of the Expeditionary Force had landed in South Africa. By the end of December no fewer than 45 655 men had arrived together with guns, horses and other supplies.<sup>9</sup> The man already appointed in June 1899 to command the British forces in South Africa was the shy, but experienced General Sir Redvers Buller, V.C. His military career spanned 41 of his sixty years, during which time he had been in Canada, West Africa, Egypt, Sudan and South Africa and spent some years in the War Office. Because of his shyness he tended to be aloof - a trait that made him enemies in high places. Despite his apparent aloofness, he was very much a soldiers' general, caring for his men's needs and grieving over casualties in battle. Buller himself believed that he was not suited to be commander-in-chief, but should rather serve as second-in-command. In fact initially he had tried to resist his appointment.<sup>10</sup> He did eventually accept and, upon his arrival in Cape Town at the end of October, it soon became all too obvious that the Boers had already grasped the

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<sup>9</sup> Maurice, I, pp. 2, 4-10 and 471-476.

<sup>10</sup> T. Pakenham, The Boer War, pp. 113-114, 156-157 and 240; C.H. Melville, Sir Redvers Buller, II, pp. 1-2.

initiative.

As he familiarised himself with the precise circumstances and with the threats posed to Kimberley, Ladysmith, Mafikeng and to the north-eastern Cape, he formulated an appropriate plan of action. His initial plan was to advance, from Cape Town, along the railway line to Bloemfontein and further north. In the circumstances then prevailing he decided however to delay this scheme. Instead, his army was to be divided into three parts. The largest - approximately 20 000 men - which he himself was to accompany, would travel via Durban and relieve Ladysmith. It was evident that in Natal, invaded as it was by the largest Boer force, lay the greatest difficulty and danger. A second force was to land at Port Elizabeth and East London, and under Lieutenant-General Sir W. Gatacre and Lieutenant-General J.D.P. French, deal with the threat to the north-eastern Cape. The third force, under Lieutenant-General Lord Methuen's command, was to relieve Kimberley.<sup>11</sup> The effect of this decision was that, like the Boers, the British would be fighting a war over a large area and that for both, maintaining adequate supplies where required, would be difficult. For a while Buller had to be patient while his troops and supplies arrived and then despatched to their assigned destinations. As the weeks passed, the Boers failed to make any concerted effort to exploit their initial successes. Breytenbach also stresses that they failed to respond adequately to the potential threat from the Cape Colony, underlining this view by maintaining that they should have had at least 10 000,

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<sup>11</sup> Maurice, I, pp. 196-204.

in place of the 3 200 men, in position and should also have left Belmont and Colesberg and rather captured De Aar and Noupoort. This, along with control of Stormberg station, which they already occupied, would have made a British advance northwards significantly more difficult.<sup>12</sup>

During November, French and Gatacre advanced north, along the rail lines. French strove to limit Boer incursions into the Colesberg district, by means of reconnaissances rather than by actual engagements. He continued this strategy for three months. Gatacre, meanwhile, decided to enhance British prestige by driving the Boers out of Stormberg. This was a disaster, however, for a poorly planned and executed engagement on 10 December 1899, saw his men repulsed and over 600 taken prisoner. From then on he played a somewhat passive role from his base at Queenstown. In this he was aided by the Boers' own lack of aggression from in and around Stormberg.<sup>13</sup>

Initially Methuen met with slightly better success, the Boers being engaged at Belmont and Graspan on 23 and 25 November respectively, and being forced to vacate both positions. However, at the Riet River the Boers offered sterner resistance (28 November), resulting in 500 British troops being either wounded or killed. From here too the Boers eventually withdrew, and Methuen continued his advance up the railway line. On 11 December

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<sup>12</sup> Breytenbach, I, pp. 458-462.

<sup>13</sup> H. Bailes, 'Military Aspects of the War' in P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds.), The South African War, pp. 76-77.

he launched another attack at Magersfontein, on a Boer force now considerably enlarged and was repulsed with significant casualties - 968 killed or wounded. On orders from Buller, Methuen remained on the defensive from then on, until the arrival of Field Marshal Lord F.S. Roberts, in February 1900.<sup>14</sup>

In Natal the British efforts were repulsed with even heavier losses. The Boers, after a foray with about 2 000 burghers to Mooi River, withdrew to defensive positions just north of the Thukela River and Colenso. They dug in here and were reinforced until they numbered 4 500. In command was the young, inexperienced Louis Botha, determined to prevent the relief of Ladysmith or at least make this as costly an exercise as possible. When, on 15 December, Buller's troops attacked these Boers they were unceremoniously repulsed, suffering over 1 100 casualties. Boer casualties were only 38.<sup>15</sup> The Boers had, in quick succession, repulsed the British in three theatres of the war, despite the large reinforcements which had been shipped in. In retrospect, this achievement represented the highwater mark of the Boers' endeavours.

Buller was shaken by the succession of reverses and became quite pessimistic. In a telegraph to the Secretary of State for War he reported: "My failure to-day raises a serious question. I do not

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<sup>14</sup> Amery, II, p. 419; Bailes in Warwick and Spies (eds.), S.A. War, pp. 78-82; Maurice, I, pp. 211-260 and 304-331.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice, I, pp. 332-375; Bailes in Warwick and Spies (eds.), S.A. War, pp. 82-85; C.J. Barnard, Generaal Louis Botha op die Natalse Front 1899-1900, pp. 42-58; Breytenbach, II, p. 323.

think I am now strong enough to relieve White."<sup>16</sup> The War Office and British cabinet responded swiftly to the crisis by appointing Field Marshal Lord F.S. Roberts as the new commander-in-chief in South Africa and General Lord H.H. Kitchener as his Chief of Staff, with the relegated Buller henceforth responsible only for the Natal campaign, which carried on under considerable difficulties and required his full attention.<sup>17</sup> Buller accepted this move with good grace and, for a while, went on the defensive with his forces.<sup>18</sup>

After Buller was reinforced by the 5th Division, which arrived in early January 1900, he decided to continue the efforts to relieve Ladysmith, being spurred on by the concerted Boer attempts on 6 January to smash the defensive perimeter around the town. He moved up the Thukela River to try and cross at Potgieter's Drift. The Boers, noting this move, also moved upstream. They had already dug in on the heights opposite Potgieter's Drift by the time Buller arrived in the area, he therefore ordered Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Warren, who had joined him with the reinforcements and was his second-in-command, to move even further upstream and attempt to outflank the Boer right. Warren duly crossed the Thukela, but was repulsed in an engagement on Ntabamanyama (20 and 21 January) and with heavy losses at Spioenkop (24 January). Buller was prompted to unify his force again and on 5 to 7 February made a new attempt to

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<sup>16</sup> Maurice, I, p. 377.

<sup>17</sup> Maurice, I, p.381.

<sup>18</sup> Pakenham, p.241.

break through Botha's defence line at Vaalkrans, but was again repulsed. He then returned to the Colenso area and after almost continuous fighting, from 14 to 27 February 1900, he eventually managed to break through the Boer defence line and finally relieved Ladysmith the following day. As a result of this breakthrough the Boers decided to retire and made for either the Drakensberg or the Biggarsberg.<sup>19</sup> For much of the time Buller's strategy along the Thukela was unimaginative. With little reconnaissance work done, generally, only limited objectives were attacked. As a result Botha, despite limitations in both men and artillery, never had his resources stretched beyond their capabilities. Buller's numerical superiority was not fully exploited until 27 February, when he attacked three major Boer positions at once, most of his artillery being so placed that it could for once, lend real support. The result was immediate success.

Along the western front there had also been developments. Roberts arrived in Cape Town on 10 January 1900. After appraising himself of the precise situation he set about implementing a relatively simple plan he had devised. It was in fact similar to that which Buller had initially intended to implement. By the end of January he had concentrated approximately 40 000 men and 108 guns between the Modder and Orange Rivers, utilising mainly the western railway.<sup>20</sup> Roberts's first major objective was to relieve

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<sup>19</sup> Maurice, II, pp.334-530; Bailes in Warwick and Spies (eds.), S.A. War, pp. 85-90; Barnard, pp. 74-147.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice, I, pp. 408 and 428-438.

Kimberley, and this he achieved with French's cavalry on 15 February. French then swung east, and by moving in north of Cronje's wagon train, cut him off on the Modder River, at Paardeberg. Kitchener, (in command in the absence of the ill Roberts), approached from the west and south with the infantry and artillery. The initial attempts to force Cronje's capitulation, failed. But with Roberts again in command and after days of heavy shelling, Cronje, along with 4 000 burghers, was forced to surrender on 27 February.<sup>21</sup> This opened the way for an advance on Bloemfontein and a mere two weeks later, on 13 March, Roberts entered the Orange Free State capital.<sup>22</sup> The British had taken the initiative in both major theatres of the war, but had as yet not achieved complete dominance. The Boer leadership was now confronted with a deep crisis, more serious than that which Buller had had to contend with when he first arrived in South Africa. The pressures the burghers had had to contend with resulted in widespread demoralisation and some desertions. Also, positions controlled by them for some time such as those in the north-eastern Cape were relinquished, thus opening up yet more supply routes for Roberts's force.<sup>23</sup>

It was under these difficult circumstances that the Boers operating in Natal had to make quick reassessments of strategy. In general, the Free Staters retired to the Drakensberg from the

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<sup>21</sup> Bailes in Warwick and Spies (eds.), S.A. War, pp. 90-93; Maurice, II, pp.1-179.

<sup>22</sup> Maurice, II, pp. 237-238.

<sup>23</sup> Breytenbach, V, pp. 1-16.



Thukela line and to Ladysmith on 28 February, while the Transvaal commandos made for the Biggarsberg.<sup>24</sup> Fortunately for them, while they were in disarray during the retreat, Buller, failing to capitalize on a great opportunity, did not follow up to inflict further losses.<sup>25</sup> It is probable that Buller's cautious nature and the traps set by the Boers into which he had already fallen while trying to relieve Ladysmith, prompted him not to take any risks by pressing with a pursuit.

Topographical configurations in which those Boers who had been around Ladysmith and along the Thukela now found themselves, certainly favoured a continued defensive action. In a line from south to north-west of Ladysmith was the Drakensberg range forming a formidable barrier which could only be crossed at specific passes. At a right angle to the Drakensberg, approximately 40 kilometres north of Ladysmith, there emerged the Biggarsberg range, running on a line from west to east. This range ends just south-east of Helpmekaar and could only be crossed at a few passes. Despite these passes, it still presented a formidable defensive barrier.

In spite of Buller's failure to follow the Boers to the Biggarsberg, the demoralisation that set in amongst them, further compounded by Cronje's capture, resulted in a very real likelihood of these men deserting and leaving Natal altogether.

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<sup>24</sup> Amery, III, p. 546. No statistics are available as to how many burghers went in the two directions.

<sup>25</sup> D. Reitz, Commando, pp. 88-91; Barnard, pp.144-145; B. Viljoen, My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War, pp. 73-74.

In an effort to persuade the burghers to continue the struggle, President Paul Kruger of the South African Republic, hastened to the Natal front, where on 2 March he addressed a throng of men at Glencoe. Initially he berated them for retreating, but then strove to instill a new determination and fire into them, urging them to hold off the British from their countries. His speech had the desired effect - but only for a few days!<sup>26</sup>

Joubert, commander-in-chief of forces in the Biggarsberg, was of the opinion that peace talks should be initiated. To facilitate such a peace initiative he believed the Boers should retire to Lang's Nek, arguing that while they were in British territory, they would not be amenable to talks. Both Kruger and President M.T. Steyn of the Orange Free State rejected this, maintaining that the deeper in British territory they were, the stronger their bargaining position would be. Kruger did, however, send a message to the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, on 5 March, proposing peace on condition that the republics' independence as sovereign states be recognised. This, as expected, was rejected on 12 March.<sup>27</sup>

At a council-of-war held on 5 March at Glencoe and attended by a large number of Boer officers, it was decided to dig in along the Biggarsberg. Very probably, Kruger's address at Glencoe urging everyone to resist, influenced the officers' decision

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<sup>26</sup> Breytenbach, V, pp. 17-21; Barnard, p.131. Breytenbach states the throng of burghers gathered around Kruger numbered a few thousand.

<sup>27</sup> Barnard, pp. 148-149; Breytenbach, V, pp. 23-24.

considerably. Botha had, on the previous day, already ridden along the range to determine where to position his men. At the same meeting Botha was appointed Joubert's second-in-command, as the Commandant-General was seriously ill. Soon afterwards, on 27 March, Joubert died and Botha was appointed Acting Commandant-General.<sup>28</sup>

Shortly after the council-of-war of 5 March, Botha set about creating order and organization out of the existing chaos. Once it had been determined which positions were to be occupied, orders were issued to give effect to the decision. The Biggarsberg from the Drakensberg in the west to just south-east of Helpmekaar was to be held, with the commandos concentrating their men at the various passes. The Biggarsberg provided an excellent natural fortress with few weaknesses. From the Drakensberg to Mkupe Pass the Soutpansberg, Heidelberg, Boksburg, Germiston and Standerton commandos were stationed. From Mkupe Pass to approximately just south of Dundee were placed the Carolina, Lydenburg, Bethal, portion of the Pretoria, Krugersdorp and Middelburg commandos. The next sector, from south-east of Dundee to just south-east of Helpmekaar, was held by the Johannesburg, Swaziland, Utrecht and Piet Retief commandos. Also near Helpmekaar were elements of the German Corps and Irish Brigade.

The Wakkerstroom and Ermelo commandos were not allocated specific positions but acted as a roving force. The Vryheid commando was

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<sup>28</sup> Barnard, pp. 148-153.

sent to its home district to do patrol work. At the same time, some of the Free State commandos held a number of the Drakensberg passes to the west of Ladysmith. Once the commandos were allocated their positions, dug their trenches and built their breastworks, in which tasks they were assisted by 600 blacks, there followed a period of relative inactivity. The use of blacks was not unusual. Both the Boers and British depended upon them from the very beginning of the war for ancillary duties, such as providing intelligence, the digging of trenches, driving wagons and attending to the horses. Warwick in his book Black People and the South African War 1899-1902 states that a system of forced labour for the commandos was introduced. However, by February/March 1900 some blacks were refusing to work for the commandos due to ill treatment.<sup>29</sup>





To alleviate boredom during the period of relative inactivity that now set in, games were played. Some burghers built a church consisting of stone walls approximately 1,5 m tall with a tarpaulin roof. It is possible that this structure was in the Boksburg sector as a Boksburg dominee held services in it. Some wives also joined their men during this quiet period, despite the fact that the presence of women in the laagers, except in

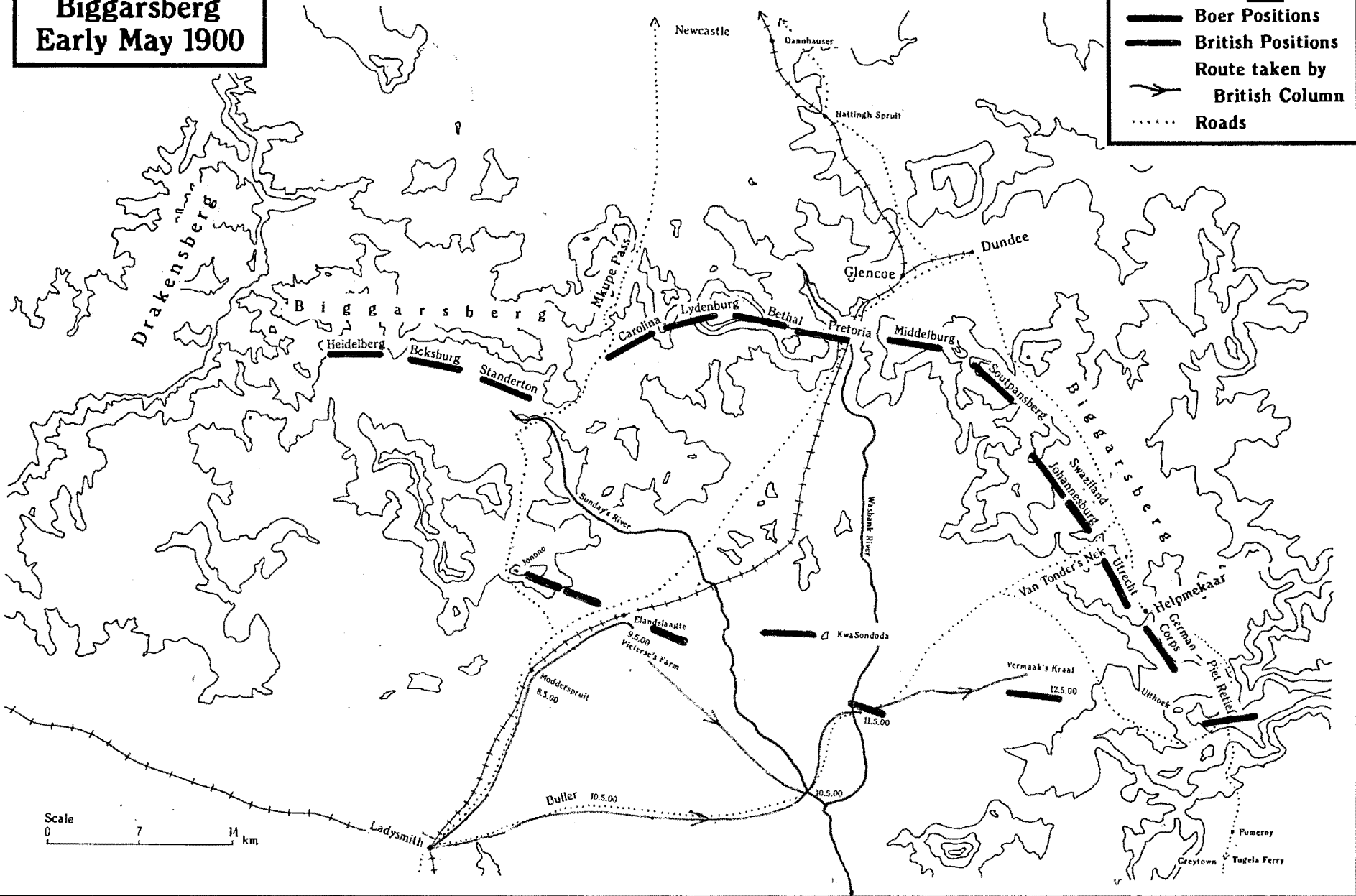
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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 149-153; W. van Everdingen, De Oorlog in Zuid-Afrika, p. 133; F.J. Grobler, Die Carolina-Commando in die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902, pp. 79-80; C.H. Muller, Oorlogsherinneringe, p. 65; J.F. Naude, Vechten en Vluchten van Beyers en Kemp, pp. 95-98; A. Lynch, My Life Story, p. 186; L. Penning, De Oorlog in Zuid-Afrika, II, p. 730; Viljoen, pp. 80-82; Journal of Principal Events Connected with South Africa, III, p. 68; K.G. 884, Letters by L. Meyer to Vechtgeneraal S. Oosthuizen, Cmdt Middelburg, Cmdt Vryheid, Cmdt Piet Retief, Cmdt Swaziland, Cmdt Johannesburg, 5 March 1900, T.A.; P. Warwick, Black People and the South African War 1899-1902. pp. 80-82.

# Biggarsberg Early May 1900

**KEY**

-  Boer Positions
-  British Positions
-  Route taken by British Column
-  Roads



Scale  
0 7 14 km

hospitals or ambulances, was forbidden by the Boer high command. This ruling, however, was not always strictly enforced during the early part of the war.<sup>30</sup>

It is difficult to establish the exact size of the Boer force that initially entrenched itself on the Biggarsberg in early March - it may have been as large as 10 000 men. However, by mid-March it appears to have dwindled to 6 000. This was the result of the Wakkerstroom and Ermelo commandos being transferred to the Orange Free State and a large percentage of each commando were granted leave.<sup>31</sup> Buller's own information was that he was confronted by 7 000 men.<sup>32</sup>

Assisting Botha were Generals Schalk Burger, D.J.E. Erasmus and Lucas J. Meyer. They had each been ordered to command a sector of the defence line. Burger was responsible for the section from the Drakensberg to east of Mkupe's Pass, from Mkupe's Pass to near the railway line fell under Erasmus and the rest to the east and south was the responsibility of Meyer. In mid-March Burger moved to Pretoria so that he could pay proper attention to his duties as a member of the Executive Council. General J.C. Fourie was elected to replace him on the Biggarsberg.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Grobler, pp. 79-80; Muller, p. 65; Naude, p. 98; S.B. Spies, Methods of Barbarism?, pp. 18 and 312.

<sup>31</sup> Barnard, p. 150.

<sup>32</sup> Principal Events, III, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> K.G. 886, p.4; Leyds 719(d), Tel.no. 11, Burger to L. Botha, 19 March 1900; Leyds 721(a), Tel.no. 63, Botha to Burger, 6 April 1900, T.A.

As further news of Cronje's capitulation at Paardeberg and the resulting critical situation in the Orange Free State became available, it destroyed the effects of Kruger's speech. Burghers began leaving the Biggarsberg. Joubert feared that his whole line would give way. The sudden collapse of Boer morale and lack of discipline is a recurrent theme throughout much of this dissertation. These manifestations became particularly prevalent as the pressure on the Boers as a whole increased. In his book Kommandolewe Tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902, F. Pretorius identifies several reasons, which are also pertinent to this study, resulting in a lack of discipline. He points out that the commando laws and regulations of 1898 for the South African Republic and 1899 for the Orange Free State stipulated that legal orders by officers were to be obeyed and where burghers failed to do so specific punishments were provided for. Although the laws and regulations were sometimes applied, they to a large extent remained a dead letter. Burghers were not used to being disciplined and having their individualism curbed and therefore often objected so vigorously to punitive action, to make its application impossible. Officers were generally loath to apply the law strictly because they were elected by their burghers and held their positions because of the goodwill of their fellow men. Furthermore officers and men were known to one another socially. European armies, through the drill system learnt to obey orders, the commandos did not undergo such training. The granting of leave was another problem issue. The commando laws did not make provision for leave, some officers were consequently more lenient than others in allowing burghers to go home as the war dragged

on. Several leave regulations were made during the war, but never strictly adhered to. Furthermore, men better known to officers or whose fathers held prominent positions in society, tended to obtain leave more easily. Many of these difficulties came down to the Boers being a volunteer army made up largely of farmers who had their own lives to lead.<sup>34</sup>

One may question why the Boers, apart from an attack launched on 10 April at Elandsplaagte, remained essentially inactive, allowing the British to prepare themselves at leisure for the next campaign. While the low morale, already mentioned, did play a role, it was hardly the only reason. Seen in the context of Boer strategy in the Thukela valley, the commandos fought almost exclusively a defensive campaign. It was not generally their style to go on the offensive. In order to do so they would have had to be suitably trained, to be psychologically prepared to leave the safety of their trenches and confront an enemy in the open. This kind of preparation they most certainly did not have. They were probably further psychologically disadvantaged in the knowledge that the force before them had driven them from a powerful defensive position, because of its numerical preponderance.

Botha was not the only commander kept busy since the collapse of the Boer defence line on the Thukela. Having relieved Ladysmith Buller was immediately confronted by new tasks. These were

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<sup>34</sup> Breytenbach, V, p.21; F. Pretorius, Kommandolewe Tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902, pp. 203-227.



numerous, extensive in scope and varied. The first and most urgent one was to bring supplies into Ladysmith, to the force that had defended the town and to move most people out of the disease ridden town, for them to recuperate in healthier surroundings. For him to mount a future campaign, it was essential that all damages caused by the Boers to the railway line between Colenso and Ladysmith and beyond to Elandslaagte be repaired, that his own force which had just endured two weeks of almost continuous fighting be re-equipped, to obtain fresh mounts as only about 200 useless horses remained and to re-organise the British forces in Natal.

Once Ladysmith was relieved it was necessary to integrate Lieutenant-General Sir George White's defending force with that of the relieving one. This posed problems, particularly as suitable appointments had to be found for various senior officers. By April, 1900 Buller's re-organised force had taken shape. It consisted of the 2nd, 4th and 5th Divisions (Infantry) commanded by Lieutenants-General C.F. Clery, N.G. Lyttelton and H.J.T. Hildyard respectively and also the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Brigades commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel J.F. Burn-Murdoch, Major-General J.F. Brocklehurst, Major-General Lord Dundonald respectively. In addition there were approximately 110 pieces of artillery attached to the force.<sup>35</sup>

In the process of re-organising the Natal Field Force, a number

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<sup>35</sup> F.M. Maurice and M.H. Grant, Official History of the War in South Africa, III, pp. 249-251.

of battalions that were involved in either the defence or relief of Ladysmith, were transferred to Roberts's forces. Along with this shifting of units Lieutenants-General White, Hunter and Warren also departed from the Natal front.<sup>36</sup>

The one major decision Buller was faced with, was to determine the route to be followed beyond Ladysmith. Once the town was relieved, the Natal Field Force no longer had an immediate and clear objective. As a result, this force's further role and strategy became the subject of numerous telegrams between Buller and Roberts. During this exchange Buller vacillated between plans to attack towards the Drakensberg or advance over the Biggarsberg towards Volksrust. If he opted for the former he would link up with Roberts, while the latter would assist in his securing the railway line towards the South African Republic.<sup>37</sup>

Just as Buller vacillated over what strategy to pursue, so his mood swung from one of extreme optimism to pessimism. Thus for instance, on 2 March, Buller in the first excitement after relieving Ladysmith, proposed occupying Northern Natal with three brigades while forcing the Drakensberg passes with his remaining two divisions, thereby joining hands with Roberts. Roberts opposed this plan, for in his view the Boers' Drakensberg position was too strong and therefore Buller's advance on Van

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<sup>36</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 165-166; Maurice and Grant, III, p.258.

<sup>37</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 165-167; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 265-267; Roberts Papers, XVI T.A., W.O. 105/13, Buller to Roberts and Roberts to Buller, 2 to 21 March 1900 and XVII T.A., W.O. 105/13, Roberts to Buller and Buller to Roberts, 19 March 1900 to 9 April 1900.

Reenen's Pass should be strictly defensive.<sup>38</sup> On 5 March Buller reported a plan to head for Dundee and possibly Newcastle. This had been prompted by a report, from an unidentified source, maintaining that the Boers were in full retreat. Roberts agreed to this plan of action.<sup>39</sup>

However, two days later Buller, believing that the Drakensberg would be easier to cross than the Biggarsberg, changed his mind again, intending to head for Harrismith. In response, Roberts cautioned that the Drakensberg was not to be crossed until he himself was able to assist on the other side of the mountain, but he had no objection to active operations being carried out in Natal.<sup>40</sup> By 14 March Buller was once again confidently proposing an advance on the Biggarsberg.<sup>41</sup> Yet, a mere five days later, he was reporting that the force holding the Biggarsberg had been reinforced and that the Boers were trying to work their way around his right. In consequence he requested Roberts to clear the Drakensberg passes for him.<sup>42</sup> This exchange of telegrams continued for a number of weeks dragging

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<sup>38</sup> Roberts Papers, XVI T.A., W.O. 105/13, Tel. nos. 214 and 315, Buller to Roberts and Roberts to Buller, 2 and 3 March, 1900.

<sup>39</sup> Roberts Papers, XVI T.A., W.O. 105/13, Tel. nos. 216 and 349, Buller to Roberts and Roberts to Buller, 5 and 6 March, 1900.

<sup>40</sup> Roberts Papers, XVI T.A., W.O. 105/13, Tel. nos. 219 and 403, Buller to Roberts and Roberts to Buller, 7 March 1900 and 10 March 1900.

<sup>41</sup> Roberts Papers, XVI T.A., W.O. 105/13, Tel.no. 221, Buller to Roberts, 14 March 1900.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts Papers, XVII T.A., W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 223, Buller to Roberts, 19 March 1900.

on through March and April. Despite all the messages that passed to and fro, no plan of action was agreed upon. Roberts exercised considerable tact and patience, offering advice and assistance whenever he was able to do so.<sup>43</sup>

Buller's activities during March-April 1900, or his apparent lack thereof, have been criticised. Amery wrote, "The two months that followed the relief of Ladysmith were...a time of complete inaction for the Natal Army."<sup>44</sup>

Buller's apparent lack of activity should, however, be considered in the light of the tasks already mentioned, which confronted him. To then speak of "a time of complete inaction", is neither accurate nor fair. That numbers of troops were not particularly active, was due to their recuperating from the effects of the siege and prolonged campaign. As late as 31 March, it was reported that there was much sickness in the Second Division, while the Fourth Division had 2 300 men unfit for marching.<sup>45</sup> On 22 March the Medical Officer reported that he did not think that the men who had assisted in the defence of Ladysmith would be fit for the field for another month.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, to have rushed on to the Drakensberg and Biggarsberg before repairing the rail lines and building up a stockpile of supplies in Ladysmith

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<sup>43</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 165-166; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 256-258.

<sup>44</sup> Amery, IV, p. 168.

<sup>45</sup> Principal Events, III, p. 53.

<sup>46</sup> Roberts Papers, XVII T.A., W.O. 105/13, Tel no. 224, Buller to Roberts, 22 March 1900.

or further along the line, would have been shortsighted. Without adequate supplies to draw on, an advancing force would sooner or later have to halt, to enable essential supplies to be provided.

During this period in which the Boers and British were re-organising and preparing themselves in Natal, for the next phase of the campaign, there was little contact between the respective forces except for occasional skirmishes between scouting parties. The most extensive skirmish occurred when, on 10 April, the Boers launched an attack on the British encamped near Elandslaagte. As early as 4 April Schalk Burger, from the safety of Pretoria, was urging Louis Botha to attack the British force.<sup>47</sup> However, the success of such an attack was highly unlikely. As Lucas Meyer, in a telegram to President Kruger mentioned, the British force on the Elandslaagte plain was, to judge by the number of its tents, very large. It was also well fortified and allegedly surrounded by dozens of pieces of artillery.<sup>48</sup> None the less, on the evening of 9 April, two days after Meyer's pessimistic report to Pretoria, a Boer force comprising the Krugersdorp, Middelburg, Swaziland and Utrecht commandos, departed from their camps with the intention of attacking the British force near Elandslaagte. Early the following morning they arrived at the Sunday's River, with Meyer commanding the left flank, Louis Botha and General D.J.E. Erasmus the centre and General C.E. Fourie the right flank. It soon became apparent that the strength of the

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<sup>47</sup> Leyds 720(g), Tel. no. 37, Burger to L. Botha, 4 April 1900, T.A.

<sup>48</sup> Leyds 721(a), Tel. no. 38, Meyer to Kruger, 7 April 1900, T.A.

British force, its careful positioning in the plain and its fortification, would prevent the Boers from advancing within rifle range. It was therefore decided merely to bombard the encampment with artillery. There is no record of how many pieces of artillery the Boers had with them. The British artillery replied to the barrage with their 18 pieces of artillery. The duel continued all day, but little significant damage was caused. However, the Boer action prompted Buller to withdraw his force a little further south.<sup>49</sup> If the Boers were to attack again, they would then have to cover more open ground before coming into range. Buller was obviously being wary, ensuring that the Boers could not, under cover, advance to within rifle range. Several engagements, and particularly the first at Colenso in December 1899, had taught him the salutary lesson that a Boer with a rifle, was a most effective fighter.

In order to understand the relevance and significance of Buller's activities in May-June 1900, they should be seen in the context of Roberts's movements in the Orange Free State and periodic reference will therefore be made to what was taking place to the west of the Drakensberg. By the same token Boer strategies, activities and difficulties in Natal must be viewed in the context of events on other fronts in South Africa.

After the capture of Bloemfontein on 13 March 1900, Roberts, for various reasons remained there for several weeks. These reasons

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<sup>49</sup> Leyds 721(d), Tel.no. 21, Meyer to Kruger, 12 April 1900, T.A.; Amery, IV, p. 169; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 253-254; D. Reitz, Commando, pp. 92-93.

included securing his lines of communication and building up a stockpile of supplies. Also, his campaign-weary troops were allowed to recuperate. It was essential too, to secure adequately his position against Boer forces active to both west and south-west and east and south-east of Bloemfontein. The burghers to the east and south-east posed a very real threat to his supply lines.<sup>50</sup> While the reasons why both Roberts and Buller did not attempt to advance for some time were, therefore, somewhat similar, Roberts had the additional burden of trying to subdue forces posing a threat to his rear and flanks. The March-April period was thus a time of preparation and consolidation for Roberts and Buller. By the end of April-early May, Buller's 2nd Division was encamped near Surprise Hill just west of Ladysmith, while the 1st Cavalry Brigade was stationed further west, towards Bluebank. The eastern side of the town was covered by the 2nd Cavalry Brigade and, encamped north-east of the town at Modderspruit, was the 4th Division. Based at Buys's farm south of Elandslaagte was the 3rd Mounted Brigade, and the 5th Division held a line from Jonono's Kop to the Elandslaagte battlefield. Portion of the 2nd Division was stationed with the 4th Division.<sup>51</sup> As a result of the re-organization and transfer of certain units from Natal to other fronts, there was a good deal of shifting of men in and around Ladysmith, during March and April.

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<sup>50</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 11-77; Breytenbach, V, pp. 129-316.

<sup>51</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 255 and 259; Principal Events, IV, p. 54.

It is difficult to establish the exact size and strength of the Natal Field Force on 1 May 1900. Figures do show that on 1 June this force comprised 45 715 officers and men. Of this force a total of 5 576 officers and men guarded the lines of communication and 4 658 kept watch on the Drakensberg passes. With the Natal Field Force were 119 pieces of artillery, three Vickers-Maxim guns and 48 machine guns; of these 23 guns and seven machine guns were employed along the lines of communication or by the Drakensberg defence force. As there were no significant additions to, transfers from or losses suffered by Buller's Natal Field Force during May, one can, with reasonable assurance, assume that the force would have been of similar strength at the beginning of May 1900.<sup>52</sup>

At the same time the Biggarsberg was held by 2 494 burghers in Fourie's sector,<sup>53</sup> 2 000 in Erasmus's sector,<sup>54</sup> and approximately 2 000 in Meyer's sector.<sup>55</sup> It is therefore

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<sup>52</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 539; Principal Events, IV, p. 54.

<sup>53</sup> Leyds 722(f), Tel. no. 2, Fourie to KG Dept., 1 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>54</sup> Leyds 722(d), Tel. no. 65, Erasmus to KG, 27 April 1900, T.A.

<sup>55</sup> Leyds 721(a), Tel. no. 38, Meyer to President, 7 April 1900, T.A. The figure of 2 000 burghers for Meyers's sector is an adjusted one. On 7 April he reported having 3 000 men. However, of these the majority of the Krugersdorp and Irish Brigade were transferred out of Natal on 14 April. As partial compensation he received the Soutpansberg commando from Fourie's sector. They were however transferred after the date on which Fourie reported the strength of his sector, and therefore no deduction has to be made from his figure of 2 494 men. Lastly, Meyer included the Vryheid commando into his figure, despite their being based in their home district.



probable that between 6 000 and 6 500 burghers lined the Biggarsberg. Regarding artillery, Captain Pretorius reported to Major Wolmarans, "Hier is aanwezig drie Fransche kanonnen vier Krupp twee Armstrongs twee Howitzers twee snelvuur zeven groot maxims en kleine."<sup>56</sup>

A serious blow to the Boer cause in Natal, was the departure of Louis Botha from that front on 3 May 1900. He was now the Commandant-General and, with the passage of time, it became evident that it was in the Orange Free State that the most serious crisis existed. Botha had, during the Thukela campaign, proved that he had an outstanding military brain and his successes had won him the respect of fellow officers and men. This respect played a vital role when morale wavered under pressure. This exceptional officer would henceforth no longer have a direct influence on the Natal front. As from 7 May it was Meyer who was in overall command along the Biggarsberg. He was somewhat older and did not command as much respect as Botha did.<sup>57</sup>

By early May 1900, Roberts was ready to resume his northward advance from Bloemfontein. The grand strategy he had devised for the British forces was that they should advance, within several

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<sup>56</sup> Leyds 721(e), Tel. no. 31, L. Botha to Meyer, 14 April 1900; Leyds 721 (f), Tel. no. 11, Engelbrecht to Meyer, 30 April 1900. (Although this telegram is dated 30 April it should probably be 20 April.); Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 107, Erasmus to President, 17 May 1900; Leyds 725(b), Tel.no. 91, Meyer to L.Botha, 19 May 1900, T.A.; Breytenbach, I, p. 161 and V, pp. 388-389.

<sup>57</sup> Grobler, pp. 86-87; Barnard, pp. 154-157.

columns, on a front stretching over approximately 600 kilometres, from Kimberley to Ladysmith. The columns were to converge upon one another, with Pretoria as the ultimate goal.<sup>58</sup> With this strategy in mind Roberts telegraphed the following message to Buller on 2 May.

A force under command of General Ian Hamilton successfully cleared large numbers of the enemy out of the Houet Nek ten miles north of Thaba-'Nchu yesterday. This force will now advance on Winberg, and another, which I accompany, will move simultaneously along the line of the Railway. You should occupy the enemy's attention on the Biggarsberg, and as their numbers decrease, which they assuredly will, move your troops towards the Transvaal, repairing the railway as you advance. Please let me know what you hope to be able to do in this respect.<sup>59</sup>

Hamilton commanded a force of approximately 14 500 men with 38 guns and was supported by Lieutenant-General Sir H.E. Colvile's force of 4 000 men and 14 guns. A Boer force occupying Toba Mountain and Houtnek blocked Hamilton's proposed route to Winburg. After a fierce fight, marked at times by lack of coordinated action among the Boers, Hamilton eventually was able to drive the Boers off. This placed him in a position to march, in tandem with Roberts's force, north to Winburg and then on to Kroonstad.<sup>60</sup> The instruction that Buller repair the railway line was probably prompted by two factors. It would mean that the British would have another supply line and, probably more important, it was a much shorter one than any of the others.

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<sup>58</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 80-84.

<sup>59</sup> FK 1792 T.A., W.O. 32/861, Tel. no. 1419, Roberts to Buller, 2 May 1900.

<sup>60</sup> Breytenbach, V, pp. 402-412; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 41-42; Amery, IV, pp. 96-100.

This order finally settled the route Buller was to follow. The order is almost diffident and does not go into much detail; nor does it require much decisive action from Buller. Amery suggests that this was so, because Buller would better be able to appreciate the difficulties in Natal and, "partly from a chivalrous disinclination (by Roberts) to treat a general who had once been commander-in-chief in South Africa in the same way as he treated his other subordinates."<sup>61</sup> It is quite possible that other factors influencing the relationship between Buller and Roberts also affected the manner in which these two men related to each other. Roberts's only son Frederick was killed at Colenso, while serving under Buller, who had permitted him to assist in an attempt to save the guns although it was not his duty. Roberts junior was mortally wounded in the attempt and his father had felt the loss most grievously. On a less personal level, Buller and Roberts belonged to rival groups within the military establishment. Pakenham suggests that the army was divided into the 'Indians' and 'Africans', the former headed by Roberts, with a powerful ally in Lord Lansdowne, Secretary for War, and the latter led by Wolseley and Buller.<sup>62</sup>

On 3 May Buller reported to Roberts that he would be ready to begin moving in four days time, as soon as the transport animals were gathered. Due to the presence of lung sickness and scarcity of grazing, these animals had been scattered far and wide over

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<sup>61</sup> Amery, IV, p. 85.

<sup>62</sup> Pakenham, pp. xv-xvi, 235, 241 and 246.

the countryside.<sup>63</sup> In a fairly detailed response to Roberts he described conditions and the overall situation in Natal as follows,

The enemy during the last seven weeks have prepared all passes in the Biggarsberg for defence with many (gun emplacements) and double line of entrenchments, these are now held by about 6 000 men with first rate lateral communications, and there are about 1 000 more within reach in Zululand and Vryheid. I do not think I should be justified in trying to force either Cundycleugh, Newcastle, or Dundee roads. The weak point on the defence is that portion of the berg between Dundee and Helpmekaar. To attack that a force from Elandslaagte will have to make a flank march of 25 miles exposed to attack by the Waschbank Valley and then to force (the) pass, when I shall probably find from two to 3 000 men in a strong position, possibly more. To do this I think it ought to be of a strength of two Divisions.<sup>64</sup>

Buller's message continued, describing other tasks confronting him, and difficulties to be dealt with. He mentioned that closing the Dundee-Newcastle roads would require six battalions, as there were nine miles (fourteen kilometres) of front, offering the Boers excellent terrain from which to attack. In addition it would be necessary to cover the Cundycleugh roads, guard Zululand and the roads to Estcourt and Greytown. In order to carry out all this, he requested that he be sent another two brigades in order to make certain the operation was successful. He disagreed with Roberts regarding the effects of the Orange Free State advance on the number of Boers in Natal, believing that the movement

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<sup>63</sup> FK 1792 T.A., W.O. 32/861, Tel. (no number), Buller to Roberts, 3 May 1900.

<sup>64</sup> FK 1792 T.A., W.O. 32/861, Tel (no number), Buller to Roberts, 3 May 1900.

would, in fact, cause Boer numbers to increase in Natal.<sup>65</sup>

The pessimism evident in this report and the exaggeration of difficulties and troop requirements was typical of Buller, as already revealed during his campaign to relieve Ladysmith. To state that the Wasbank valley offered good attacking positions was true, but once out of the valley one moves onto open plains to the south, which did not suit the Boers' tactics, as was apparent during the 10 April attack, near Elandsplaagte.<sup>66</sup> Time and events were to illustrate that Roberts's logical prediction of the Boer response to his continued advance in the Free State was correct, rather than Buller's forecast of their reaction.

The Biggarsberg, with its passes which lay to the north of Buller, rose approximately 400 metres above the plain on which he was located. It stretched from the Drakensberg in the west to beyond Helpmekaar, and could with a relative possibility of success, only be crossed somewhere east of Dundee. The other passes, namely Mkupe, CundyCleugh and Dundee were too long and steep. While this terrain did, in consequence, pose something of a problem to Buller, the plains he was on were possibly even more problematic to the Boers, minimising the element of surprise so essential for a successful action against a numerically superior enemy.

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<sup>65</sup> FK 1792 T.A., W.O. 32/861, Tel. (no number), Buller to Roberts, 3 May 1900.

<sup>66</sup> Leyds 721(c), Tel. no. 12, Meyer to President, 11 April 1900; Leyds 721(d), Tel. no. 21, Meyer to President, 12 April 1900, T.A.

During the few days following Roberts's order to Buller, there was a flurry of activity as orders were issued and the necessary preparations carried out to ready a force for an eastward advance. On 4 May confidential orders were issued for a column to move at the shortest notice. The column was to consist of the 2nd Division, with divisional cavalry to be augmented with two squadrons, the 3rd Mounted Brigade with "A" Battery Royal Horse Artillery, corps troops, 61st Howitzer Battery, two 4.7" naval guns, three Vickers Maxims and the 4th Mountain Battery. In addition, detailed instructions were issued regarding supplies being carried in wagons.<sup>67</sup>

On further orders, the 2nd Division marched to Modder Spruit on 7 May and the 3rd Mounted Brigade advanced to Cornelius Pieters's farm.<sup>68</sup> Buller, quoting an undisclosed source, reported to Roberts that Kruger had ordered an attack. At much the same time, Hildyard reported the Boers gathering in some numbers near KwaSondoda, while black spies informed the British that an attack on their force at Elandsplaagte could be expected. All this information caused Buller to delay his advance,<sup>69</sup> but in response to the information about the impending Boer attack, orders were issued for everyone to be on the alert. On 8 May

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<sup>67</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 2 Div., 4 May 1900.

<sup>68</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army and 2 Div., 7 May 1900.

<sup>69</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 7 May 1900; Roberts Papers, XVIII T.A., W.O. 105/18, Tel. no. 253, Buller to Roberts, 6 May 1900.

strong parties of the 3rd Mounted Brigade were sent to the north-east flank of Elandslaagte, while two battalions of the 2nd Division were brought forward and pushed out to the west of Elandslaagte.<sup>70</sup> Buller was still in no mood to take risks.

Little came of the anticipated Boer attack. Assistant Commandant-General Chris Botha, brother of Louis, decided not to attack with his men, as the British had not yet advanced beyond Elandslaagte. However he did report that his force was ready to strike as soon as the British reached the Sunday's River. A small unit of twenty men led by Commandant C. Ricchiardi, commander of an Italian Corps with the Boers, did in fact launch an attack towards the coal mines near the Elandslaagte station at 05:45 on 8 May, but were easily repulsed by numerically superior British forces. Ricchiardi's casualties were one killed and one wounded. British casualties were one man wounded in the knee.<sup>71</sup>

Before the British advance commenced a number of changes in the composition of the Boer force along the Biggarsberg, brought about by greater and more urgent needs in other theatres of the war, had taken place. At a council-of-war, probably held on 30 April or 1 May at Glencoe, it was decided to transfer 4 Krupps, one large and two small maxims from Natal along with 39 boxes of

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<sup>70</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 7 May 1900.

<sup>71</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army and 3 Cav. Bde., 8 May 1900; Roberts Papers XVIII T.A., W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 3567, Buller to Roberts, 8 May 1900; Leyds 723(e), Tel. no. 46, C. Botha to L. Meyer, Tel. no. 98, Edwards to Meyer and Tel. no. 104, Erasmus to Sts Secrs, 8 May 1900, T.A.; C.R.N. Burne, With the Naval Brigade in Natal, p. 59.

ammunition. Instructions were also issued for the transfer of the Standerton and Bethal commandos, comprising approximately 1 200 burghers.<sup>72</sup> To supplement his considerably reduced force, Erasmus requested that Field-Cornet P.F. Zeederberg be ordered to recruit as many burghers in Pretoria as possible and bring them to Natal. Within a short time Zeederberg was reporting that, as soon as he had sufficient men, he would depart for Natal.<sup>73</sup> The Standerton commando strongly resisted their pending transfer to the Orange Free State. When President Kruger heard of this, he made it clear that they were to proceed immediately to Brandfort, which they eventually did.<sup>74</sup> The Standerton commando were probably loath to leave the front closest to their district. Furthermore, on the Natal front they would encounter the force most likely to try to move into their district.

The Boers were experiencing other discipline problems as well. During April, with little activity taking place in Natal, the officers, by a narrow majority had voted that 12% of all burghers be given permission to return home to attend to farming matters

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<sup>72</sup> Leyds 722(f), Tel. no. 41, Pretorius to Wolmarans, 1 May 1900 and Tel. no. 39, L. Botha to Burger, 2 May 1900, T.A. No documents detailing discussions held at a council-of-war could be found. However, in Leyds 722(f), Tel. no. 41, 1 May 1900 there is a specific reference to a council-of-war taking place and orders being issued on land 2 May bringing about considerable changes in the composition of the Boer forces along the Biggarsberg.

<sup>73</sup> Leyds 722(f), Tel. no. 21, Erasmus to Landdrost, Pretoria, 2 May 1900; Leyds 723(b), Tel. no. 31, Zeederberg to Erasmus, 4 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>74</sup> Leyds 722(f), Tel. no. 49, Wd. Cmdt. Boshoff to Burger, 1 May 1900; Leyds 723(a), Tel. no. 59, Kruger to Landdrost Standerton and Tel. no. 67, L. Botha to Kruger, 3 May 1900, T.A.



and another 10% be granted leave. This concession meant that almost a quarter of the entire force was in fact legitimately away from the front.<sup>75</sup> Then, on the expiry of their leave many men failed to return to the front, simply alighting from trains before they reached their destinations. Chris Botha requested that police on duty at railway stations put an end to this practice.<sup>76</sup> On the same day that Chris Botha made this request, the leave regulations affecting all burghers were amended by the government. They stated that as a result of the seriousness of the situation in the Orange Free State and at Fourteen Streams, it had been decided to grant no further leave in May, that all granted leave was cancelled and that only 6% of burghers were permitted to attend to farming activities. Furthermore, orders were issued that all burghers liable for military service were to join their commandos immediately. In the telegram in which L. Botha announced these amendments, he lamented the fact that wherever the Boers were forced to retreat, it was because they were numerically too weak. He appealed to the commandants and veld-cornets to do their duty and to ensure that everyone was present and urged,

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<sup>75</sup> Leyds 721(f), Tel. no. 4, Meyer to Sts Secrs, 19 April 1900, T.A.

<sup>76</sup> Leyds 723(b), Tel. no. 60, C. Botha to Sts Secrs, 4 May 1900, T.A.

Die officieren hebben toch de wet in hunne handen en onze onafhankelykheid hebben zy nu in hunne handen. Daarom draag ik u hierby op om allen die de wapenen kunnen opnemen op te roepen en zich onmiddelyk te doen aansluiten zonder eenige verdere verzuim of vertraging.<sup>77</sup>

The situation in the Orange Free State and at Fourteen Streams was even more serious for the Boers; it was critical. Roberts's forces advancing jointly along the Bloemfontein-Kroonstad and Winburg-Kroonstad roads totalled 44 380 men - of whom 23 500 were mounted - with 142 guns, 20 Vickers-Maxims and 82 machine guns. Opposing them were a mere 6 000 burghers with a very limited number of guns. Louis Botha soon realised that the conventional set piece defence which they had previously employed, would never stop this massive force on the open Orange Free State plains. Alternative tactics were discussed including the scorched earth one, but no consensus could be reached and so no major tactical changes were introduced. By 10 May Roberts's forces, although hindered at some points such as at the Vet River and the Sand River, was poised to capture Kroonstad, the town the Boers were using as their Orange Free State capital. Roberts had advanced some 100 kilometres in a mere seven days. On the western flank, at Fourteen Streams, the British were also successfully progressing, having secured the important crossing over the Vaal River on 7 May. This would enable Methuen's Xth Division to advance on Mafikeng and forge into the western part of the South African Republic.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Leyds 723(b), Tel. no. 122, Wd KG to Erasmus, C. Botha, Fourie, 4 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>78</sup> Breytenbach, V, pp. 416-475 and 488-497; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 41-42 and 107-112.

Buller's initial advance on 7 May to Modder Spruit and Elandsplaagte with the 2nd Division and 3rd Mounted Brigade respectively was carried out in that direction, partly to deceive the Boers and partly to meet an expected attack on his right flank.<sup>79</sup> On 8 May the 2nd Division remained stationary, while elements of Dundonald's 3rd Mounted Brigade did some patrolling.<sup>80</sup> The following day, with the threat of a major Boer counter-offensive failing to materialise, the columns changed direction and headed in a south-easterly direction. Dundonald's men proceeded to the drift where the main Ladysmith-Helpmekaar road crossed the Sunday's River. Encountering no opposition, they bivouacked there. Koppies immediately east of the river were also occupied. Clery, with the rest of the column, joined Dundonald there the following day. Within two days Clery's men had covered 27 kilometres. Some of the roads were very dusty, but the cool and fine weather was ideal for marching.

While awaiting Clery's arrival, some of Dundonald's men were profitably employed in reconnaissance work. The Natal Carbineers scouted the terrain east of the Wasbank River, reporting on fords over that river towards Helpmekaar. At the same time two companies of Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry probed northward and were able to report that KwaSondoda was not occupied by Boers. While the 2nd Division and 3rd Mounted Brigade were on the move, a force commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel E.C. Bethune which held

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<sup>79</sup> FK 1792 T.A., W.O. 32/855, Report by Buller to Sec State for War, 24 May 1900.

<sup>80</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3 Cav. Bde., 8 May 1900.

Greytown, was ordered to advance on Helpmekaar via Tugela Ferry and via Pomeroy from the south. Bethune's force of 1 500 men comprised the Umvoti Mounted Rifles, Imperial Light Infantry, Bethune's Mounted Infantry, the Natal Hotchkiss Battery and two naval guns.<sup>81</sup>

Buller's initial attempt to deceive the Boers by moving in a north-easterly direction rather than directly east was successful. As the Boers noted the large scale movement of British forces conflicting reports were submitted about them. Erasmus reported approximately 200 wagons heading towards the Sunday's River on 7 May.<sup>82</sup> Later in the day he mentioned considerable movement around Elandslaagte, but was unsure of the route the British intended following. Sometime later he reported that their manoeuvre was possibly only a feint or shifting of a camp.<sup>83</sup> When no significant move was made on the following day, the Boers were convinced this was the case.<sup>84</sup>

Once Buller's advance continued, it prompted a flood of reports, but still with no real clarity on the exact route the British

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<sup>81</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3 Cav. Bde., 2 Div. and 2 Bde., 9 and 10 May 1900; Roberts Papers XVIII T.A., W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 0852, Buller to Roberts, 13 May 1900; J. Stirling, The Colonials in South Africa 1899-1902, p. 64.

<sup>82</sup> Leyds 723(d), Tel. no. 57, Erasmus to Sts Secrs, 7 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>83</sup> Leyds 723(d), Tel. no. 52, Edwards to L. Botha; Tel. no. 82, Edwards to L. Meyer; Tel. nos. 92 and 105, Erasmus to Sts Secrs; Tel. no. 106, C. Botha to Meyer, 7 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>84</sup> Leyds 723(e), Tel. no. 23, Fourie to Meyer; Tel. no. 39, Erasmus to Meyer; Tel. no. 64, C. Botha to Meyer; Tel. no. 98, Edwards to Meyer, 8 May 1900, T.A.

force intended taking. The movement from Elandslaagte battlefield by some of Hildyard's men in an east-south-easterly direction, rather than the south-easterly one taken by Dundonald's men added to the Boers' confusion even further. Hildyard's men had orders to occupy a bluff overlooking the Sunday's River, dig entrenchments there and make improvements to the road. This force was supported by two guns. As the general consensus of opinion among the Boers apparently was that the British force was making for either Van Tonder's Nek or Helpmekaar, C. Botha was ordered to reinforce the Van Tonder's Nek area with 500 men, a 75mm Creusot and 37mm Maxim Nordenfeldt.<sup>85</sup>

As the British force congregated on the Sunday's River on 10 May and the cavalry scouted east and north of the crossing point, alarmist Boer reports began coming in including accounts of fighting in the Helpmekaar and Pomeroy area. Later it became clear that these accounts were exaggerations. What had probably taken place were skirmishes between Boer and British patrols or contact had been made with Bethune's force. The total reported casualties for the day was one wounded of Bethune's force. Clearly, no heavy fighting had taken place that day, but none the less, the alarmist reports resulted in the despatch of reinforcements to the Helpmekaar area, accompanied by Fourie and Chris Botha. Once the true situation became known however, some

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<sup>85</sup> Leyds 723(d), Tel. no. 49, Tel Kantoor (Glencoe) to HTD; Tel. no. 57, Erasmus to Meyer; Tel. nos. 60 and 64, Erasmus to C. Botha; Tel. no. 78, Wd Cmdt Viljoen (Van Tonder's Nek) to Cmdt Viljoen; Tel. nos. 79 and 112, Erasmus to President; Tel. no. 115, C. Botha to Cmdt Vryheid; Tel. no. 116, C. Botha to (no name); Tel. no. 117, Erasmus to Meyer, 9 May 1900, T.A.; FK 1777 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 10 Bde., 9 May 1900.

of the reinforcements seem to have been withdrawn from the Helpmekaar area.<sup>86</sup>

By the evening of 10 May the British force that was gathered on the Sunday's River, south-east of Elandslaagte, consisted of the 3rd Mounted Brigade, 'A' Battery R.H.A., 2nd Infantry Division, 7th, 63rd and 64th Batteries Royal Field Artillery, 61st Howitzer Battery, two 4.7 guns, four 12 pound naval guns, 3 Vickers-Maxims (pom-poms), No. 4 Mountain Battery and a supply column with 10 days' provisions.<sup>87</sup> Buller, along with his head-quarters staff, that day rode out from Ladysmith to join them. From then Buller took personal command of this flanking force.<sup>88</sup>

Later that day orders were issued for this force to proceed towards the Wasbank River the following morning. The left flank and rear of Buller's force were to be covered by one of Hildyard's battalions occupying KwaSondoda. The occupation of this hill would also ensure the maintenance of communication with Ladysmith. All was now ready for the next phase of Buller's

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<sup>86</sup> Leyds 723(g), Tel. no. 15, Wd Asst Gen Schoeman to Meyer; Tel. no. 28, Edwards to Meyer; Tel. no. 29, Wd Cmdt to Viljoen; Tel. no. 45, C. Botha to Viljoen; Tel. no. 46, C. Botha to Mrs C. Uys; Tel. no. 57, Erasmus to Meyer; Tel. no. 58, V.C. Dercksen to L. Botha; Tel. no. 73, C. Botha to Meyer; Tel. no. 98, Landdrost to Cmdt Vryheid; Tel. no. 110, Erasmus to President, 10 May 1900, T.A..

<sup>87</sup> Amery, IV, p. 171; E.B. Knox, Buller's Campaign, p. 246; FK 1792 T.A., W.O. 32/861, Report Buller to Lansdowne, 24 May 1900.

<sup>88</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 10 May 1900.

advance.<sup>89</sup>

At 06:00, with Dundonald's cavalry leading the way and covering the flanks, Buller's force set off from the Sunday's River, heading in a north-easterly direction, towards the Wasbank River. The first ten kilometres they traversed were hilly and broken, making progress slow and very tiring, but the last four kilometres, on entering the broad Wasbank valley, were easier. As ordered, Hilyard's Dorsetshire Regiment, assisted by a small mounted force, occupied KwaSondoda without incident.<sup>90</sup>

The Boers soon noticed the advance of these two forces, while in the Helpmekaar-Pomeroy area, Commandant C.L. Engelbrecht and his Piet Retiefers had Bethune's force threatening them. As early as 7 May a party of 25 Natal Volunteers were reportedly seen at Pomeroy.<sup>91</sup> To the Boers it appeared that the major British advance was headed for Van Tonder's Nek. As a result C. Botha decided to reinforce that pass with 500 Middelburgers. At the same time he requested Meyer to ask Fourie to despatch a force with the utmost urgency and Erasmus was ordered to be prepared

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<sup>89</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, Orders issued by Clery, 10 May 1900; FK 1777 T.A., W.O. 32/855, Orders issued by G.O.C. 10 Bde, 10 May 1900.

<sup>90</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 10 May 1900; S.D. 3 Cav. Bde., 10 May 1900; S.D. 2nd Division, 10 May 1900; FK 1792 T.A., W.O. 32/861, Report Buller to Lansdowne, 24 May 1900; Burne, pp. 59-60; Cd. 142, p. 21; C.T. Atkinson, The Dorsetshire Regiment, II, p. 74.

<sup>91</sup> Leyds 723(h), Tel. no. 38, Wd Cmdt Swaziland to C. Botha; Tel. no. 50, Cmdt Engelbrecht to Landdrost Piet Retief, 11 May 1900; Leyds 723(d), C. Botha to Meyer, 11 May 1900, T.A.

to reinforce any area where fighting might begin.<sup>92</sup>

Although the Boer and British forces came relatively close to one another, it was only when Dundonald's men crossed the Wasbank River that contact was made. In a small skirmish one Natal Carbineer was wounded and a burgher, Herculaas Nel, was wounded and taken prisoner. The small party of burghers was driven off.<sup>93</sup>

By nightfall some of the British soldiers were encamped just east of the Wasbank River. That night the end of the British column entered camp only at about 03:00, having been delayed by the poor quality roads.<sup>94</sup> Although this large force was very close to Commandant Ben Viljoen's Johannesburg commando at Van Tonder's Nek, he confidently stated that with God's help he would hold them off.<sup>95</sup> During the day Viljoen had noticed strong British scouting parties east of the Wasbank River. These activities led him to believe that the British had no intention of attacking at Van Tonder's Nek, but would make for Helpmekaar.<sup>96</sup>

Early on the following morning (12 May) Viljoen's predictions

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<sup>92</sup> Leyds 723(h), Tel. nos. 55 and 56, C. Botha to Meyer; Tel. no. 61, Meyer to Fourie, 11 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>93</sup> Leyds 723(h), Tel.no. 56, C. Botha to Meyer, 11 May 1900, T.A.; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army and S.D. 3 Cav. Bde., 11 May 1900.

<sup>94</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 2 Div., 11 May 1900.

<sup>95</sup> Leyds 723 (h), Tel. no. 96, Viljoen to Wd Spec Cmdt JHB, 11 May 1900.

<sup>96</sup> Viljoen, p. 80.



regarding the direction of the British advance were confirmed when Buller's column was sighted continuing in an easterly direction.<sup>97</sup> Their route took them ever closer to the lofty heights of the Biggarsberg from which the Boers had a grandstand view of the column of approximately 10 000 infantry and cavalymen. Meyer estimated the force at 20 000 'voetgangers en paarden ruiters'.<sup>98</sup> This may, however, have included Hildyard's division which, from where it was positioned, also posed a threat to the Boer defence line and was therefore possibly included in the estimate.

As on the previous day, Dundonald's cavalry acted as a screen, covering the front and both flanks of the advancing column.<sup>99</sup> It was the 2nd East Surrey Regiment, supported by two guns, that formed the advance guard of the infantry.<sup>100</sup> The column proceeded over the open veld, as the road would have taken them too close to the Boer positions. As it was, their left flank was very exposed to any surprise attacks the Boers might have launched, and during the course of the day they had to contend with considerable sniping.<sup>101</sup> Yet, other than the sniping and an occasional skirmish with the cavalry, the Boers inexplicably

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<sup>97</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 12 May 1900.

<sup>98</sup> Leyds 724(a), Tel. no. 123, Meyer to Fourie, 12 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>99</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, 3 Cav. Bde., 12 May 1900.

<sup>100</sup> H.W. Pearse, History of the East Surrey Regiment, I, p. 414.

<sup>101</sup> P. Todd and D. Fordham (eds.), Private Tucker's Boer War Diary, p. 101; Cd. 458, p. 81.

failed to exploit the opportunities so conveniently offered by having the British strung out in the open in front of them. During one of the skirmishes three or four troopers of the South African Light Horse were taken prisoner by the Johannesburg commando.<sup>102</sup>

By midday the British advance guard had reached its destination, a farmstead known as Vermaak's Kraal. There they settled to rest, being joined during the afternoon by the rest of the column which had departed from the Wasbank River that morning. Most of the column settled on a low ridge overlooking the farmstead and facing the Biggarsberg, where, on the skyline, they could see burghers and entrenchments.<sup>103</sup> During the afternoon the British force noticed that the Boers were mounting a gun in a menacing position on the spur nearest their camp. The British force promptly responded by preparing two 4.7" guns in emplacements and training them on the spur, hoping to be able to protect their bivouac if need be.<sup>104</sup>

Vermaak's Kraal, situated as it was, a mere 6 700 metres from the Biggarsberg crestline, was not an ideal encampment ground, but it was the only place in the vicinity where water was available. This supply was not sufficient and the oxen had to be driven a

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<sup>102</sup> Leyds 724(b), Tel. no. 19, Meyer to President, 13 May 1900, T.A.; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3 Cav. Bde., 12 May 1900; Viljoen, p. 81.

<sup>103</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army and S.D. 2 Bde., 12 May 1900.

<sup>104</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 81.

further five kilometres.<sup>105</sup> If water was in short supply, the soldiers did find a fine orange orchard, whose fruits they were soon consuming with relish.<sup>106</sup> As Buller was heading east for Vermaak's Kraal, so Bethune's column was advancing from the south and on the same evening was encamped approximately 6 kilometres from Pomeroy.<sup>107</sup>

Noting all these British activities, the Boer officers ordered more reinforcements to be sent towards the threatened sector. Erasmus despatched another 200 men, while 400 Boksburgers also went across to join Lucas Meyer who was already there with 500 Middelburgers. It is quite evident that once the British began their advance, a considerable number of Boer reinforcements were ordered to move eastwards along the Biggarsberg. What is extremely difficult to establish, is whether commandos ordered to move to certain positions, actually did so and also precisely where they moved to. Erasmus mentions sending reinforcements to Helpmekaar on 12 May and that Meyer, with 500 Middelburgers, was already there. Yet some hours later Meyer sent a telegram to Fourie from Van Tonder's Nek and not from Helpmekaar!<sup>108</sup>

Where Buller had crossed the Wasbank River two field guns, two naval twelve pounders, the 2nd Scottish Rifles and a detachment

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>106</sup> Todd and Fordham, p. 101.

<sup>107</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 260; C. Boscawen-Wright, With the Imperial Light Infantry Through Natal, p. 67.

<sup>108</sup> Leyds 724(a), Tel. no. 63, Erasmus to President; Tel. no. 123, Meyer to Fourie, 12 May 1900, T.A.

of the 3rd Mounted Brigade were stationed to protect the drift and supply park left behind there. Leaving the supply park there, would eventually save it a long journey via Helpmekaar, as once the Boers were forced to vacate the Biggarsberg, it would be able to cross the hills at Van Tonder's Nek.<sup>109</sup>

By the evening of 12 May, Buller's Natal Field Force held positions from Jonono in the west, through Elandslaagte, KwaSondoda, Wasbank Drift to Vermaak's Kraal in the east and to Pomeroy in the south-east. It is therefore not surprising that Meyer, anticipating that the British would attack at two or more places between Van Tonder's Nek and Helpmekaar, urged Fourie to keep a strong commando on Knight's Hill, thereby covering the Mkupe Pass road.<sup>110</sup>

After weeks of relative inactivity, the British force had, within the space of six days, radically altered the state of affairs in Natal. Buller was poised to strike at the Boer left flank, hoping to gain a foothold on the Biggarsberg and then roll up their entire defence line. Also, as noted above, the situation for the Boers in the Orange Free State and at Fourteen Streams, was critical. Their resources were being stretched to, or beyond, the limit.

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<sup>109</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 12 May 1900.

<sup>110</sup> Leyds 724(a), Tel. no. 123, Meyer to Fourie, 12 May 1900, T.A.

### Chapter 3. HELPMEKAAR

On 11 and 12 May Buller's force had proceeded in an easterly direction, with neither the Boers, nor natural features providing much of an obstacle. Now, however, the man who preferred to be second-in-command, was faced with decisions on how to proceed further. He was also confronted by the Biggarsberg which rose sharply before him to both north and east, with its summits towering all of 400 metres above the valley in which he was encamped. Atop the Biggarsberg range lay the Boer commandos, who at this stage held a number of strategic advantages. Not only did they have possession of a strong defensive position, but they had been there for more than two months, allowing them ample time to become intimately familiar with the terrain and to build extensive fortifications in all the best places. It must have been perfectly clear that there were only three routes by which the British forces could feasibly advance in the Helpmekaar area onto the Biggarsberg. These were via Britte's Pass immediately south of Helpmekaar, or through the Uithoek valley, or from the south via Pomeroy. Any manoeuvre carried out by Buller, would be in full view of the burghers, positioned on the Biggarsberg, from Van Tonder's Nek to the south of Helpmekaar. From these positions one has an uninterrupted view of the rolling countryside stretching for many kilometres to the south, a topography giving Buller little opportunity to launch a surprise attack, but providing the defenders with excellent cover by way of a crest line littered with stones and boulders. The potential for a vigorous resistance was thus considerable.

From Van Tonder's Nek to Helpmekaar the Biggarsberg ran on a south-easterly line. At Helpmekaar it turned directly due south culminating in the shape of the letter "J". At the tip of this "J" lay Uithoek (Ngcongwana) hill, connected to the Biggarsberg by a narrow nek. It commanded the plateau leading to Helpmekaar and towered over the valleys to the south and north of it, and was therefore a strategically key feature. Through the valley to the south of Uithoek - the Uithoek valley - passed the Ladysmith-Helpmekaar road. To the south of Uithoek lay further high ground.

Before the day's activities even began, Lucas Meyer committed a fatal error of judgement. He believed the British would not continue their advance on that day, 13 May, as it was a Sunday.<sup>1</sup> Buller, however, now that he was on the move, appeared determined to maintain his momentum. Consequently, preparations commenced in the early hours of that morning to ensure the advance would continue as soon as it became light.<sup>2</sup> Meyer's miscalculation was to cost him dearly. This was not the only error he made. As mentioned above, it is difficult to establish precisely where the Boer reinforcements were positioned in the Helpmekaar area. There are numerous references to their being sent to Helpmekaar, yet the events of 13 May make it quite clear that they were not at the village. Amery suggests the reinforcements were at Beith.<sup>3</sup> This is quite probable, for late on 12 May, Meyer in a telegram

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<sup>1</sup> Leyds 724(b), Tel. no. 19, Meyer to Kruger, 13 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>2</sup> Trooper Bizley Diary, 13 May 1900.

<sup>3</sup> Amery, IV, p. 172.

sent to Fourie from Van Tonder's Nek stated, "Het is heel waarschyglyk dat zy tusschen hier en Helpmekaar de berg op 2 of meer plekken zullen aanvallen."<sup>4</sup> With this uncertainty in his mind it is likely that he deliberately held the reinforcements in reserve, thereby allowing the flexibility to deploy them where necessary, once the British attack or attacks began. Yet, both Ben Viljoen, Commandant of the Johannesburg commando and Chris Botha, Commandant of the Swazilanders had warned that they believed the British attack would be made near Helpmekaar. The reserves at Beith would then be too far north and west. This advice was ignored, prompting Viljoen to comment sarcastically, "a commandant's opinion did not weigh much just then."<sup>5</sup> Their warnings were based on the observation of scouting parties moving east of Vermaak's Kraal during 12 May.

With the stars still twinkling that Sunday morning, the leading elements of the British force departed from camp in the cold, crisp air. As on the previous two days, Dundonald's Mounted Brigade led the way, acting as a screen and also as a probing force. They made off in a south-easterly direction, heading for the Uithoek valley. The rest of the column soon formed up and followed in the cavalry's wake.<sup>6</sup> Any doubts the Boers still had about British intentions must have been swiftly swept aside, as

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<sup>4</sup> Leyds 724 (a), Tel. no. 123, Meyer to Fourie, 12 May 1900, T.A..

<sup>5</sup> Viljoen, pp. 80-81.

<sup>6</sup> Lord Dundonald, My Army Life, p. 157; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade, 13 May 1900 and S.D. 2nd Brigade, 13 May 1900 and S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900.

they noted the direction the column was taking.

Despite this, it was only at 08:00 that a Boer gun, placed in position the previous afternoon, on a spur overlooking the British encampment, opened fire. By that stage the tail end of the column was falling in, ready to move off. The 4.7" guns, specifically prepared for this eventuality, soon replied and by the fifth round silenced the gun on the Biggarsberg, but not before two Durhams were slightly wounded. It was later reported that this gun was badly damaged by the naval shells.<sup>7</sup> There is no intimation in the Boer sources, apart from Meyer's misjudgment, as to why the burghers were so tardy in responding to the British movements that morning.

Dundonald's Mounted Infantry, proceeding towards the Uithoek valley, initially advanced across the open veld rather than along the road. This was to avoid passing too closely to the crest of the Biggarsberg, along which burghers could be observed riding on either side of Helpmekaar. The colonial unit raised at the beginning of the war, Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry (T.M.I.) under command of an Imperial Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel A. Thorneycroft, led the way. Another colonial unit, the Volunteer Composite Regiment (V.C.R.), covered the rear and flanks.<sup>8</sup> For some distance the cavalry proceeded unopposed. Buller's force was

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






<sup>7</sup> FK 1792 T.A., W.O. 32/861, Buller to Sec of State for War, 24 May 1900 and S.D. 4th Brigade, 13 May 1900; E.B. Knox, Buller's Campaign, p. 247.

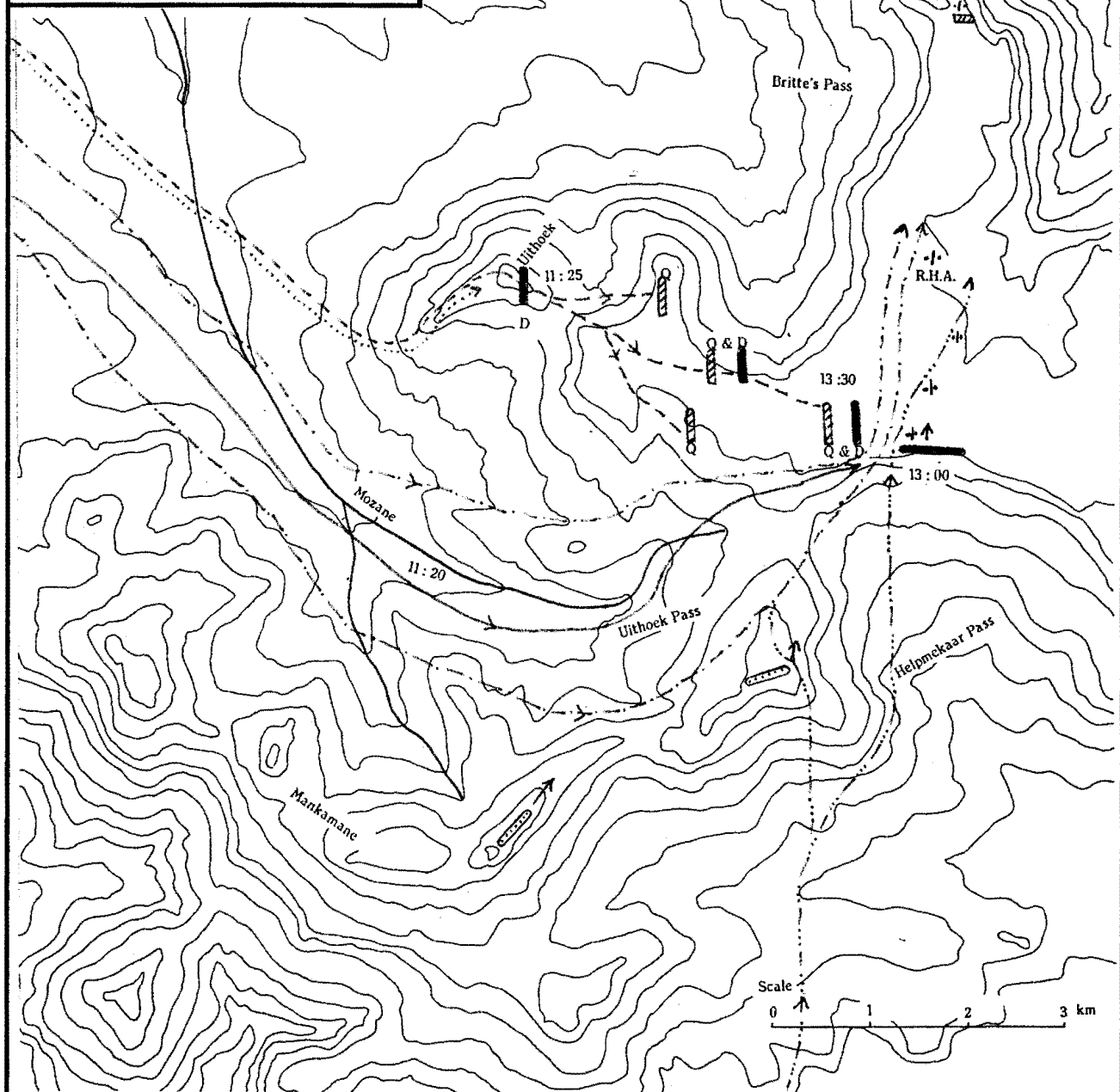
<sup>8</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900 and S.D. 2nd Brigade, 13 May 1900 and S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade, 13 May 1900; Dundonald, p. 157.



# Battle of Helpmekaar 13 May 1900

## KEY

-  Boer Positions Vacated night 12/13 . 5 . 1900
-  Boer Positions Vacated +/- 13:00
-  Boer Positions Held Until Night 13 . 5 . 1900
-  Thorneycroft M.I. Route
-  Hamilton's Route
-  Buller's Route
-  Dundonald's Route
-  Bethune's Route
-  Queens
-  Devons
-  British Artillery
-  Boer Artillery



at its most vulnerable at this stage. It was moving over open countryside and heading towards a valley, whose high ground on either side could easily be occupied by the Boers. Furthermore, the area they were approaching was confined, not allowing for effective deployment.

On arrival at the foot of Uithoek, a squadron of the T.M.I. swung slightly left and rode up the steep feature. When about two-thirds way up and unable to proceed any further on horseback, they dismounted and climbed the rest of the way. The last section was very steep and rocky. The hill was like a natural fortress, an ideal defensive position, but to the T.M.I.'s amazement they found this most strategic position unoccupied. Without firing a shot the British gained control of this key feature. It was now 09:00 and becoming ever warmer.<sup>9</sup> Possession of Uithoek was essential before Buller could contemplate entering the Uithoek valley.

During the cavalry advance, the infantry and baggage column proceeded in a south easterly direction until reaching an area approximately four kilometres from their camping ground, where they struck the Ladysmith-Helpmekaar road. Here they halted and baggage animals were outspanned, watered and allowed to graze where possible.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 82; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade, 13 May 1900; Maurice and Grant, 111, p. 261.

<sup>10</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900, pp. 70-71.

With the T.M.I. squadron in occupation of Uithoek, Buller issued orders for Major-General E.O.F. Hamilton's 2nd Brigade also to ascend the hill. The 2nd East Surrey Regiment remained behind to escort the guns. This order was issued at about the time Thorneycroft's men arrived on the summit, but only an hour later were Hamilton's men ready to proceed.<sup>11</sup> There is no explanation why an hour elapsed before Hamilton's men were ready. The infantry advance was led by the 2nd Royal West Surrey Regiment (Queens), following at a distance of about 750 metres by the 2nd Devonshire Regiment and 2nd West Yorkshire Regiment respectively. The going was hard and steep, but knowing the summit was already in British hands must have been a major consolation. The other battalions soon joined them.<sup>12</sup> The British toehold on the Biggarsberg was becoming stronger.

It is puzzling that the Boers failed to challenge the relatively small group of cavalry holding Uithoek, especially as it was a long time before the infantry joined them. This tends to confirm Amery's statement, already noted above, that the Boer reinforcements were at Beith, or at least not at Helpmekaar, which was only six kilometres from Uithoek. One begins to question the quality of Boer leadership in the area and their

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<sup>11</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 2nd Brigade, 13 May 1900; Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 82; H.W. Pearse, History of the East Surrey Regiment, I, p. 414.

<sup>12</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900 and S.D. 2nd Brigade, 13 May 1900; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 261. According to the Natal Staff Diary, Hamilton's men were only despatched at 11:00, to ascend Uithoek. It appears highly improbable that Thorneycroft's men would have been left in possession of a precarious position for two hours before additional troops were ordered to follow up.

resolve to hold their defence line, especially as the British were unable to conceal their movements.

With Uithoek in British hands and the infantry surging up to support the single squadron of Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry holding the summit, the rest of the cavalry followed by the 4th Brigade, the East Surreys and artillery entered the narrow Uithoek valley. The remainder of the Thorneycroft Mounted Infantry and the South African Light Horse reconnoitred the hills east of the road, while the Volunteers were similarly engaged on those west of the road. Succeeding hilltops were seized and all commanding positions picketed. Initially the advance followed a south-easterly direction, curving gently to the left until it veered directly due east. The ridge to the south of the road had been held by the Boers, to block an advance from Pomeroy, but fortunately for Dundonald's men it was now deserted.<sup>13</sup> All was running so smoothly that the advance must have seemed like a successful training exercise to Buller.

Meanwhile, Bethune's force was also playing its role in the advance on the Biggarsberg. It was encamped some six kilometres south of Pomeroy. During that night however, some of Bethune's men proceeded beyond Pomeroy, gaining control of some of the hills "which commanded the southern sides of the Pass up which

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<sup>13</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900 and S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade, 13 May 1900; Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 82; Amery, IV, p. 173.

we (Buller's force) had to approach."<sup>14</sup> This would probably account for Dundonald's men finding the ridge south of Uithoek valley unoccupied. As Buller's force moved off towards Uithoek in the early morning, the rest of Bethune's men advanced from the south. Pomeroy was reported to be occupied by Boers, but on entering the village they found it deserted and as they passed through, noticed that a number of homes had been ransacked.<sup>15</sup> Once through Pomeroy, Bethune's column pushed on toward Helpmekaar Pass, another five kilometres away. As Buller's column passed along the Uithoek valley, they suddenly spied riders descending a hill lying south-east of them - they were Bethune's advance scouts.<sup>16</sup>

This meant that the British advances, executed in difficult terrain, were perfectly synchronized. All the pieces were coming together at the correct place and time. On the other hand, Boer problems were steadily mounting. Not only had Uithoek been left undefended, but Bethune's column was closing in via the Helpmekaar Pass, without meeting vigorous opposition. The British were thus converging with three forces toward the southern end of the Helpmekaar plateau. There was Hamilton's brigade on Uithoek, Buller's column marching up the Uithoek valley towards

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<sup>14</sup> Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 82. When Buller refers to "we" and "Pass" in his report, it is not absolutely clear whether he is referring to the force approaching from the Ladysmith side and the pass up the Uithoek valley. It is highly probable that this is the case though, as Bethune's men tend at this stage of his report to be referred to as a separate force from that approaching from Ladysmith.

<sup>15</sup> Boscawen-Wright, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900.

Uithoek pass and Bethune approaching from the south.<sup>17</sup> With every passing moment their position was becoming stronger and more menacing. It is striking how much time and space Buller's forces were granted in which to manoeuvre.

Once Hamilton's men were on Uithoek, orders were issued for the Queens to proceed across a narrow nek in an easterly direction towards the next ridge, some 2 000 metres away. The main advance was made by four companies, while one company was pushed out to occupy a ridge on the left front and another four companies covered the right. The ridge directly ahead was not entrenched and appeared unoccupied. Simultaneously, three companies of Devons were ordered to the top of Uithoek, to cover the advance on the ridge. Another four companies of Devons supported the Queens. The Queens occupied the ridge unopposed and from there moved to a further crest commanding the Pomeroy-Helpmekaar road, arriving there at 13:30.<sup>18</sup> What had been a toehold on the Biggarsberg, was now a foothold.

Buller's column made steady progress and at 11:20 began proceeding up the Uithoek Pass. Simultaneously, Bethune was closing in on the high ground from the south.<sup>19</sup> Ahead of Buller, Dundonald's men swept onto the high ground and swung left in the vicinity where the Ladysmith-Helpmekaar and Pomeroy-

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<sup>17</sup> Knox, p. 248.

<sup>18</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900 and S.D. 2nd Brigade, 13 May 1900.

<sup>19</sup> Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 82.

Helpmekaar roads met. Near there Bethune's column linked up with them, at approximately 13:00.<sup>20</sup> The timing could not have been better.

Shortly before the two forces linked up, Bethune encountered the first resistance that day. It came from Boers in deep trenches and a clump of bush on the edge of the escarpment, looking south towards Pomeroy. Bethune's naval guns were brought into action, while the mounted men pressed on up the last part of the pass. As Bethune's men approached the small wood, the party of Boers, whose exact size it has not been possible to establish, broke from cover and galloped off along the road towards Helpmekaar. At that moment the Queens reached the crest overlooking the route the retreating Boers followed. The Queens promptly opened up with their maxim and also fired some long range volleys at the hastily retiring horsemen. One or two were knocked over.<sup>21</sup> The Boers had left it far too late to offer effective opposition, as Buller's forces had been allowed to gain far too strong a foothold on the Biggarsberg.

Once the British reached elevated positions on the Biggarsberg, they noticed a number of burghers on the very open plateau, south of Helpmekaar. With forces converging from three directions, these Boers hastily retired. A major concern from the Boers facing the advancing mounted men, must have been the possibility

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 82; Dundonald, p. 157; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade, 13 May 1900.

<sup>21</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 2nd Brigade, 13 May 1900.

of having their retreat route cut off by Hamilton's infantry.

The British success thus far, was gained at the expense of merely one man wounded. This single British casualty, more than everything else, illustrates clearly the lack of Boer resolve at Helpmekaar. This lack of resistance is also borne out by the fact that the leading infantry battalions, the Queens and Devons, only fired a total of 840 rounds during the entire day - less than one round per man. Nor did they suffer a single casualty.<sup>22</sup> A striking feature of the British movements is their co-ordination. In the records there is no evidence of how this was achieved, that is, whether it depended upon signals, preplanned strategy or both. It can hardly have been the product of coincidence.

Earlier during the morning, once Lucas Meyer had realized the true British intentions, he hastily despatched C. Botha and his Swazilanders to reinforce the Boers at Helpmekaar. On the arrival at Helpmekaar between 10:00 and 11:00, it was already too late for Botha to occupy positions to defend the passes. The British three-pronged attack was too advanced and the Helpmekaar Pass had not been properly occupied by Commandant Engelbrecht and his Piet Retiefers, or the small German Corps, also in the area. Key positions had clearly been vacated or never occupied. It is therefore probable that Botha and his reinforcements had to satisfy themselves by merely occupying the stony koppies just south of the Helpmekaar village. Even with Botha's Swazilanders

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 13 May 1900; Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 82; Knox, p. 248; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 261.



as reinforcements, the total Boer force at Helpmekaar probably consisted of no more than 600 to 700 men, and may even have been fewer. Advancing on them were approximately 10 000 British.<sup>23</sup>

Once Dundonald and Bethune's forces linked up, they rapidly and confidently advanced northward towards Helpmekaar, following the retreating Boers. They proceeded over flat and very open ground. Before long they ran into sudden and spirited resistance. This must have come as something of a surprise, after difficult positions had been captured with such ease earlier in the day. At the northern end of the plateau along which they galloped, were the two stony koppies, held in some strength by the Boers. At this point the nek narrows down to a width of only about 200 metres across, with steep slopes on either side. The narrowing of the plateau aided the defenders by forcing the British to shorten their firing line, and consequently preventing Buller from exploiting his numerical superiority. Furthermore, the koppies had been strengthened by extensive fortifications and gun emplacements. Tucker, a private with the Rifle Brigade, was most impressed by the system of fortifications, describing them in his diary as follows.

Their position was first class, commanding every inch of the road... we had never seen such long walls and trenches

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<sup>23</sup> Penning, II, p. 735; Leyds 771(b), P.A. Nierstrasz, 'Der Süd-Afrikanische Krieg 1899-1902', p. 910, T.A.; Amery suggests it was Ben Viljoen who hastened to Helpmekaar with reinforcements. This is probably an error. It is the only source claiming it was Viljoen, rather than Botha, going to Engelbrecht's aid. Not even Viljoen in his memoirs makes mention of going to Helpmekaar. Amery, IV, p. 174; Viljoen, p. 82.

before. They had built some beautiful emplacements for their guns, especially their pom-poms. They were... well built, with neat trenches either side for the gunners to dodge into... The walls were sometimes a mile in length and strongly built, every gun position was placed well and in commanding positions, well protected by walls.<sup>24</sup>

From these positions the Boers blazed away with rifles, two pom-poms and a heavier gun - probably a 75mm Creusot or Krupp. The advancing British horsemen were checked. In an effort to smash his way through the sudden resistance, Dundonald, at approximately 14:00, brought his Royal Horse Artillery - R.H.A. Battery "A" - into action. But even his artillery failed to dislodge the Boers, and the intensity of the fire coming from the koppies forced the battery to retire.<sup>25</sup> The Boers finally displayed the resolve that should have been evident earlier in the day, when they could possibly have prevented the British from reaching the summit.

Later in the afternoon the two twelve pounders with Bethune's column came to the R.H.A.'s assistance and shelled the Boer position from a range of approximately 3 700m.<sup>26</sup> At approximately 16:00 British firepower was further strengthened

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<sup>24</sup> Todd and Fordham, pp. 103-104.

<sup>25</sup> Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 82; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900; Dundonald, p. 157; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 262; Lord Birdwood, Khaki and Gown, p. 110.

<sup>26</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 262.

by the addition of another two twelve pound naval guns, three Vickers-Maxim guns, the 4th Mountain Battery and 64th and 67th Batteries R.F.A. The Vickers-Maxim guns were the equivalent of the Boer Maxim-Nordenveldt.<sup>27</sup> Despite the intensity of this fire, the Boers obstinately clung to their Helpmekaar position. It was reported that two of the Boer guns were damaged by the British artillery barrage, but it has been impossible to confirm this from any Boer source.<sup>28</sup> With the sun rapidly sinking in the west, the firing died down at approximately 17:00. Having succeeded in turning the Boer position and gaining a major foothold on the Biggarsberg range, Buller had made the entire Boer defence line vulnerable to an enveloping movement, once he had driven off the burghers at Helpmekaar.<sup>29</sup>

Boer resolve and resistance had clearly stiffened during the afternoon, due no doubt, to the arrival of reinforcements and also to the presence of Chris Botha. He did not possess the leadership qualities of his brother, Louis, but was none the less more energetic and determined than some of the other officers. During the morning the British had proceeded, practically unhindered, and even when the first Boers were encountered on the plateau they had offered only token resistance. It was only later, with C. Botha's drive, that real resistance was offered.

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<sup>27</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900 and S.D. 2nd Brigade, 13 May 1900; Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 82; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 262; Birdwood, p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900 p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900.

But one must bear in mind that it was the Piet Retief commando, one of the less efficient Boer units, that defended the Helpmekaar area. They were assisted by a small contingent of the German Corps. The Piet Retiefers' poor performance prompted Ben Viljoen to refer to them, somewhat derisively, as the "Piet Retreaters".<sup>30</sup>

It is quite possible that had Botha not arrived with reinforcements when he did, the Boer position would have been overrun, permitting the British at least to reach Helpmekaar that day. Although Botha may have been too late to prevent the British from gaining a foothold on the summit, he did win time to make the retreat from the Biggarsberg, that was about to commence, more orderly. Also important was that more supplies were saved than would otherwise have been possible. What is certain, is that those responsible for holding the Helpmekaar position, were grossly negligent. Neither were the positions occupied, nor was there evidence of effective leadership and they failed to confront the British when they were at their most vulnerable. Furthermore, there is no evidence of Meyer's making any effort that day to acquaint himself personally of developments at Helpmekaar. It is not surprising therefore that, soon after this battle, strong and open opposition to his leadership developed.<sup>31</sup> This opposition, which is to be dealt with more

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<sup>30</sup> Viljoen, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Leyds 724(d), Tel. no. 79, Viljoen to Kruger, 15 May 1900; Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 11, Uys to Kruger, 20 May 1900; Leyds 725(e), Tel. no. 60, Lombard to Kruger, 22 May 1900; Leyds 725(d), Tel. no. 39, Badenhorst to L. Botha, 21 May 1900, T.A..

fully below, eventually resulted in his removal from the Natal front.

Failure by the Boer forces earlier in the day against Buller's men is probably due to a combination of factors. War weariness and poor morale may have been partially responsible, but then they had also been factors along the Thukela River and were overcome. It is therefore necessary to delve further and deeper for some other causes. Ineffective leadership at several levels appears to have played a role and it would appear that Lucas Meyer was part of that problem. Commandant L.E. Krause, in the context of the Boer defeat on the Thukela on 27 February 1900, described Meyer as a clear thinker, but lacking the power to carry out his ideas. He was a man of thought, rather than action, waiting for the enemy to make the first move.<sup>32</sup> Meyer failed to supervise affairs adequately at Helpmekaar. This failure was compounded by the fact that one of the less efficient Boer units, the Piet Retief commando, bore the brunt of the British attack. Once before, at the battle of Pieter's Hill (27 February 1900), it had failed to resolutely resist a British attack.<sup>33</sup> Meyer must have realized the inadequacies of the Piet Retief commando and therefore, when it became abundantly clear that the British were heading in their direction, should have ensured that reinforcements were timeously sent to them, and actually arrived there. He failed to attend to this detail and in consequence the

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<sup>32</sup> C.M. Bakkes, Die Britse Deurbraak aan die Benede-Tugela op Majubadag 1900, p. 75. Krause at the time of the Thukela battle, was a mere burgher.

<sup>33</sup> Bakkes, p. 75.

key defensive positions, such as Uithoek and the high ground to its south were not occupied. In partial mitigation, however, it must be borne in mind that the British force held a very long line, with a numerically vastly superior force. By holding such a long line and because of their numerical preponderance, the British forces were in a position to attack at one of several points along the Biggarsberg. Or they could even launch more than one attack at the same time.

As evening set in and the firing died down, only Hamilton's three battalions, that had advanced via Uithoek, and a detachment of Dundonald's men remained on the summit. The rest of Dundonald's men, as well as Bethune's force, were obliged to retire from the plateau, owing to a shortage of water on the high ground.<sup>34</sup> Buller was undoubtedly well pleased with the day's outcome. At very little loss he had achieved the first and possibly the most difficult part of his objective, having dislodged the Boer left flank from its positions. His delight is evident from the unstinting praise he heaped on his commanding officers. In a message to Roberts, Buller wrote: "Our small loss is, I think, certainly due to the excellent troop-leading of General Hamilton, General Lord Dundonald and Colonel Bethune".<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately no copy of the general orders for the attack on Helpmekaar was located, making it impossible to determine whether

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<sup>34</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 13 May 1900 and S.D. 2nd Brigade, 13 May 1900; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 262; Todd and Fordham, p. 103.

<sup>35</sup> Principal Events, IV. p. 20.

events went according to plan; what improvisations, if any, were necessary and to what extent personal initiative was used. Therefore the strategy and tactics employed can only be analysed and judged in terms of what occurred, rather than of what was planned. Nonetheless, Buller's message to Roberts, quoted above, does at least hint at some personal initiative by Hamilton, Dundonald and Bethune.

The tactics Buller employed in this battle were somewhat different from those he used along the Thukela. For the first time the cavalry played the leading and major role during the entire engagement - and most effective this was, as it increased the British mobility. As in the final battle on the Thukela, Buller held a long front - from Jonono in the west to Helpmekaar in the east, thereby stretching the limited Boer resources and keeping his true intentions hidden until the final thrust was made. None the less, it needs to be borne in mind that a relatively small Boer force, in suitable terrain, had checked him short of Helpmekaar. The occupation of Uithoek and the other strategic high ground to the south and north, with an adequate force, may well have checked or at least, made Buller's progress onto the high ground a costly one.

Despite considerable activity in trying terrain, neither side suffered heavy losses. It is extremely difficult to ascertain exactly what these losses were. Meyer reported to the President that Boer casualties were only one gunner killed and a member of

the Piet Retief commando seriously wounded.<sup>36</sup> British casualties were also limited - seven wounded - prompting Buller to describe the encounter as an "almost bloodless victory."<sup>37</sup> Dundonald however, refers to twelve casualties in his brigade alone.<sup>38</sup> Whichever is the more accurate figure, the price Buller paid was infinitely smaller than during any of the Thukela River campaign battles. This too must have pleased him considerably, especially as he was loath to suffer losses.<sup>39</sup>

Ironically, the Boer defenders of the Biggarsberg did not realise that their efforts to hold their line were in vain. That morning as reinforcements scurried to Helpmekaar, Louis Botha was persuading his government that, due to the worsening situation in the Orange Free State, the Biggarsberg line should be relinquished and a new defence line taken up on the Drakensberg. Once Botha's view was accepted, Kruger informed Meyer during mid-afternoon that he was to relinquish the Biggarsberg line, but stressed that the withdrawal should be orderly - all supplies brought out and the communication system and coal mines be laid waste. He explained that, due to the build-up of pressure on all fronts, it was necessary to concentrate the Boer forces to a greater degree and the western front had already been drawn

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<sup>36</sup> Leyds 724(d), Tel. no. 29, Meyer to Kruger, 15 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>37</sup> Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 83.

<sup>38</sup> Dundonald, p. 158.

<sup>39</sup> Pakenham, pp. 235 and 240; J. Symons, Buller's Campaign, p. 166.



closer in. Meyer was ordered to release the Heidelberg and Pretoria commandos to join the defenders along the Vaal River.<sup>40</sup>

It appears that in ignorance of this order, a hastily convened council-of-war at Helpmekaar had discussed whether the positions that had been successfully defended south of the village, should be held or vacated. Arthur Lynch, commander of the remaining Irish on the Biggarsberg, by then also at Helpmekaar, found Chris Botha in command there. Lynch recorded that, at the council-of-war, Botha favoured a desperate counter-attack, but that this tactic was overruled by other unspecified officers and it was decided to retire from Helpmekaar, thereby permitting the British easy access onto the broader plateau, which lay to the north of the village.<sup>41</sup> As soon as this decision was taken, the Boers retired from the Helpmekaar area, under the cover of darkness. This routine of breaking up camp was repeated along the entire length of the Biggarsberg. Meyer sent out written instructions ordering all the commandants to vacate their positions.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Leyds 724(b), Tel. no. 67, Kruger to Meyer, 13 May 1900, T.A. At a council-of-war held at Kroonstad, as early as 17 March 1900, attended by both Kruger and Steyn, and senior Boer officers, it was decided that mines should be laid waste before the British could take control of them. L. Botha was opposed to this policy as he maintained they were private property. In the end, the Boers did not follow through with this policy. Breytenbach, V, pp. 156-167 and 535.

<sup>41</sup> A. Lynch, My Life Story, pp. 186-187; Penning, II, pp. 735 and 738.

<sup>42</sup> Leyds 724(c), Tel. no. 77, Meyer to Kruger, 14 May 1900, T.A.

Before dawn on Monday 14 May, Dundonald's Mounted Brigade, as on the previous morning, again formed up. Patrols despatched to reconnoitre the Helpmekaar Nek, soon established that the Boers had vacated their strong position to the south of the village. Acting on this information, Buller ordered Dundonald's men to pursue the Boers. The advancing force formed up as follows: V.C.R. and South African Light Horse (S.A.L.H.) on the right and left fronts respectively, followed by the R.H.A. and lastly T.M.I..<sup>43</sup> It is significant that this was the first time since the commencement of the war that Buller followed up a successful engagement fairly rapidly with a pursuit, employing his cavalry and more mobile artillery to greater advantage. It might well be that this new tactic resulted from greater confidence which the recent success in the Thukela valley engendered.

The pursuit placed considerable pressure on the Boers already retiring from the Biggarsberg. With the British gaining access to the Biggarsberg plateau, there was now a greater urgency to move everyone and everything to safety. Meyer had to act with rapidity to ensure that certain commandos, in particular those at Van Tonder's Nek and further east, were not cut off and to enable him to withdraw his artillery and most of his supplies. To assist the withdrawal, he issued orders for the mounted men to act as a rearguard to slow the British advance and thus gain precious time.<sup>44</sup> News of the British pursuit concerned Kruger,

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<sup>43</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade, 14 May 1900; Dundonald, pp. 157-158

<sup>44</sup> Leyds 724(c), Tel. no. 77, Meyer to Kruger, 14 May 1900, T.A.

prompting him to order Meyer to use his mounted men in counter-attacks and at the same time to urge him not to lose faith.<sup>45</sup>

Apart from the Vryheid, Utrecht and Swaziland commandos under C. Botha, making for Doornberg with instructions to hold those hills, the other commandos headed for the Drakensberg. C. Botha's instructions were, to prevent the British from attacking the families in the Utrecht-Vryheid districts.<sup>46</sup> This could only be a temporary defensive measure. Having vacated the Biggarsberg line, the Vryheid-Utrecht districts were vulnerable to British incursion, from a number of points. Therefore instructions were issued that the families living in these districts be evacuated deeper into the Republic, to beyond Wakkerstroom. The Utrecht and Swaziland burghers retired via De Jager's Drift, while the Piet Retief and Vryheid commandos crossed at Landman's Drift. It is evident that some of the Johannesburgers also took the easterly route. For them it was the shortest route out of the British colony. On 17 May Chris Botha requested carts to be sent to assist them to move their laager. It would appear that the slower moving supply wagons may have chosen the shorter route, while the mounted men headed north.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 98, Kruger to Meyer, 14 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>46</sup> Leyds 724(d), Tel. no. 21, Meyer to L. Botha, 15 May 1900, T.A. The issue concerning the possible movement of families further into the republic was a contentious one, and will be explored more fully in Chapter 4.

<sup>47</sup> Leyds 724(c), Tel. no. 51, Meyer to Cmdt Vryheid and Tel. no. 76, Meyer to Landdrost and Cmdt Vryheid, 14 May 1900; Leyds 724(e), Tel. no. 10, C. Botha to Meyer, 16 May 1900; Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 111, C. Botha to Meyer, 17 May 1900, T.A.

Dundonald's pursuing cavalry surged through the deserted village of Helpmekaar and pushed on towards Dundee, over open, flat terrain. To slow the pursuit, the Boer rearguard set fire to the dry grass. The fire and dense swirling smoke complicated the cavalry's task. And then, about five kilometres north of Helpmekaar, they were suddenly fired upon from a rocky ridge next to the road. In an attempt to manoeuvre around both flanks, they spread out while the R.H.A. were brought into action in the centre. The flanking movements, combined with the frontal artillery barrage soon caused the burghers occupying the koppie to melt away, until the last remaining men discharged their Mausers as rapidly as possible and then galloped away with all possible speed. The action lasted a mere half an hour, but nevertheless was precious time gained for the men trying desperately to save the guns and supplies. Having broken the resistance, Dundonald's men immediately gave chase once more, but were again hampered by the mass of grass fires the Boers had lit to cover their retreat.<sup>48</sup>

From Boer sources it is impossible to determine the strength of their rearguard force. What is clear is that it comprised a variety of units. Members of the Pretoria and Boksburg commandos, Lynch and his Irish, as well as Ricchiardi and men under his command, were certainly present and it is probable that members of other commandos were also involved. The British officers

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<sup>48</sup> Dundonald Papers, III, T.M., S.R.O. GD 233/158, Dundonald to Buller, 22 May 1900; Lynch, pp. 188-189; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 14 May 1900 and S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade, 14 May 1900; Dundonald, p. 158.

estimated that they were confronted by 1 000 men, while Dundonald's pursuing cavalry consisted of approximately 1 500 men and the six guns of the R.H.A.<sup>49</sup> The feebleness of the resistance suggests that the Boer force was smaller than 1 000 men. Approximately three kilometres beyond the first point at which the Boers had resisted, they again attempted to check the pursuing cavalry. However, Dundonald's brigade, employing the same tactics they had previously, soon managed to dislodge the Boers and went plunging after them through the thick smoke and fire now enveloping the countryside.<sup>50</sup>

This time the retiring Boers covered some distance before making a third stand at Blesboklaagte, not far from Dundee at about 16:00.<sup>51</sup> The position they chose was powerful. They occupied the lower slopes of Endumeni hill, overlooking a deep ravine and were assisted by two or three high-velocity guns - possibly Creusots -which outranged the R.H.A. guns.<sup>52</sup> Dundonald despatched a force to work its way around the Boer right flank. Simultaneously some Natal Carbineers were instructed to cut the railway line just north of Glencoe. The flanking force made steady progress through broken terrain. Noticing this advance, the Boers withdrew. At about the same time Dundonald received the

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<sup>49</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 14 May 1900 and S.D. 2nd Division, 14 May 1900; Lynch, pp. 188-189.

<sup>50</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 14 May 1900 and S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade, 14 May 1900; Dundonald, p. 158.

<sup>51</sup> Dundonald, p. 158; Amery, IV, p. 176.

<sup>52</sup> Knox, p. 251; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 263-264; Dundonald Papers, III, T.M., S.R.O. GD 233/158, Dundonald to Buller, 22 May 1900.

following order from Buller: "Lord Dundonald you have done well. Scout across Blesboklaagte tomorrow, but do not press any advance as I wish to get my infantry and supply up. ...All is well."<sup>53</sup> Upon receipt of this order, Dundonald recalled his men and leaving only a strong picket in the area, retired to Meyer's farm some way back,<sup>54</sup> bringing a dramatic, eventful day to a close for the cavalry. They had covered 40 kilometres as the crow flies and must have been near exhaustion, as well as hungry, thirsty and begrimed from the fires they had ridden through.

For the Boers, darkness brought a welcome respite from their pursuers. Under its cover they continued their retreat. Those holding the position at Blesboklaagte began to retire as soon as they noticed that their right flank was threatened, and headed eastwards towards the drifts over the Buffalo River.<sup>55</sup> Hundreds of burghers retiring from the Biggarsberg - whether mounted or on foot - made for Glencoe with their guns and supplies. Just how many there were, is impossible to establish, as it is unknown which commandos made for Glencoe. In all probability the Carolina and Lydenburg burghers took a more direct route to Newcastle. The mounted Carolina and Lydenburg burghers formed a rearguard, protecting the slower moving transport and those Natal families supporting the Boers, now wishing to withdraw from the colony.

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<sup>53</sup> Dundonald, pp. 158-159; Dundonald Papers, III, T.M., S.R.O. GD 233/158, Lord Birdwood's letter to The Times, 14 November 1900 and Dundonald to Buller, 22 May 1900.

<sup>54</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 264.

<sup>55</sup> Dundonald Papers, III, T.M., S.R.O. GD 233/158, Dundonald to Buller, 22 May 1900, Principal Events, IV, p.21.

Obviously those commandos ordered to make for Doornberg did not pass through Glencoe. None the less, Glencoe was for several hours thronged by a teeming, chaotic mass of humanity, horses, wagons and artillery. It must have been a time of great anxiety for officers and burghers, not knowing whether they would have sufficient time to make a successful getaway. Eventually ten train loads of unmounted burghers left Glencoe station, along with eleven or twelve guns. The mounted men and wagons travelled along the road.<sup>56</sup> The last train departed from Glencoe at about dawn on 15 May.<sup>57</sup> By swift action and because the pursuit was not pressed, they managed to extricate almost all their men, equipment and supplies from a difficult situation.

This was achieved despite the chaos, disorder and considerable lack of discipline. But Lucas Meyer was a dispirited, concerned, angry man on 14 May. In a telegram to L. Botha he described how the Boers tried to check their pursuers, but lamented that when the first gun was fired the burghers fled. Such was the lack of discipline that the officers did not have the least control. Meyer feared the worst after the events he witnessed the previous day, and felt his men to be quite untrustworthy.<sup>58</sup> The Boers' lack of formal training and discipline became clearly evident under these circumstances, as they came under increasing

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<sup>56</sup> Principal Events, IV, pp. 25.

<sup>57</sup> Amery, IV, p. 177; Roberts Papers XVIII, T.A., W.O. 105/13, Buller to Roberts, 16 May 1900, p. 97; A 850 C.H.K., Diary of J.H. Janson, 25 May 1900, T.A.; Principal Events, IV, pp. 21 and 25; Penning, II, p. 740.

<sup>58</sup> Leyds, 724(d), Tel. no. 21, Meyer to L. Botha, 15 May 1900, T.A.; Viljoen, p. 83; Lynch, p. 189.

pressure. Individual burghers did not know whether their colleagues would stand and fight and it is therefore not surprising that the rearguard failed to take a firm stand. Such an action required discipline and trust.

While the pursuit was in progress on 14 May, Buller's infantry and artillery as well as Bethune's column, advanced and encamped in the region of Beith. The infantry was not engaged at any stage during the day.<sup>59</sup> At the same time Hildyard's 11th Brigade departed from Jonono, heading in an easterly direction, in preparation for taking Wessel's Nek Station.<sup>60</sup>

At 06:00 on 15 May the entire British force on the Biggarsberg advanced towards Dundee. A Natal Carbineer patrol had entered the town during the night and reported that the Boers had vacated it. The last Boer train had in fact departed at 17:20 the previous afternoon.<sup>61</sup> Thus, at about 10:00 the mounted men and Buller were able to enter the town unopposed. Two squadrons of the S.A.L.H. proceeded to Glencoe, where they hoped to link up with Hildyard's 5th Division, which was proceeding along the railway line and along Newcastle road from the south. The supply column

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<sup>59</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army and S.D. 2nd Division, 14 May 1900 and S.D. 2nd Brigade, 14 May 1900.

<sup>60</sup> FK 1777 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 11th Brigade, 14 May 1900, p. 25, T.A.

<sup>61</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army and S.D. 2nd Brigade, 15 May 1900; Dundonald Papers, III, T.M., S.R.O. GD 233/158, Dundonald to Buller, 22 May 1900.



only arrived on 16 May.<sup>62</sup> The British encampment was established on the Newcastle side of Dundee and for most men 16 May was a much needed rest day. The force had been on the move continually for five days. During the rest day baggage columns stocked up with supplies from the supply column.<sup>63</sup> The 5th Division continued making steady progress from the south, reaching Wessel's Nek station without encountering any of the anticipated resistance.<sup>64</sup>

The British force was now firmly established on the Biggarsberg and the Boers, without putting up much of a struggle, had vacated very strong positions. However, the burghers were making for a formidable barrier, the Drakensberg, where they hoped to make their next stand. The orderliness and discipline displayed by the British forces at this stage was in sharp contrast to the chaos and confusion reigning among the burghers. In mitigation it is necessary to bear in mind that retaining order while retiring under pressure, especially for a force not noted for discipline, would be difficult.

Buller has been criticised for not continuing his pursuit and thereby losing contact with the Boer rearguard. In losing contact with the rearguard, he allegedly also afforded the Boers

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<sup>62</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army and S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade and S.D. 4th Brigade, 15 May 1900.

<sup>63</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army and S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade and S.D. 2nd Brigade, 15 May 1900.

<sup>64</sup> FK 1777 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 11th Brigade, 15 May 1900; Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 83.

opportunity to destroy most culverts and bridges along the railway line.<sup>65</sup> It is necessary to evaluate this criticism and try to establish whether it would have been feasible to allow Dundonald's Mounted Brigade to continue tearing across the countryside. They had already outstripped the supply columns and if they were to continue their pursuit they would, within a day or two, have been forced to return for additional supplies. By pressing the pursuit they may of course have saved some of the culverts and bridges and may also have caused greater consternation among the retiring burghers and forced them to leave guns and supplies behind. All this lies in the realm of conjecture and does not detract from the fact that at some stage a halt had to be called to await supplies.

During the pursuit and retreat which followed the Helpmekaar engagement, neither side suffered heavy losses. This was mainly because the burghers never made a determined and prolonged stand at any one position and because Dundonald failed to catch up with the slower moving elements of the retiring Boer force. Dundonald reported only five men wounded. Amery records total British casualties for the entire five days, from 11 May, as not having exceeded 25.<sup>66</sup>

There are a number of references to Boer casualties, burghers taken prisoner and Natal rebels laying down arms. It is, however,

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<sup>65</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 177-178.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 177; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3rd Mounted Brigade, 15 May 1900.

impossible to reconcile the various references. Buller, in his report to the Secretary of State for War reported taking 47 prisoners, several wagons and that a number of Natal rebels had laid down their arms.<sup>67</sup> While Dundonald reported capturing 25 prisoners, wagons, many horses and oxen,<sup>68</sup> Meyer reported to Kruger on 15 May, when the situation was still in turmoil and when he was highly unlikely to have had an accurate record of events, that on the previous day a few burghers were wounded and three Boksburgers taken prisoner.<sup>69</sup> Penning refers to some men being killed and Schikkerling describes numerous burghers being wounded.<sup>70</sup>

Clearly the price the Boers paid in terms of casualties was low. But they gave up splendid positions and their morale too, took a severe beating. To prevent a rout, which would permit the British forces easy access onto the highveld, was going to require some effective leadership from Meyer, to instill the necessary resolve in his burghers to make a new stand against Buller's massive force. Only time would tell whether this could be achieved.

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<sup>67</sup> Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, 24 May 1900, p. 83.

<sup>68</sup> Dundonald Papers, III, T.M., S.R.O. GD 233/158, Dundonald to Buller, 22 May 1900.

<sup>69</sup> Leyds 724(d), Tel. no. 29, Meyer to Kruger, 15 May 1900, T.A..

<sup>70</sup> Penning, II, p. 740; R.W. Schikkerling, Commando Courageous, p. 15.

#### Chapter 4. 'JUST SPARRING'

The Boer retreat from the Biggarsberg continued unabated on 15 May, although the British pursuit was effectively broken off the previous evening. The retreat, as previously noted, took two general directions, namely northwards to Newcastle and beyond and eastwards to the drifts over the Buffalo River.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the Vryheid, Utrecht, Swaziland and Piet Retief burghers who headed east, the rest moved northwards.

The burghers who retreated north, generally travelled either by train or on horseback. Many of their supplies were brought out on ox wagons. The men heading east, were mostly mounted. An unspecified number of Natalians fighting with the Boer forces and still remaining with them at this stage, decided to take their families, livestock and whatever goods they could, with them. Long rows of carts and wagons carrying the women and children were to be seen heading towards Lang's Nek.<sup>2</sup> It was a sad time for these families.

The chaos and disorder that set in among the Boers on 14 May, and continuing on the following day, caused Lucas Meyer and his officers considerable anxiety. Meyer in fact feared that the retreat would turn into a complete rout,<sup>3</sup> prompting him to report dejectedly on 16 May to his President, "Ik jaag rond om

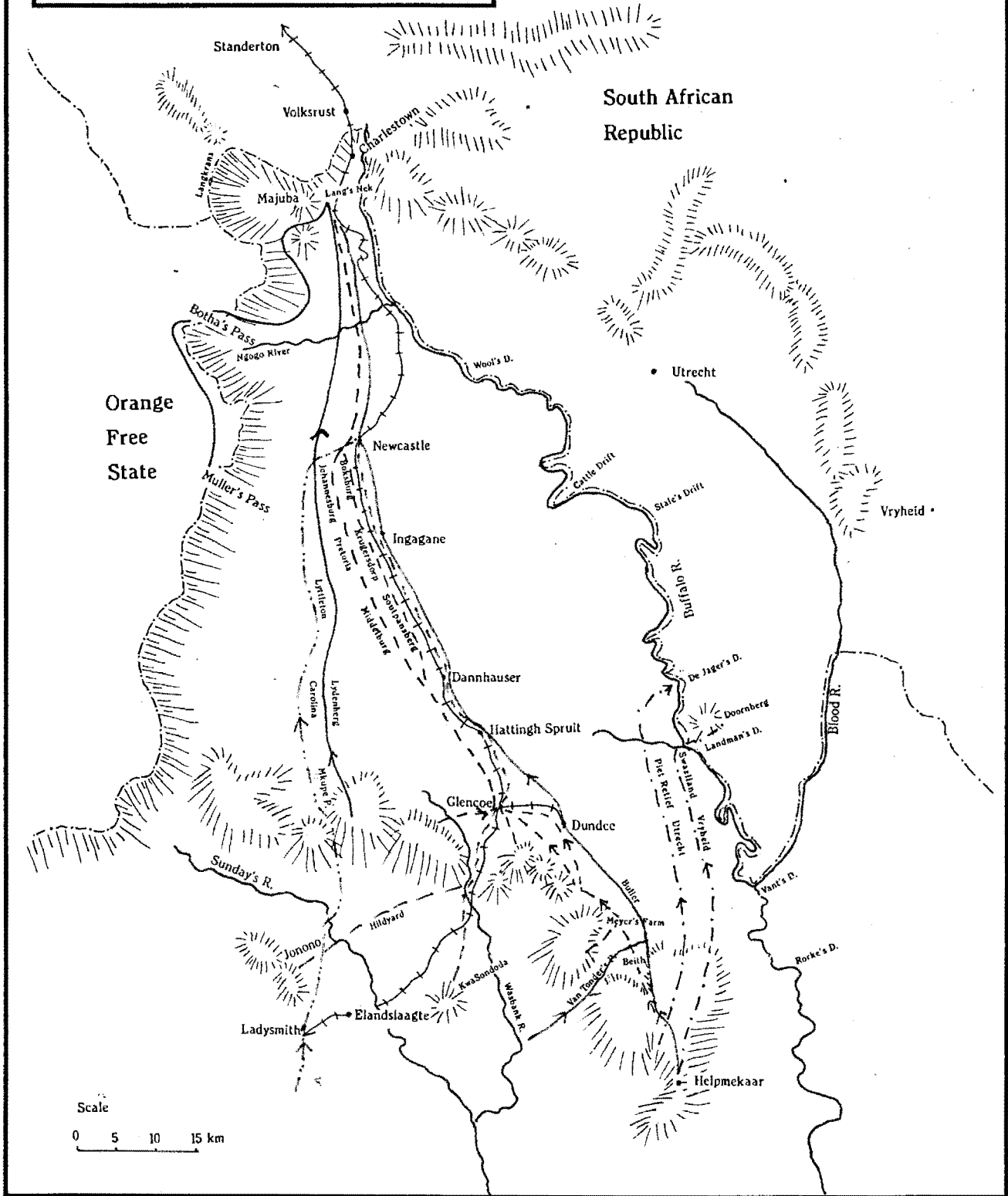
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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Viljoen, p. 83; Leyds 724(e), Tel. no. 62, Meyer to Cmdt-Gen, 16 May 1900, T.A..

<sup>3</sup> Leyds 724(d), Tel. no. 21, Meyer to L. Botha and Tel. no. 79, Viljoen to Kruger, 15 May 1900, T.A..

# Lines of Retreat & Advance 14 - 28 May 1900



de menschen te keeren. Het is byna onmogelyk. Zy ryden in alle richtingen, waarschyglyk huistoe. Geliewe alle Landdrosten kennis te geven hen dadelyk terug te zenden."<sup>4</sup> Clearly, with the decision to vacate the Biggarsberg and the coinciding British success at Helpmekaar, Boer difficulties were compounded. The tone and content of Meyer's telegram suggest a loss of control and even panic. This may explain Ben Viljoen's apparent lack of confidence in his commanding officer when, on arrival at Charlestown it was Kruger rather than Meyer whom he contacted to describe the prevailing great disorder and to request guidance from the President on what to do next.<sup>5</sup>

Kruger had made his views quite clear as to the strategy to be employed in Natal, having already implored Meyer to urge the burghers to stand and fight, if they wished to retain their independence. At the same time Kruger had alleged that it was not so much the burghers but the officers who were responsible for resistance melting away in the face of the pursuit, pointing out that in the Free State, despite poor Boer positions and their numbers being so small by comparison, they had none the less managed to resist the British.<sup>6</sup> Erasmus refuted Kruger's allegation, maintaining he was unaware of any burgher having complained about an officer. Significantly, on that same day Field-Cornet Dercksen reported to Kruger that the Boers could

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<sup>4</sup> Leyds 724(e), Tel. no. 31, Meyer to Kruger, 16 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>5</sup> Leyds 724(d), Tel. no. 79, Viljoen to Kruger, 15 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 57, Kruger to Meyer, 15 May 1900, T.A.

have struck a telling blow against the British force, had the officers not fled with the burghers. He believed it would be necessary for Kruger to address the men personally, to lift their morale.<sup>7</sup> As errors were committed under pressure, fingers were pointed to find suitable scapegoats. Before according any blame however, it is necessary to take the whole Boer method of fighting, or lack thereof, into consideration. Did the Boers have the necessary inbuilt discipline and order which these difficult and extraordinary times demanded?

It is evident that during 16 May the immediate Boer panic and attendant disarray began abating. Erasmus and Meyer had reported that burghers were beginning to take up positions in the Lang's Nek area. At the same time some mounted men had formed a rearguard, to cover slow moving transport, some of which comprised wagons of the Carolina and Lydenburg commandos.<sup>8</sup>

Once most of the commandos had reached the Lang's Nek area on 17 May, a council-of-war was held at which it was decided to hold the Drakensberg line.<sup>9</sup> The Boers now occupied the same positions they had held and defended with such success during the First Anglo-Boer War of 1880-1881. Their positions were extremely powerful, but at the same time there were certain disadvantages

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<sup>7</sup> Leyds 724(e). Tel. no. 83, Erasmus to Kruger and Tel. no. 93, Dercksen to Kruger, 16 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 62, Meyer to Cmdt-Gen and Tel. no. 83, Erasmus to Kruger, 16 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>9</sup> Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 67, Cooper to H.T.D., 17 May 1900, T.A.; Viljoen, p. 84.

they would have had to contend with, one of which was the tremendous length of the line. The Drakensberg positions they held in this north-western corner of Natal, towered high above the colony and could only be crossed at a few points. The Drakensberg stretches from south to north. At Volksrust a range of hills emerges from the Drakensberg, stretching in an east south-easterly direction to just beyond Vryheid. Similar to the Biggarsberg, this range has a limited number of crossing points.

The situation that now confronted Buller was very similar, in many respects, to the one when the Boers held the Biggarsberg. One advantage Buller had however, concerning the Boer positions, was hindsight - gained by the misfortunes of General Colley in 1881 and other British reverses suffered in the area at that time. Once the Boers had decided to hold that portion of the Drakensberg in north-western Natal, as well as the hills stretching easterly towards Vryheid, commandos were allocated various positions. The heaviest concentrations of men were again in and around the passes.

The extreme right flank, comprising the Carolina and Lydenburg commandos commanded by Assistant General J.C. Fourie, was to occupy positions from Botha's Pass to Langkrans,<sup>10</sup> but shortly after their arrival there, they were ordered to hold Muller's Pass as well. Fourie was thus responsible for a line encompassing three passes, some 45 kilometres long as the crow flies, which

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<sup>10</sup> Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 99, Meyer to L. Botha, 17 May 1900; A 850 C.H.K., Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, p. 5 (no date) and Diary of J.H. Janson, 2 June 1900, T.A.



would take a good four and a half hours to span on horseback. With his mere 600 mounted men and another 300 on foot,<sup>11</sup> it is not surprising that he soon requested reinforcements from Meyer whom, he had been led to believe, had a surplus of burghers in the Lang's Nek area. By 25 May no reinforcements had arrived, so a token force of only 25 burghers was ordered to hold Muller's Pass. There, this force apparently made contact with the Orange Free State burghers, who held positions mainly further south.<sup>12</sup>

The central sector was under the command of Assistant General Erasmus. It stretched from Langkrans to the Buffalo River and was occupied from Langkrans to the tunnel at Lang's Nek, by Dercksen and the Boksburg commando; and from the tunnel to the Buffalo River by the Johannesburg and Soutpansberg commandos. The portion further east to Moolman's Nek was guarded by the Middelburg commando, while a small force comprising the Irish No.2 Brigade, German and Italian Corps, was fitted in where required. Erasmus also reported the presence of Pretoria and Krugersdorp burghers at Lang's Nek.<sup>13</sup>

It is extremely difficult to determine the exact strength of the Boer force in the central sector. On 17 May the Krugersdorp and

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<sup>11</sup> Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 99, Meyer to L. Botha, 17 May 1900; Leyds 725(b), Tel. no. 74, Steyn to Kruger and Tel. no. 80, Meyer to Kruger, 19 May 1900; Leyds 726(a), Tel. no. 9, Fourie to L. Botha, 25 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>12</sup> Leyds 726(a). Tel. no. 9, Fourie to Botha, 25 May 1900; A 850, C.H.K., Diary of J.H. Janson, 2 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>13</sup> Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 99, Meyer to L. Botha and Tel. no. 107, Erasmus to Kruger, 17 May 1900, T.A.; Viljoen, pp. 84-85; C.H. Muller, Oorlogsherinneringe, p. 65.

Soutpansberg commandos together totalled 700 men, while Meyer maintained there were approximately 2 000 burghers at Lang's Nek.<sup>14</sup> Precisely which area he meant by the Lang's Nek position is not clear, but it appears not to have included Botha's Pass or Moolman' Nek. Even then that figure would appear to be somewhat low. In early June the Pretoria commando alone reportedly consisted of 1 000 burghers, and that after about 500 of them had deserted.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore probable that this central sector was held by between 3 500 and 4 000 men by 20 May, or soon thereafter. Once positions were allocated, entrenching commenced.<sup>16</sup> Erasmus's men were generally holding very powerful positions, but the long defensive line was a serious handicap and would give the British a number of feasible options by which to pierce it.

Although conditions along the Drakensberg and just east towards Wakkerstroom stabilised, there still existed a crisis in the Utrecht and Vryheid districts. Once the Boers vacated the Biggarsberg, these districts became extremely vulnerable to British invasion. Chris Botha, in command of the Vryheid, Swaziland, Utrecht and Piet Retief burghers, reported having

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<sup>14</sup> Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 107, Erasmus to Kruger, 17 May 1900; Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 20, Meyer to Kruger, 20 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>15</sup> Leyds 726(e), Tel. no. 7, C. Botha to Kruger, 5 June 1900, T.A. It is improbable that Meyer's undefined position of Lang's Nek included Botha's Pass and Moolman's Nek, as the former was held by approximately 1 200 Lydenburgers and Carolina men and Moolman's Nek by approximately 500 Middelburg burghers. If these positions were included, it would leave him with only about 300 men at Lang's Nek itself.

<sup>16</sup> Schikkerling, p. 16.

between 300 and 400 men to guard all the drifts from Rorke's Drift to Wool's Drift and beyond. This was an impossible task. Quite evidently, a large number of burghers of his four commandos were no longer on duty. He made it clear that were the British to advance on Vryheid and Utrecht, he would be unable to repulse them and therefore requested reinforcements.<sup>17</sup> At the same time he ordered his officers to call up all men liable for duty. Another problem hampering Botha's men was the weakness of their horses. Recent long rides led to their emaciation and this was compounded by the fact that the nutritional value of the veld had rapidly diminished during the cooler months. Many Piet Retiefers went home, because of their horses' poor condition.<sup>18</sup>

Numerous burghers no longer with their commandos in the Vryheid-Utrecht districts, had in fact gone to the assistance of their women and children who were packing up, with the intention of withdrawing deeper into the Republic, away from the advancing British menace. The whole issue of what to do with the civilians in these districts caused considerable disagreement within the Boer leadership.<sup>19</sup> Kruger initially made it clear that he

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<sup>17</sup> Leyds 724(e), Tel. nos. 10 and 117, C. Botha to Meyer, 16 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>18</sup> Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 111, C. Botha to Meyer, 17 May 1900, T.A. Botha did not specify how many Piet Retiefers were absent.

<sup>19</sup> Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 6, C. Botha to Meyer, 17 May 1900, T.A. Again, Botha did not specify what percentage or number of burghers was absent. He was probably in no position to do so. The situation had become very fluid and circumstances were changing daily.

wished to see the civilians moving deeper into the Republic.<sup>20</sup> To begin with no action was taken. It would appear that this was due to the British offensive coming to a halt in March and also because of the logistical difficulties experienced. Sometime later, in May, Louis Botha opposed his government on this issue, urging the Landdrosts of Utrecht and Vryheid to persuade the families to stay on their farms, as fleeing only caused misery.<sup>21</sup> Despite this, Chris Botha was adamant the families should move, maintaining that if they remained, the burghers would refuse to remain with their commandos, preferring to protect their families instead.<sup>22</sup> But Meyer correctly pointed out the futility of men remaining behind, as they would be taken prisoner as soon as the British arrived.<sup>23</sup> It was also pointed out, that those families who had remained behind in the Orange Free State, were not being ill treated. Logic therefore dictated that the men should remain with their commandos. When personal property and one's families are at stake, cold logic however seldom holds sway, as evidenced in this case, with the majority of men going to the aid of their women and children. A further complication was a shortage of black labour to assist with moving

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<sup>20</sup> Leyds 724(c), Tel. no. 51, Meyer to Cmdt Vryheid, 14 May 1900, T.A.; Spies, p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> Leyds 725(b), Tel. no. 48, L. Botha to Landdrosts Utrecht and Vryheid, 19 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>22</sup> Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 10, C. Botha to Meyer, 20 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>23</sup> Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 28, Meyer to C. Botha, 20 May 1900, T.A.

and a lack of transport for the poorer families.<sup>24</sup> Despite all this, some families did move, but at the same time confusion continued over what would happen because of the government's and Louis Botha's conflicting instructions. Furthermore, people were unsure of the safest route to follow.<sup>25</sup> Kruger did eventually concur with Louis Botha on the issue of families. The government consequently issued a special bulletin on 21 May, stating that, where families remained on their farms which fell into British hands, they would not be molested by the enemy. Where, however, the women folk fled, their property was destroyed. None the less, cattle, horses and forage were taken by the troops and persons capable of military service were made prisoners of war.<sup>26</sup> By implication therefore, families were now being encouraged to remain on their property.

One way or another the Boers were extremely busy, as the British had been in the days succeeding the battle of Helpmekaar. Once Buller established himself beyond the Biggarsberg, he set about consolidating his position by pressing ahead, bringing north more of his force and repairing the badly damaged railway line - all necessary preparations for launching his next concerted offensive.

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<sup>24</sup> Leyds 724(f), Tel. nos. 6 and 111, C. Botha to Meyer, 17 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>25</sup> Leyds 726(a), Tel. no. 60, Cmdt Vryheid to C. Botha, 26 May 1900; Leyds 726(b), Tel. no. 50, Asst-Gen Grobler to C. Botha, 27 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>26</sup> Spies, p. 40.

The advance column, which spent a day replenishing provisions in Dundee, continued apace on 17 May, the main body reaching Dannhauser and some of the mounted men entering Newcastle.<sup>27</sup> The following day Buller, with the rest of Dundonald's men and Clery's infantry, entered a virtually deserted Newcastle, as there were only about 80 adults left.<sup>28</sup> That afternoon he reported optimistically to Roberts that the Boers were utterly demoralised and were not likely to make a stand this side of Heidelberg. Indeed so hopeful was Buller, that he promised to have men in Standerton on 30 May, provided he could repair the railway line in time.<sup>29</sup>

Consequently, the next morning Dundonald's 3rd Brigade, followed by infantry and artillery, were despatched towards Lang's Nek with instructions to reconnoitre the area.<sup>30</sup> The Ngogo River was crossed without incident. Advancing just west of Mount Prospect, they headed for Lang's Nek. On the way, some Boer stragglers were taken prisoner and wagons and rifles captured.<sup>31</sup> The leading scouts advanced to within about 2,5 kilometres of Lang's Nek. It became clear that the position was in fact strongly held and therefore two guns of the R.H.A. battery were brought into action at the extreme range of 4

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<sup>27</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 265.

<sup>28</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 18 May 1900.

<sup>29</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Report by Buller to Roberts, 24 May 1900.

<sup>30</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3 Cav. Bde., 19 May 1900.

<sup>31</sup> Birdwood, p. 111; Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 255, Buller to Roberts, 18 May 1900.

kilometres.<sup>32</sup>

Once Buller realized that the Nek was so well held, he ordered Dundonald to retire.<sup>33</sup> Apart from his usual caution which probably prompted this command, the fact that he was in no position to support Dundonald adequately should he manage to cross the Drakensberg, no doubt also influenced him in reaching his decision. The commencement of the retreat was the moment for which Erasmus had waited. He had had an uninterrupted view of the entire movement from his lofty eyrie somewhere in the mountains. As the British withdrawal began, he launched 400 burghers, held in readiness behind Majuba, at the retiring force, in an effort to cut off part of Dundonald's men and possibly their guns. Half the Boers went around the west of the hill and the others around the east of it. But Dundonald, anticipating the possibility of such a manoeuvre, successfully held off the Boer counter-attack with reserves, previously held out of view on either flank. Consequently, he managed to withdraw successfully to the Ngogo River, where the cavalry along with the 4th Brigade encamped.<sup>34</sup>

The cavalry and infantry, supported by two 4.7" and two 12 pounder naval guns, were to remain in this area until early June. The cavalry held a line of outposts from Coetzee's Drift, to the

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<sup>32</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3 Cav. Bde., 19 May 1900.

<sup>33</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 611, Buller to Roberts, 19 May 1900.

<sup>34</sup> Leyds 725(b), Tel. no. 88, Erasmus to Kruger, 19 May 1900, T.A.; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army and S.D. 3 Cav. Bde., 19 May 1900; Dundonald Papers, V, T.M., S.R.O. GD 233/128, Report by a Military Correspondent.

southern spurs of Majuba, near O'Neil's Cottage. Manning of this outpost line alternated between the S.A.L.H., Volunteer Composite Regiment (V.C.R.) and T.M.I. from 20 to 26 May. On 27 May the S.A.L.H. was ordered to Newcastle, where they were to join a force to advance on Utrecht. That left the T.M.I. and V.C.R. to share manning the outpost line. Occasional fire was exchanged with Boers approaching the outposts. On 24 May about 150 burghers advanced against the western-most picket, with the apparent intention of trying to cut it off. They were however driven off, with the aid of reinforcements hurried out to assist. On 28 May the 4th Brigade, with its four naval guns, moved further north to occupy a position from Nkwelo on its left to the Newcastle-Lang's Nek road on its right.<sup>35</sup> The infantry and cavalry in this area acted as a shield, behind which Buller was able to prepare himself for the next offensive.

The presence of this British force concerned Meyer and led him to believe that an attack was imminent. His lines were long and thinly held, prompting him to request reinforcements from C. Botha on the left flank.<sup>36</sup> This request was made despite Botha's earlier plea for assistance. There were simply no longer enough burghers to fulfil all the needs.

Meyer need not have concerned himself about a possible attack, for Buller had decided to consolidate his position before pushing

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<sup>35</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 3 Cav. Bde., 20-31 May 1900 and S.D. 4th Bde., 20-31 May 1900.

<sup>36</sup> Leyds 725 (c), Tel. no. 20, Meyer to Kruger and Tel. no. 22, Meyer to C. Botha, 20 May 1900, T.A.



on. In the knowledge that considerable effort would be required to advance beyond the Drakensberg, Buller halted for a while in order to repair the railway line, build up supplies and bring all his forces to Newcastle and beyond.<sup>37</sup> This would permit the Boers more time to select their positions carefully and entrench more effectively. Buller had little choice but to follow the course he did, logistics dictating what was feasible at this stage.

Buller's 5th Division, which had held a pivotal position on Jonono's Kop and KwaSondoda while the advance on Helpmekaar was in progress, also headed northwards from 15 May. They proceeded via Wessel's Nek to Glencoe and Hattingh Spruit. From these encampments they assisted with the repairs to the railway line, which the Boers had extensively damaged - every bridge and culvert having been blown up. Between Wasbank station and Glencoe Junction alone, 26 bridges and culverts were destroyed and similar damage was caused all along the way. From 18 to 25 May elements of the 5th Division laboured long and hard to make the line operational again.<sup>38</sup> On 28 May the line was fully restored to Newcastle, by which time the 5th Division had arrived in the town. The Division advanced from Hattingh Spruit via Dannhauser and Ngagane.<sup>39</sup> While the 5th Division repaired the rail line

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<sup>37</sup> Amery, IV, p. 180; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 265.

<sup>38</sup> Burne, p. 61; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 265; Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 256, Buller to Roberts, 20 May 1900.

<sup>39</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. VII, W.O. 105/8, Buller to Sec for War, 19 May 1900; FK 1777 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 10th Bde., 19 to 27 May 1900.

their transport assisted in building up supplies in Newcastle.<sup>40</sup>

Lyttelton's 4th Division, encamped near the Sunday's River by 22 May, was ordered to advance north via Mkupe Pass. This Division, comprising soldiers who had defended Ladysmith, was still recovering from the rigours of the siege and had thus far been spared any arduous work.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast to the slow but steady and smooth consolidation of the British position in and around Newcastle, a reverse was suffered on the right flank. There Bethune's column, operating as a detached force, crossed the Buffalo River at Vant's Drift on 17 May, making a reassuring show of force, prior to the re-establishment of a magistracy at the isolated little town Ngutu in Zululand. Two days later Bethune was ordered to return from Ngutu to Newcastle.<sup>42</sup>

The following day, Bethune, heading a column of 356 men and two Hotchkiss guns, and assisted by Zulu guides, left Ngutu for Newcastle. Other Zulus reported Vryheid to be virtually deserted but full of stores. This seemed too good an opportunity to be missed and appears to have persuaded Bethune to make a detour via the town. The supply column however, was ordered to head for

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<sup>40</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 265.

<sup>41</sup> Lyttelton, p. 234; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 22 May 1900.

<sup>42</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 266.

Newcastle via Dundee - a shorter route. Bethune decided they would take on a day's supply at Vryheid. This was an indication that he anticipated success. By 14:15 the Blood River was reached.<sup>43</sup>

There Bethune was informed that a Boer commando had the previous day moved from De Jager's Drift to about nine kilometres south of Vryheid, at Scheeper's Nek, where they were then laagered.<sup>44</sup> They therefore blocked his direct route into Vryheid. Undeterred, he decided to attack. In subsequent reports he gave different reasons for this decision. In his first report he wrote: "As they were chiefly Natal rebels I made up my mind to attack them; they had no guns."<sup>45</sup> In a later report he wrote: "Decided to attack them as they had wagons."<sup>46</sup> Bethune gives no indication of why he believed the force before him consisted only of Natal rebels.

Leading Bethune's column was Captain Goff's squadron with a Hotchkiss gun, followed by that of Captain Ford. Bringing up the rear was Bethune with three squadrons and the other Hotchkiss gun. Goff made off at a great pace and was twice ordered to slow down as the rest were having difficulty in keeping up with his

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<sup>43</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. V, W.O. 105/8, Bethune to Chief of Staff Newcastle, 21 May 1900 and T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 0628, Buller to Roberts, 23 May 1900.

<sup>44</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. V, W.O. 105/8, Bethune to Chief of Staff Newcastle, 21 May 1900, p. 57 and T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 0628, Buller to Roberts, 23 May 1900.

<sup>45</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. V, W.O. 105/8, Bethune to Chief of Staff Newcastle, 21 May 1900.

<sup>46</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 0628, Buller to Roberts, 23 May 1900.

squadron. As they approached a koppie at Scheepers' Nek just south of Vryheid, Lieutenant Lanham warned Goff that it was occupied by Boers, but he continued undeterred and actually rode past the first line of burghers.<sup>47</sup>

The Boers encamped south of Vryheid, at Scheepers' Nek, were in fact not Natal rebels but approximately 80 members of the Swaziland commando under leadership of Acting Commandant Blignaut.<sup>48</sup> That afternoon the Swazilanders gathered near a spring to attend a church service conducted by Dominee E.C. Anderssen. During the service burghers positioned on a nearby koppie suddenly shouted a warning, having noticed the advancing Goff and his men. This brought a prompt end to the service, with the burghers rushing off to take up their positions.<sup>49</sup>

As the impetuous Goff entered a nek, he was suddenly fired upon at short range from the stony koppies to the east and the two farm houses to the west. Goff's men, who did not have their horses shot from beneath them, quickly dismounted and tried to seek shelter in a donga. At the same time a maxim gun was brought into action. From their good positions the Swazilanders made life extremely difficult for these men.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. V, W.O. 105/8, Bethune to Chief of Staff Newcastle, 21 May 1900.

<sup>48</sup> Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 48, Landdrost Vryheid to L. Botha, 20 May 1900, T.A.; Penning, II, p.745.

<sup>49</sup> E.C. Anderssen, Die Verlede Herleef, p. 33.

<sup>50</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 180-181; Roberts Papers, T.A. V, W.O. 105/8, Bethune to Chief of Staff Newcastle, 21 May 1900.

Ford's squadron gallantly went to the assistance of the reckless Goff, having to endure a galling fire and finding a fence which impeded them from extending properly. The fire from the koppies on the east caused Ford's squadron to wheel right and form up at right angles to the original route of advance. This was the dismal scene that greeted Bethune on his arrival. With darkness approaching, he realized that the only option was to attempt to withdraw the engaged squadrons. Additional squadrons were employed on either flank to cover Ford's withdrawal, while the Hotchkiss guns were brought into action against the koppies to the east. Less than an hour after the action commenced it was over. Bethune, despite Goff's impetuosity and the difficult circumstances, managed to extricate most of his men.<sup>51</sup>

That evening the Boers noticed the British retiring towards Doornberg. They had successfully repulsed Bethune's force at very little cost to themselves, casualties amounting to only one killed and one wounded.<sup>52</sup> These were also the figures given to the British soldiers by Boer doctors. Bethune maintained he personally knew of ten Boers killed. This was probably an exaggeration in an effort to detract from what was an unfortunate and costly experience.<sup>53</sup> British casualties on the other hand,

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<sup>51</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. V, W.O. 105/8, Bethune to Chief of Staff Newcastle, 21 May 1900 and T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 0628, Buller to Roberts, 23 May 1900.

<sup>52</sup> Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 63, Landdrost Vryheid to Kruger, 20 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 63, Landdrost Vryheid to Kruger, 20 May 1900; Roberts Papers, T.A. V, W.O. 105/8, Bethune to Chief of Staff Newcastle, 21 May 1900.

were significantly higher. In Bethune's report to Buller he listed these as 18 killed, 23 wounded and 18 prisoners, along with the loss of Goff's maxim gun.<sup>54</sup> Amery, by contrast, lists the casualties as 30 killed, 30 wounded and six prisoners, as well as the loss of Goff's maxim gun. Casualty figures supplied by C. Botha were 27 killed, 25 wounded and 11 prisoners, while Blignaut reported 105 killed and wounded and 13 prisoners.<sup>55</sup> It is impossible to establish which, if any, are the correct figures. It is probable that Bethune's figures are on the low side, for he reported that only nine of Goff's squadron returned. It is probable that some of Ford's men were killed and wounded, therefore making for a figure of slightly more than the 59 men listed by Bethune.<sup>56</sup> What is significant, is the high proportion of killed to wounded, suggesting that Goff was in very close contact with the Boers.

Although the Boers had repulsed the British force and inflicted significant losses, they fully expected them to renew their attack the following morning.<sup>57</sup> The next day, buoyed by success, the Boers turned out in significant numbers and high spirits, riding out to Scheepers' Nek. But no British were to be

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<sup>54</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. V, W.O. 105/8, Bethune to Chief of Staff Newcastle, 21 May 1900.

<sup>55</sup> Amery, IV, p. 181; Leyds 725(e), Tel. no. 61, C. Botha to Meyer, 22 May 1900; Leyds 725(f), Tel. no. 22, Act Cmdt Blignaut to Kruger, 23 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>56</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 0628, Buller to Roberts, 23 May 1900.

<sup>57</sup> Leyds 725 (c), Tel. no. 63, Landdrost Vryheid to Kruger, 20 May 1900, T.A.

seen.<sup>58</sup> Bethune, having cut himself off from his supply train, anticipating being able to stock up in Vryheid, was forced to fall back on Ngutu to obtain supplies. From there he returned to Newcastle via Dundee.<sup>59</sup>

Bethune's otherwise excellent record was now blemished. In a telegram to Roberts, the considerate Buller, although of necessity critical of Bethune, acknowledged the positive contribution he had made stating: "...but it is due to him to say that he has always done his work remarkably well."<sup>60</sup> In partial mitigation of Bethune for this setback, it needs to be considered that it was Goff's rash action which led to the column's misfortune. Therefore the greatest direct responsibility for this reverse surely lies with Goff. Nonetheless, with reports of Boers in the neighbourhood being received, one would have expected Bethune to keep his column on a tighter rein and not have it extended as it was. After all, the column numbered less than 400 men and had no baggage train to hold it back, making it easier for everyone to move at much the same pace. The Boers obviously kept cool heads and for once allowed a larger force than themselves to ride right into an ambush. By holding their fire they were able to reap the success they did.

It was now quite evident to Buller that he needed to take

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<sup>58</sup> Leyds 725(d), Tel. no. 34, Landdrost Vryheid to L. Botha, 21 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>59</sup> Amery, IV, p. 181.

<sup>60</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 0620, Buller to Roberts, 22 May 1900.

positive, successful action in order to secure his right flank. In addition he had to decide on the strategy and route to be followed once sufficient supplies were built up, the railroad repaired and his force in position in and around Newcastle.

This latter issue was the subject of regular and protracted communication between Buller and Roberts during the later part of May. Roberts was making steady progress towards the Transvaal and, in consequence, urged Buller on 15 May to make his way over the Drakensberg passes west of Newcastle towards Vrede, as this would assist his right flank.<sup>61</sup> Two days later Roberts informed Buller that once he was in the Transvaal he intended making Natal his base, thus gaining control of the entire railway line and the Lang's Nek tunnel would be especially important.<sup>62</sup> On 23 May Roberts reiterated his plea for the occupation of Vrede, especially as the only Orange Free State opposition at that stage was emanating from the north-east corner of the country.<sup>63</sup>

Typically, Buller was reluctant to commit himself and take decisions, oscillating between various plans of action. Initially, as noted above, he attempted to force his way over Lang's Nek but found it strongly held. Once he knew this, as well as the fact that Botha's Pass and Moll's Nek were held, it was obvious to him that either route would be difficult.<sup>64</sup> On 24

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 1615, Roberts to Buller, 15 May 1900.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 1660, Roberts to Buller, 17 May 1900.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 1772, Roberts to Buller, 23 May 1900.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 258, Buller to Roberts, 23 May 1900.



May he made it clear to Roberts that he considered it risky to despatch a division to Vrede, especially as his communications were threatened from both flanks and he claimed that Roberts's Orange Free State advance increased rather than reduced the pressure on him.<sup>65</sup> Two days later Buller informed Roberts that he was confronted by 10 000 men in very strong positions and consequently requested that a division be sent to the head of Muller's Pass to assist him.<sup>66</sup> On the same day Roberts informed Buller there was no need to take undue risks, as he was in the process of crossing the Vaal River and would, with the 8th Division, occupy all principal centres in the north-eastern Orange Free State, including Vrede.<sup>67</sup>

On 27 May Buller suddenly swung into action. Orders were issued for a total force of between 8 000 and 9 000 men consisting of cavalry, infantry and supported by artillery, to make for Utrecht and the Doornberg, where Buller believed he would have to contend with about 1 500 burghers. The 11th Brigade (Hildyard's Division), supported by between 400 and 500 of the 3rd Mounted Brigade, 2 field batteries and four 12 pounders, was to advance on Utrecht via Wool's Drift and clear the country of any Boers south of the town. Simultaneously, the 8th Brigade (Lyttelton's Division), in which the Gordon Highlanders replaced the King Royal Rifles, with the 18th Hussars, two field gun batteries, one howitzer battery, two 12 pounders and one Vickers Maxim gun, was

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 259, Buller to Roberts, 24 May 1900.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 260, Buller to Roberts, 26 May 1900.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 1807, Roberts to Buller, 26 May 1900.

to clear the Doornberg area by advancing via Cattle Drift.<sup>68</sup> By mobilizing such a large force, Buller was obviously not leaving anything to chance after one bad experience on the right flank. This action was aimed at securing the right flank, ascertaining the feelings of the Utrecht inhabitants and misleading the defenders at Lang's Nek.<sup>69</sup>

On 28 May the two columns advanced on their designated objectives. As the British approached Utrecht, most of the burghers withdrew from the town, heading north-east onto the Balelasberg. There is no evidence as to how many burghers withdrew. After negotiations, the Utrecht landdrost, Scheffer, formally surrendered the town to Hildyard on 31 May. Major D. Henderson then entered the town and read out a proclamation which stated that, if South African Republic citizens gave up their arms and ammunition and agreed not to commit hostile acts against the British forces, they would be permitted to go free. After hearing this proclamation 40 burghers surrendered their arms. Lyttelton too encountered no resistance, and on 31 May reported the Doornberg clear of Boers.<sup>70</sup>

On 2 June both columns began returning to Natal and the Boers re-

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., Tel. no. 263, Buller to Roberts, 27 May 1900; FK 1777 T.A., Orders for attack by Lyttelton and Hildyard, 27 and 28 May 1900; Amery, IV, p. 183; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 267.

<sup>69</sup> Cd. 1791, Minutes of Evidence taken before the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa, p. 185.

<sup>70</sup> FK 1776 T.A., S.D. Natal Army, 28-31 May 1900; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 267; A.H.C. Kearsley, War Record of the York and Lancaster Regiment, p. 69.

occupied Utrecht. Other than possibly undermining Boer morale and casting some doubt as to future British strategy, the exercise was futile, because the right flank remained as exposed as ever.<sup>71</sup> But even so, Buller's task of reaching the highveld was made easier with each passing day by Roberts's steady successes to the west.

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<sup>71</sup> Amery, IV, p. 183; Burne, p. 65; Leyds 726(d), Tel. no. 31, C. Botha to L. Botha and Tel. no. 43 Gen Steenkamp to C. Botha, 2 June 1900, T.A.

## Chapter 5. 'LULL BEFORE THE STORM'

Growing threats to Boer independence and ever increasing British military pressures, had a variety of repercussions in the latter part of May and early June 1900. One of these saw Kruger becoming more directly and intimately involved in military matters on the Natal front.

Kruger intervened regarding Meyer's intended occupation of Majuba. He wanted a gun placed on the hill. Meyer, however, pointed out that unless one had a great deal of time first of all to build a road, this would be impossible. The President was so upset by Meyer's reply that he requested him immediately to place two Nordenfeldt's and if possible, another gun on the hill as well. He maintained that as there were so many burghers, the guns could be dismantled and carried up. He regarded this matter as urgent, for he believed the loss of Majuba would also result in the loss of Lang's Nek. Simultaneously, Kruger wondered whether a large gun should not be placed on Moll's Kop (Phokweni).<sup>1</sup>

Meyer however remained unconvinced, insisting that it was impossible to place guns on Majuba or a Long Tom (155mm Creusot) on Phokweni, as the latter would take four or five days to get there and the British were not likely to grant them that much time.<sup>2</sup> Despite Meyer's firm resistance to his President's proposals, the disagreement between himself and Kruger continued.

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<sup>1</sup> Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 20, Meyer to Kruger and Tel. nos. 38 and 40, Kruger to Meyer, 20 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>2</sup> Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 42, Meyer to Kruger, 20 May 1900, T.A.

Kruger then ordered a Nordenfeldt to be dismantled and placed on Majuba, which in any case was to be occupied, as the rail line passed so close to it. Furthermore, he informed Meyer that a Long Tom was already en route to Volksrust, for emplacement on Phokweni.<sup>3</sup>

Despite continued pressure from Kruger, Meyer insisted that no Nordenfeldt would be placed on Majuba, explaining it was already occupied by riflemen, as well as covered by numerous guns from various angles. He also correctly pointed out that a gun on Majuba would be useless against infantry advancing up the steep slopes. On being informed that a Long Tom was on its way, he surrendered on this issue, promising to give all necessary assistance to have it emplaced.<sup>4</sup> What Meyer failed to mention in this altercation with Kruger, was that even if the British gained control of Majuba, the length and steepness of its slopes would have prevented them from placing artillery on the hill with a sufficient range to threaten Lang's Nek. Was it perhaps the historical significance of this site, rather than strategic considerations that prompted Kruger to order artillery to be placed on it? The loss of Majuba may have been perceived as cancelling out the Boer victory there on 27 February 1881. This victory was to a degree already cancelled though, by the surrender of General P.A. Cronjé with 4 000 burghers at Paardeberg, and Buller's success in finally piercing the Boer

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<sup>3</sup> Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 50, Kruger to Meyer, 20 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>4</sup> Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 57, Meyer to Kruger, 20 May 1900, T.A.

defence line on the Thukela River. Both these events occurred on 27 February 1900 - Majuba day.

The Long Tom arrived in Volksrust on 21 May and the next day the tremendous task of placing it on Phokweni, a hill that towers over northern Natal, began. The future safety of this gun was a major concern to Meyer. During a retreat it was hardly likely there would be either oxen or burghers to assist in bringing it down from the hill. Past experience had taught Meyer that his men could not be relied on in a time of crisis. It is interesting and possibly significant that when Meyer communicated his fears about the safety of the Long Tom to Louis Botha, he referred to an eventual retreat.<sup>5</sup> The situation in Natal, as well as in the Orange Free State, may have made it self-evident that a retreat from the positions held by Meyer was inevitable. Some may have construed this as a defeatist attitude, but was he not being realistic? The odds against the Boers had lengthened since the victorious days along the Thukela and everywhere else the Republican forces were either in retreat or under pressure.

Fears for the safety of the Long Tom were shared by Lieutenant F. von Wichmann, a member of the German Corps and commander of the artillery in Natal. This heavy gun would be in a somewhat isolated spot on the defence line, from which it would be difficult to remove. He therefore requested a case of dynamite, with which to destroy it, should its loss appear likely.

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<sup>5</sup> Leyds 725(d), Tel. no. 114, Meyer to L. Botha, 21 May 1900, T.A.

Furthermore, he wanted three large ox-wagons and teams of oxen, and an additional 20 oxen hired on a daily basis. These were to be kept at the gun, until required. These steps for the gun's safety were eventually taken, but kept a secret lest they undermine Boer morale.<sup>6</sup> On 28 May, the Long Tom from its superb position, but at very long range, opened fire on the British encampment near Nkwelo, seriously wounding one of the King's Royal Rifles. On subsequent days, the gun was fired for short periods and the British gunners occasionally replied with 4.7" guns. Apart from its initial success, the Long Tom caused no further casualties during May. However, its presence was a factor Buller had to take into consideration, when deciding on the options open to him.<sup>7</sup>

It was not only Kruger that was dissatisfied with Meyer. A number of men under his command had lost faith in him. Ben Viljoen reported to Kruger on 16 May: "Ik en ik geloof alle burgers is nu zonder vertrouwen in de generaals die over ons is en ik geloof ook niet dat zy eenige reorganisatie zal verkrygen." He urged Kruger to appoint a new commanding officer, suggesting that Chris Botha would be a good choice. Later the same day he tempered his criticism, naming Erasmus as still doing his best.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> Leyds 726(c), Tel. no. 1, Von Wichmann to RVR Charlestown, Tel. no. 21, Eloff to Uys, 30 May 1900 and Leyds 723(d), Tel. no 90, Wolmarans to Von Wichmann, 7 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>7</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 4th Bde., 28 May 1900; Amery, IV, p. 183; K.G. 815, Uys to Erasmus, pp. 125-126, 29 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>8</sup> Leyds 724(d), Tel. no. 79, Viljoen to Kruger, 15 May 1900; Leyds 724 (e), Tel. nos. 77 and 99, Viljoen to Kruger, 16 May 1900, T.A.

situation was obviously very serious, for here was a commandant requesting that his commanding officer be relieved.

Kruger responded promptly. The same day he promoted C. Botha to Acting General, a rank he incidentally already held, and ordered him to Lang's Nek, where he was to motivate the men, have all deserters shot, as well as their horses.<sup>9</sup> This obvious lack of confidence and intervention in his affairs, stung Meyer into replying sharply and sarcastically to his President:

Den Heer C. Botha is reeds daar benoemd in plaats als Wd. op 3 dezer en wordt steeds als zoodanig door my bekend... Het spyt my dus dat de Regering zulke aanstellingen doen zonder vooraf met hoofd officieren te raad plegen. In deze geval is het toevallig recht maar de Regering kon net zoowel een verkeerde persoon aangesteld hebben.<sup>10</sup>

Kruger's apparent lack of knowledge concerning the rank of Chris Botha is not entirely surprising. There is no clarity concerning Botha's rank at this stage. Meyer did make it known on the Natal front that Chris Botha held the rank of Acting Assistant Commandant General while he, Meyer, was away in Pretoria as from 3 May. Botha was therefore not an Acting General as from that day. Meyer returned to Natal on 10 May and it would appear that Botha held the rank of Assistant General from then on. This is suggested by the fact that Viljoen addressed a telegram, on 10

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<sup>9</sup> Leyds 724(e), Tel. no. 113, Kruger to C. Botha, 16 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>10</sup> Leyds 724(f), Tel. no. 13, Meyer to Kruger, 17 May 1900, T.A.



May, to Assistant General C. Botha. No documentary evidence could be located which specified whether he was an Acting or Assistant General.<sup>11</sup>

Criticism against Meyer continued to mount. Field-Cornet Uys of Utrecht also requested the President to replace him,<sup>12</sup> while E.S. Badenhorst in a telegram on 21 May to Louis Botha quite bluntly requested: "Ik een der Voortrekkers van het land versoek U. Ed. hierby beleefd maar dringend Genl Meyer te willen ontslaan."<sup>13</sup> Clearly the burghers' dissatisfaction with Meyer was so strong that they were prepared to communicate directly with their President or Commandant-General about the matter. The situation must have caused Kruger and especially the much younger Louis Botha much pain. After all Meyer was a person of standing, if by now a little past his prime. For Louis Botha the pain was probably greater. They came from the same area and had known one another for at least 16 years. It was Meyer who in an earlier campaign in 1884 against the Zulu leader Usibhebhu, had recognised the 21 year old Louis Botha's tactical skills and therefore permitted him to attend councils-of-war. From that campaign developed a friendship between the two men, which later

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<sup>11</sup> Leyds 723(a), Tel. no. 38, Meyer to Cmdts on Natal front, 3 May 1900; Leyds 723(f), Tel. no. 99, Meyer to C. Botha, 9 May 1900; Leyds 723(g), Tel. no. 17, Viljoen to C. Botha, 10 May 1900 and Leyds 724(d), Tel. no. 21, Meyer to L. Botha, 15 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>12</sup> Leyds 725(c), Tel. no. 11, Uys to Kruger, 20 May 1900; Leyds 725(e) Tel. no. 60, Lombard to Kruger, 22 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>13</sup> Leyds 725(d), Tel. no. 39, Badenhorst to L. Botha, 21 May 1900, T.A. There is no indication which commando Badenhorst was a member of and whether he held any rank.

also grew into a business relationship. From 1897 they represented the Vryheid district in the Volksraad and at the outbreak of war Botha acted as second-in-command to Meyer, who commanded the commandos from the south-eastern Transvaal. When Meyer took ill in October 1899 near Ladysmith, Botha took over as acting-general and his military career blossomed. Now he was expected to take action against his friend and former commander.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the personal circumstances, the situation could no longer be ignored. In consequence Kruger transferred Meyer to the Gatsrand-Pretoria area to take command there, while Chris Botha replaced him at Lang's Nek with rank of Assistant Commandant-General. That evening, 23 May, Meyer departed from the Natal front.<sup>15</sup> Just how much the altercation Kruger had with Meyer over Majuba influenced his decision to remove the latter from the Natal front, will never be known.

Circumstances were such that this was not the ideal time to gain promotion. The situation was so critical and the problems requiring attention so grave, that Chris Botha could resort to little more than crisis management.

More serious than the dissension in the burgher ranks, was a shortage of various supplies and a partial collapse of the supply

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<sup>14</sup> Barnard, pp. 2-5, 13, 21, 24, 28 and 29.

<sup>15</sup> Leyds 725(f), Tel. no. 14, Kruger to Meyer and Tel. no. 68, Meyer to Kruger, 23 May 1900, T.A.

system. Indeed on 30 and 31 May most alarming reports about the supply situation were received. The commissariat at Charlestown had closed as there were no more provisions to distribute. From Standerton it was reported that sufficient supplies of meat, meal and rice to feed 5 000 men existed for a mere three days. The entire commissariat staff at Volksrust had fled, as well as a number of the Standerton staff. It is not clear why they had left, but news of the British advance on Johannesburg was a possible factor.<sup>16</sup> This advance threatened their retreat route and, eventually, probably their homes and families also. At Volksrust 500 bags of meal lay unattended and there was no one to receive the bread that arrived there and so it was reported there would be no food for some commandos the following day. On the same day too, the Wakkerstroom commandant reported having run out of food. These dire circumstances prompted Kruger to act quickly and decisively. He ordered the Standerton commissariat to make the necessary provision and at the same time he despatched a 'reliable' person with £1 000 to the Natal front, to purchase stock and other supplies.<sup>17</sup> What Kruger meant by 'the necessary provision' is not clear, but presumably it was to ensure that supplies sent would be so handled as to ensure that the commandos received the supplies they needed.

Kruger's prompt intervention resolved the crisis temporarily, and

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<sup>16</sup> Leyds 726(c), Tel. no. 21, Eloff to Uys, 30 May 1900 and Tel. no. 19, Wd. HCC Standerton to Uys and Tel. no. 20, Spec. Cmdt to Uys, 31 May 1900, T.A.; Breytenbach, V, p. 538.

<sup>17</sup> Leyds 726(c), Tel. no. 20, Spec Cmdt to Uys and Tel. no. 35, Kruger to Van Broekhuizen and Tel. no. 44, Lombard to C. Botha, 31 May 1900, T.A.

for a while there was no report of supply shortages. However, on 7 June there was a further request for supplies and money to be sent to Lang's Nek.<sup>18</sup>

The protracted conflict was also taking its toll on the burghers' horses. Long and repeated rides caused their condition to decline. This was further exacerbated by the reduced nutritional value of the veld in the cooler months. In consequence, more and more men were forced to walk. On 22 May, Chris Botha requested 100 horses from Meyer to try to make up the shortfall among his ranks. Horse fodder too, was in short supply.<sup>19</sup>

As this succession of crises was being dealt with, another major menace was moving inexorably north, west of the Drakensberg. Roberts's forces were making steady headway. On 26 May they crossed the Vaal River and on 31 May marched into Johannesburg. Five days later Roberts's troops triumphantly entered Kruger's capital, Pretoria.<sup>20</sup> News of the rapid advance into their country and the capture of its two major centres, left many a burgher on the Natal front wondering what he was defending. The safety of these men's loved ones and property was also of concern. Roberts's advances also cut off the retreat route for many burghers on the Natal front. Those men relying on trains for

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<sup>18</sup> Leyds 726(d), tel. no. 25, C. Botha to L. Botha, 3 June 1900; Leyds 726(f), Tel. no. 21, Act. Landdrost (?) to K.G., 7 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>19</sup> Leyds 725(e), Tel. nos. 48a and b, C. Botha to Meyer, 22 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>20</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 135-159.

transport, and their numbers were steadily increasing, felt threatened as the rail line east of Johannesburg fell into British hands. By cutting off the retreat route, Roberts's victories only exacerbated the generally low morale and poor discipline already in existence since the retreat from the Biggarsberg.<sup>21</sup> Rumours, usually rife in such situations, also played their part in undermining the Boers' willingness to remain on the Natal front. In contrast, there were certain individuals or groups of men, who remained determined to continue their resistance, come what may.

Rumours circulating at the front were that all women had to leave Johannesburg. This rumour persisted for about two weeks before Roberts reached Johannesburg. Approximately ten days after rumours began circulating about Roberts, the Soutpansberg commando requested a transfer home on hearing that the British were allegedly just two days from its districts. Kruger refused this request, reassuring them that the rumour was untrue and that, in any case, the government would make the necessary arrangements, if required to do so.<sup>22</sup>

The combination of Roberts's successes in cutting off the retreat routes, persistent rumours and a desire to protect their families and property, as they were threatened, led to large scale

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<sup>21</sup> Schikkerling, p. 17; K.G. 815, Uys to Erasmus, 29 May 1900, pp. 125-126, T.A.

<sup>22</sup> Leyds 725(a), Tel. no. 56, Van der Byl to Louw, 18 May 1900; Leyds 726(b), Tel. no. 84, C. Botha to Kruger and Meyer, 27 May 1900 and Tel. no. 3, Kruger to C. Botha, 28 May 1900, T.A.

desertions from the Natal front, during the latter part of May and early June. The Soutpansbergers were not pacified by Kruger's re-assurances. On 30 May it was reported that a large number of them had deserted. One source mentioned 60 men and another as many as 200. It is not possible to determine which is the more accurate figure, but clearly desertion on a large scale had occurred. At the same time it was reported that all the Johannesburg Police, along with various other burghers, had deserted.<sup>23</sup> The deepening crisis, coupled with an absence of ingrained and strong conventional military traditions, was taking a heavy toll on the Boer forces.

By 2 June it was reported that a mere 130 Soutpansbergers remained in their positions. Of 1 600 Pretorians only 1 000 remained, the rest having deserted. There was also a partial desertion by the Middelburgers from Moll's Nek. These desertions were serious enough in themselves, but they had the added effect of undermining the resolve of those burghers still in their positions. Chris Botha himself became quite pessimistic, believing that even addressing the burghers was now of no further value.<sup>24</sup> None the less, the next day Botha went out to the Pretoria and Soutpansberg commandos and addressed them in an effort to encourage and motivate them. Later that day he informed Meyer that their morale was much improved and that he believed

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<sup>23</sup> Leyds 726(c), Tel. no. 22, Von Wichmann to C. Botha and Tel. no. 26, Spec Cmdt to Uys and Tel. no. 28, Uys to C. Botha, 30 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>24</sup> Leyds 726(d), Tel. no. 15, C. Botha to Kruger and Tel. no. 31, C. Botha to L. Botha, 2 June 1900, T.A.

they would fight to the end.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to the generally low morale and poor discipline among commandos around Lang's Nek and east thereof, the Carolina and Lydenburg commandos at Botha's Pass, were still in position and determined to resist. However, news of the desertions by the Pretoria and Soutpansberg commandos caused unease, for if the British broke through at Lang's Nek, the force at Botha's Pass would probably be cut off.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from creating a crisis in Boer morale and discipline, Roberts's advance was the cause of a number of commandos being shifted from one front to another. There were two main reasons for transferring commandos. One was Louis Botha's need for reinforcements and the other was a psychological one. As commandos on any front found their respective home areas threatened, so quite naturally they wished to be there to defend them. This psychological influence was highlighted by the Soutpansberg burghers' response to the rumours they heard of British forces threatening their area.

The first unit to leave the Drakensberg line to go to Louis Botha's assistance, was Lynch's Irish Brigade. There is no evidence of the exact strength of this unit, but it almost

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<sup>25</sup> Leyds 726(d), Tel. no. 25, C. Botha to L. Botha and Tel. no. 30, C. Botha to Meyer, 3 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>26</sup> Leyds 726(d), Tel. no. 31, C. Botha to L. Botha, 2 June 1900, T.A.

certainly was not large.<sup>27</sup> The Irish were followed by the Johannesburg commando on 23 May.<sup>28</sup> The Johannesburgers were exchanged for the Wakkerstroom commando.<sup>29</sup> It made good sense to exchange these commandos, for they would both be nearer home and therefore more likely to be motivated to resist the British.

On 27 May Chris Botha gave his men the alarming news that the British had crossed the Vaal River. This prompted Field-Cornet Chris Muller of the Boksburg commando to ask forlornly: "Wat help dit om hier posisies vas te hou; die vyand is deur die Vaalrivier en trek na die Rand en ons kan ons nie daar verdedig?" Botha acceded to this request and that same night, Dercksen left with a portion of the commando. The station master at Volksrust was alerted to prepare himself to transport the commando and their supplies at short notice.<sup>30</sup> The rest of the commando soon followed.

It was very soon after these transfers that the Soutpansbergers and the Johannesburg Police deserted in large numbers, critically

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<sup>27</sup> Lynch, p. 193; Leyds 725(b), Tel. no. 91, Meyer to L. Botha, 19 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>28</sup> Viljoen, p. 86; Schikkerling, p. 18; Leyds 725(f), Tel. no. 55, Viljoen to Act Spec Cmtt Johannesburg, 23 May 1900, T.A. Viljoen gives 15 May as the commando's day of departure and Schikkerling mentions 26 May. It is probable that the telegram date is the correct one.

<sup>29</sup> Leyds 725(b), Tel. no. 112, L. Botha to Landdrost Wakkerstroom, 19 May 1900; Leyds 725(e), Tel. no. 110, Meyer to L. Botha, 22 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>30</sup> Leyds 726(b), Tel. no. 46, C. Botha to L. Botha and Tel. no. 84, C. Botha to Meyer and Kruger, 27 May 1900, T.A.; Muller, pp. 65-66.



weakening the central section of the defence line. This development, along with the poor morale, supply shortages, in addition to the menace that lay before them and was moving in behind them, must have caused Chris Botha and those fellow officers who still had the will to resist, great concern.

Compounding Chris Botha's problems, was a message received from Kruger on 27 May that the Boers would try to hold Johannesburg and Pretoria. Should they fail, the eastern and northern districts were to be held, with Machadadorp becoming the seat of government, and Vrede becoming the capital of the Orange Free State. In order to protect communications in the eastern districts of the Republics, it would thus be imperative that the Drakensberg be held.<sup>31</sup> With both Johannesburg and Pretoria falling soon after Kruger's message was received, Botha indeed had a crucial and responsible role to play. Should he give way, both Machacadorp and Vrede would be open to attacks from two fronts.

Fortunately for the Boers, it appears that Buller was unaware of the majority of their problems. At least his messages and reports do not reveal any knowledge of such information. In fact, he still anticipated considerable difficulty in trying to force his way onto the highveld.<sup>32</sup> So, when Buller received news that Elandsfontein had fallen into British hands, thus severing the

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<sup>31</sup> Leyds 726(b), Tel. no. 58, Kruger to C. Botha, 27 May 1900, T.A.

<sup>32</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 4 June 1900, p. 84 and Buller to Roberts, 2 June 1900, p. 87.

rail link between the Natal front and Johannesburg-Pretoria, he decided to exploit the situation. He tried to achieve his first objective, that of a passage onto the highveld by negotiation. Under a flag of truce he sent a message to Chris Botha, questioning whether it was still worth his while to continue the struggle, as his rail communications were cut. Botha replied that he would have to refer the question to the Commandant-General.<sup>33</sup> Upon receipt of this reply, Buller issued orders to his force facing Lang's Nek to fire in self-defence only. The Boer guns too became silent.<sup>34</sup>

When Kruger came to hear of Buller's message, he let Chris Botha know in no uncertain terms that he was not to negotiate with the British commander. He maintained that the burghers had fought the British forces with great success in the Transvaal and ordered that the struggle should continue. Furthermore, he claimed that Buller would only be satisfied with unconditional surrender.<sup>35</sup> Despite Kruger's orders, a conference did take place between Buller, C. Botha and their respective staffs. They met in the open, between the historic Majuba and Mount Prospect. Buller pointed out to Botha that not only was his rail link severed, but he was confronted by a large army with guns and that by continuing to fight he would only be throwing away lives to no avail. This was probably the strongest reason for Buller's

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 84; Breytenbach, V, pp. 533-534.

<sup>34</sup> FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 2nd Div., 30 May 1900 and S.D. 4th Bde., 31 May 1900.

<sup>35</sup> Leyds 726(c), Tel. no. 23, Kruger to Uys, 30 May 1900, T.A.

initiating these talks, since he disliked seeing men suffer - he went so far as to state that he hated war. Did the thought of failure also influence this approach?

Buller offered the following terms to Botha: the burghers, while retaining their small arms, were to disperse to their farms, but were to leave their artillery behind; the issue of the ultimate surrender, however, of the small arms would be subject to an agreement between Kruger and Roberts. Buller was, of course, not in a position to make peace but he promised to telegraph Roberts to enquire about peace terms. Botha made it clear that he could neither offer or accept peace terms, but in the meantime he would communicate Buller's proposal to his government. While answers were awaited, a truce prevailed until 5 June, with the British promising not to advance beyond their present positions.<sup>36</sup>

In the light of Kruger's earlier orders to Botha, he was highly unlikely to agree to any terms - even the generous ones Buller was offering. Like Kruger, Roberts took a much harder line on the surrender issue. In reply to Buller, Roberts declared that the Transvaal Government would have to surrender unconditionally and the burghers turn in their firearms, horses and sign a pledge not to fight again in the war before being allowed to go home. Roberts had none the less already made it possible for burghers, under certain circumstances, to surrender and return to their farms. In terms of Proclamation III issued on 15 March 1900,

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<sup>36</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 4 June 1900, pp. 84-86; Boscawen-Wright, p. 76.

burghers who had not taken a prominent part in the policy which led to the war, commanded forces in the Orange Free State, commandeered or used violence against any British subjects and were willing to lay down their arms at once, and bind themselves by an oath to abstain from further participation in the war, would be given free passes to allow them to return to their homes and would not be made prisoners of war, nor would their property be taken from them. In a later proclamation (Proclamation XIII) issued on 31 May 1900 in Johannesburg, applicable to the South African Republic, he made a similar offer. He did omit the undertaking 'nor would their property be taken from them'. Spies argues that this change was made because military exigencies did not always permit it to be honoured.<sup>37</sup> Chris Botha rejected Roberts's terms, conveyed to him by Buller on 5 June, as expected.<sup>38</sup> This was the same day on which Roberts entered Pretoria. Clearly the Boers' desire for freedom and independence was greater than the allure of generous peace terms.

Undoubtedly Kruger would have been angered by Botha's negotiations, having from the outset made his attitude very clear. Indeed his brother Louis too was displeased with the fact that his brother had negotiated with the British. Undaunted by the criticism, Chris Botha explained that he had done so to gain time, in order to speak to his men and also to re-organise some of his commandos. In fact in a telegram to Meyer he maintained

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<sup>37</sup> Cd. 458, Roberts to Buller, 3 June 1900, p. 87; Spies, pp. 34-50.

<sup>38</sup> Amery, IV, p. 184.

that, without the respite the positions would have been lost without a shot being fired. The Boers also took the opportunity to improve their trenches during this respite. The British saw them openly moving about and entrenching.<sup>39</sup> The truce was like manna from heaven for Chris Botha. It came just when large-scale desertions were occurring, when the commissariat was collapsing and when morale had reached new depths.

If this truce was of significant value to Chris Botha and his burghers, it was most decidedly appreciated by some of the British soldiers who had been very busy for a lengthy period of time. From 2 to 5 June most of these soldiers enjoyed a well-earned rest and the silence of the big guns was in itself refreshing. Some soldiers took the opportunity to get their kit in order, having been reduced to marching with just putties bound around their feet.<sup>40</sup>

Negotiations having failed, Buller was now left with four options. He could force his way past the Boers via Botha's Pass, via Lang's Nek or via Moll's Nek, or he could wait until Roberts's continued successes forced the Boers before him to retire into their republic to defend it. For a proud person like Buller the last option was hardly viable. He therefore had to choose between the three passes. Lang's Nek was obviously a very

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<sup>39</sup> Leyds 726(d), Tel. no. 85, C. Botha to Kruger, 2 June 1900 and Tel. no. 25, C. Botha to L. Botha, 3 June 1900; Leyds 726(e), Tel. no. 28, C. Botha to Meyer, 4 June 1900, T.A.; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. 4th Bde., 31 May 1900.

<sup>40</sup> Kearsley, P. 71.

strong position from a purely topographical point of view alone, while Moll's Nek lay in hilly, dangerous terrain. In effect, he therefore had no choice.

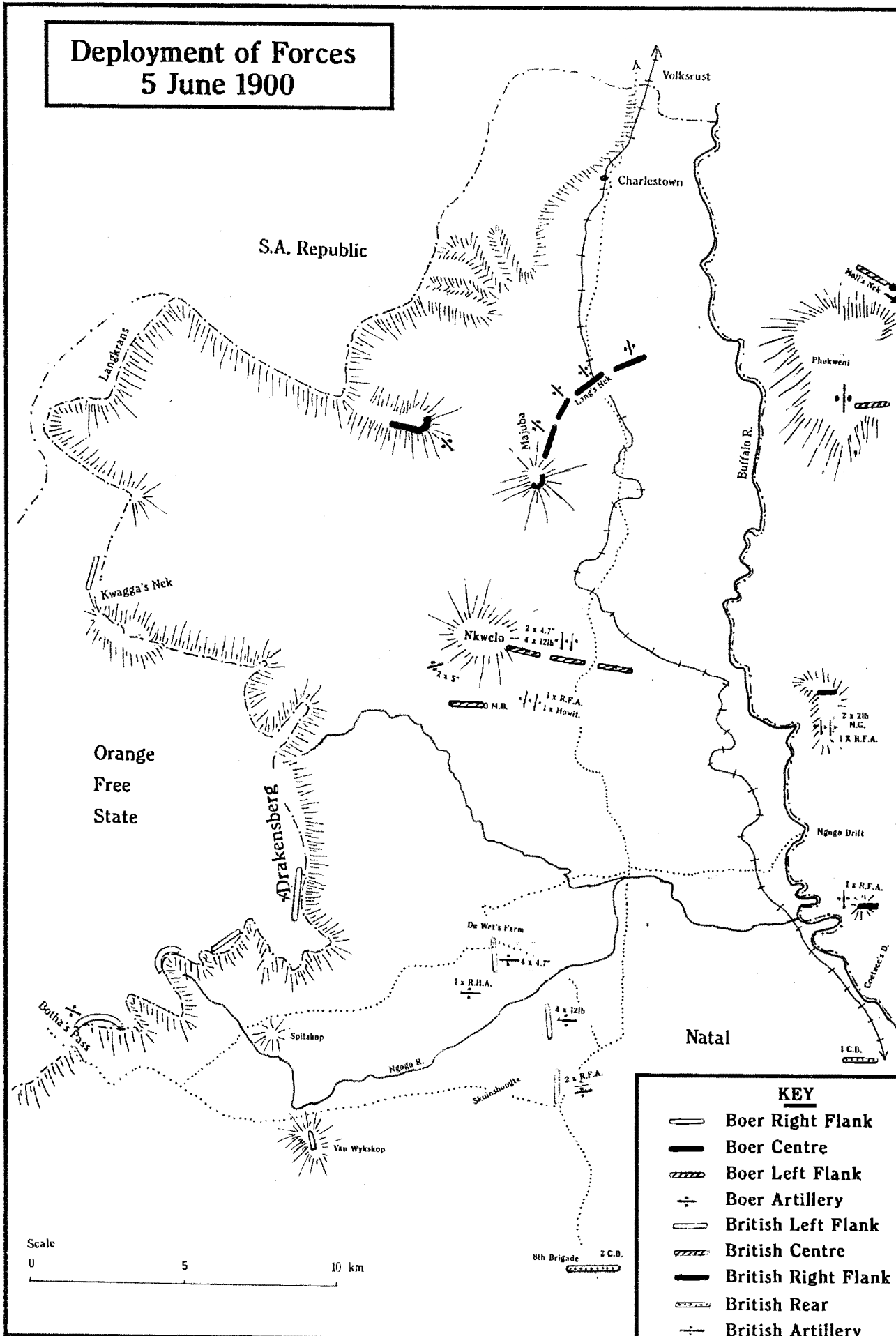
Even while the negotiations with the Boers had been in progress, Buller had anticipated their failure and had prepared for his next move - an attack on the Boer line at Botha's Pass. In planning an attack in this north-western corner of Natal, Buller had a distinct advantage. Having been there in 1881 immediately after hostilities had ceased, the area was well known to him. On 4 June he had informed Roberts that he intended to launch a turning movement to his left, to carry him over the Drakensberg and in behind Lang's Nek. He explained that he anticipated considerable opposition as he believed that some 4 000 Boers faced him. Undoubtedly he realized by now that the Boers had a morale problem, and so expected only half of them to fight.<sup>41</sup> Roberts cautioned that it was scarcely necessary to force himself onto the highveld at great cost, as Pretoria was already in British hands. None the less, Roberts did not prohibit Buller from attempting the turning movement. Buller was himself to judge whether, depending on the opposition encountered, action should be continued.<sup>42</sup> Roberts was not making it easy for Buller. The decision whether to attack or wait for the Boers to melt away was left with Buller, and the outcome would therefore be his ultimate

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<sup>41</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 269; Melville, I, p. 146; Roberts Papers T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 030, Roberts to Buller, 5 June 1900.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts Papers T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 030, Roberts to Buller, 5 June 1900.

# Deployment of Forces 5 June 1900



S.A. Republic

Orange Free State

Natal

KEY	
	Boer Right Flank
	Boer Centre
	Boer Left Flank
	Boer Artillery
	British Left Flank
	British Centre
	British Right Flank
	British Rear
	British Artillery

Scale  
0 5 10 km

8th Brigade 2 C.O.

responsibility.

During the negotiations with Chris Botha and the truce, Hildyard and Lyttelton had withdrawn from Utrecht and the Doornberg. By 5 June part of Buller's force was concentrated as follows: Newcastle was guarded by the 8th Brigade, while the right flank, comprising Coetzee's and Ingogo Drifts, was secured by Lyttelton's 7th Brigade, assisted by two 12 pounder naval guns and two batteries of field guns. The centre, facing Lang's Nek, was held by Clery's 4th Brigade, supported by two 5", two 4.7" guns, four naval twelve pounder guns and the 63th R.F.A. and 86th Howitzer batteries. Clery held a line from Nkwelo to the Newcastle-Lang's Nek road. On the left flank, close to De Wet's Farm, Hildyard's 5th Division was assisted by the 2nd Brigade and four 4.7" guns, four naval twelve pounder guns, the 13th and 69th R.F.A. batteries and the six R.H.A. guns. It is not certain where the cavalry was at this time, but it seems that the 3rd Mounted Brigade was near Nkwelo. The 2nd Cavalry Brigade was probably still patrolling the Buffalo River drifts from Vant's Drift to Stale's Drift, as they had been ordered to do on 25 May. Buller personally moved from Newcastle to Skuinshoogte on 5 June.<sup>43</sup> His was a truly impressive force, consisting of approximately 35 000 men, 96 guns and 41 machine guns. Facing approximately 4 000 burghers, with 2 guns under Fourie, 5 guns in the Lang's Nek area and the Long Tom on Phokweni. The Boer numbers can only be

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<sup>43</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 184-185; Cd. 458, No. 6, Buller to Sec for War, p. 88; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 271; FK 1776 T.A., W.O. 32/855, S.D. Natal Army, 28 May 1900 and S.D. 1 Cav. Bde., 28-31 May 1900.



approximations, for by this stage many burghers had deserted and there is no accurate record of the numbers still in position. Furthermore, no precise figure reflecting Boer artillery strength was ever located. One has to rely on evidence such as Erasmus's request for rail trucks to transport 5 guns from the Lang's Nek area, in trying to piece together the full picture.<sup>44</sup>

Buller had placed his forces with care to ensure he was protected on all sides. The greatest concentration of men and guns lay on his left flank where he intended launching a turning movement. There were however, so many men and guns placed at his centre as well as on his right, that the Boers were forced to occupy their entire line. They could not be certain where an attack would be made. Strategically, Buller was at considerable advantage, as his forces were relatively close together, holding the inner curve of a line in contrast to the Boers, having to defend the much longer outer curve of the line.

By now 21 days' supplies lay stockpiled in Newcastle. Thus from a British point of view the scene was perfectly set for their attempt to pierce the Boer defence line.<sup>45</sup> However, in the process of securing his right flank, repairing the damaged railway line, attempting to resolve his military obstacles by means of negotiations and of building up substantial supplies, Buller had allowed the Boers ample time once again to choose

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<sup>44</sup> Leyds 726(f), Tel. no. 30, Erasmus to Chef Charlestown, 8 June 1900, T.A.; Grobler, p. 95.

<sup>45</sup> Cd. 458, Buller for Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 88.

sound positions and properly entrench themselves. At Lang's Nek the Boers made a naturally powerful position even more daunting with rows of entrenchments and numerous gun emplacements.<sup>46</sup> As mentioned above, it is necessary to bear in mind that Buller could only safely launch a sustainable attack once the rail line was repaired and he had a sufficient stockpile of supplies - which was on about 28 May. It was thus only the negotiations and the truce that had provided the Boers with additional time to prepare themselves.

Considering the state of Boer morale and disarray of their commissariat on 28 May, a British attack at that time may have been successful. Buller was of course unlikely to have been aware of these circumstances immediately and could therefore not exploit them. However, his negotiations may be an indication that he suspected such a situation to exist and he tried to exploit it in a non-military way.

At this stage Buller had clear-cut numerical and psychological advantages. Even strategically, he had certain advantages. The time for decisive action was at hand.

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<sup>46</sup> Knox, pp. 269-270.

## Chapter 6. BOTHA'S PASS

By 5 June the British force had made all possible preparations for launching their next attack against the Boers, who were securely entrenched in their mountain fastnesses. The peace negotiations failed to provide the desired results and Buller was again obliged to resort to a military solution. Therefore, soon after receiving the negative response to his peace terms, he left Newcastle, making for his left flank at Skuinshoogte. There he ordered Hildyard, encamped at De Wet's Farm, to occupy Van Wykskop the following morning.<sup>1</sup> This command was to set in motion a movement which would hopefully carry the British force via Botha's Pass over the Drakensberg onto the highveld. Once there, they would be able to threaten Erasmus and Chris Botha from the rear at Lang's Nek.

The topographic features at Botha's Pass under Boer control gave them significant strategic advantages. The slopes up the Drakensberg to the Boer positions were long, between 300 and 500 metres in altitude, and mostly very steep - in places, unscalably so. Generally the Drakensberg runs along a line from south to north, but at the pass the line makes a bulge to the west. Within the curve, lying east of the mountains, there is a large, relatively flat basin. The eastern entrance to the basin is dominated by Van Wykskop, a hill which in turn is attached to a spur stretching southwards, linking up with the Drakensberg where the southern part of the curve begins. This spur and Van Wykskop block off easy access to the basin from the east and south-east.

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<sup>1</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 88.

North-west of Van Wykskop is the free-standing, conical Spitskop. Spitskop and Van Wykskop, overlooking the north-eastern entrance to the basin as they do, were of strategic value to anyone wishing to gain access to the Drakensberg in the Botha's Pass area.

In pursuance of his instructions, Hildyard ordered Major-General Talbot Coke to reconnoitre Van Wykskop to find suitable naval gun positions on it. Early the following morning the S.A.L.H. Middlesex Regiment and 13th R.F.A. battery accompanied by Coke, departed from De Wet's Farm, making for Van Wykskop.<sup>2</sup> This action was the first indication of where the next attack was likely to be made. Buller, to the last moment, kept the place of this intended attack a closely guarded secret. Both the British soldiers and burghers were expecting an attack to be made. However, with the large British forces spread over a vast area, neither the soldiers nor burghers knew where it would be made.<sup>3</sup> The Boers on the right flank, at Botha's Pass, had anticipated an attack immediately on expiry of the truce, but nothing transpired.<sup>4</sup>

The key position of Van Wykskop was held by a mere 25 burghers. When these men noted the size of the force headed in their

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<sup>2</sup> Amery, IV, p. 186; T.T. Jeans, (ed.), Naval Brigades in the South African War, p. 285; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> Trooper H.G. Bizley Diary, 5 June 1900; Jeans, p. 285; Leyds 726(e), Tel. no. 21, Erasmus to Kruger, 5 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>4</sup> A 850 C.H.K., Diary of J.H. Janson, 6 June 1900, T.A.

direction, they offered a mere token resistance before retiring, thus permitting the S.A.L.H., numbering between 400 and 500, to take possession of this strategic position with ease.<sup>5</sup> Their failure to occupy Van Wykskop with an effective force enabled the British force to take a major step towards threatening the Boer position at Botha's Pass.

The Boers, realising the consequences of their error, launched a spirited counter-attack. Their only sizeable piece of artillery in the area, a 75mm Creusot, was brought into position and opened fire. From a northerly direction both Carolina and Lydenburg burghers opened fire at long range, with their rifles, while from the south-west, Carolina men advanced on Van Wykskop. To create cover for themselves, the Boers set fire to the tinder dry veld and advanced under cover of the smoke. However, the reconnaissance party under Lieutenant-Colonel G.J.H. Byng, commander of the S.A.L.H., stood fast against the spirited, but not particularly resolute, counter-attack. When the counter-attack began, the Middlesex Regiment were some distance east of Van Wykskop, as were the 13th R.F.A. guns.<sup>6</sup> During the afternoon only after the S.A.L.H. had been under fire for several hours, did the Middlesex Regiment reinforce them. The intensity of the Boer counter-attack alerted Hildyard to the fact that, to vacate Van Wykskop and recapture it sometime in the future, might well

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 12 and 14, T.A.; Amery, IV, p. 186; Leyds 726(f), Tel. no. 2, C. Botha to Kruger, 7 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>6</sup> A 850 C.H.K., Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.; Amery, IV, p. 186; Jeans, p. 286; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 89; Grobler, p. 91.

be a costly exercise. Wisely, he decided to turn his reconnaissance force into one of occupation. When darkness fell the Boers retired, leaving Van Wykskop securely in British hands.<sup>7</sup> The Boer counter-attack was never really threatening, for the S.A.L.H. suffered only four wounded and the infantry one killed and five wounded. The Boers reported one burgher, Nicolaas van Loggerenberg, killed.<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, Buller realised that it was important to consolidate his gain rapidly and then to exploit it, before the Boers could shift too many reinforcements onto their right flank. Consequently there was considerable activity during the night of 6 to 7 June, the remainder of the 10th Brigade, the 2nd Dorsetshires and 1st Dublin Fusiliers moving from De Wet's Farm closer to Van Wykskop.<sup>9</sup> During the afternoon Captain E.P. Jones, commander of the Naval Brigade, located suitable sites on Van Wykskop for 12 pounder naval guns. As he returned to his guns at or near De Wet's Farm, he encountered Lieutenant A. Halsey with two 12 pounders, already ordered forward, proceeding towards Geelboom Farm, a position just east of Van Wykskop. At 19:00 Jones received orders to position Lieutenant C.R.N. Burne's two twelve pounders on Van Wykskop by daylight, and two 4.7" guns just

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<sup>7</sup> Amery, IV, p. 186. There is no record of how long the S.A.L.H. were under fire, prior to being joined by the Middlesex Regiment.

<sup>8</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 89; A 850 C.H.K., II, Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, 8 June 1900, p. 5, T.A. Van Rensburg's diary is not subdivided into dates and therefore only the page number will be provided for reference purposes.

<sup>9</sup> Knox. p. 258.

east of that hill, but hidden from the enemy view.

They soon set off with these guns, but the numerous drifts made the going very slow and fatiguing. As they approached Van Wykskop they encountered veld fires, still blazing from the previous day. They proved both a blessing and a curse, providing some light, but at the same time distressing the oxen, making them difficult to control. At 04:00 the final gully before the ascent up Van Wykskop was reached, but here Jones was confronted with a new problem. Where he descended the hill the previous day, all the grass had been burnt, causing the disappearance of the landmarks he had mentally noted. However, Colonel Sim, Royal Engineers, having earlier prepared a rudimentary track to the summit, joined Burne and assisted him to find his way. Each gun was drawn by 32 oxen. In the biting cold, the gunners, not having had a scrap of food or rest since departing, laboured on. As the final, but particularly steep section was tackled in the early dawn, the wheel of one gun gave way and it had to be abandoned. The other gun reached its destination exactly at daylight, by which time there was sniping at the north-west crest and slope of Van Wykskop. The gun was immediately set up in an emplacement by the Royal Engineers and it opened fire on a Boer encampment visible on the Drakensberg some six kilometres away. As the camp appeared deserted, firing ceased after a while and the gunners lay down for a short, but well earned rest in the freezing wind sweeping the hill.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 88; Cd. 142, Naval Brigade in South Africa, 14 June 1900, p. 36; Jeans, pp. 286-287; Burne, pp. 66-67.

In addition to the units and artillery already mentioned, there were other large scale movements on the left flank, all in preparation for a massive assault on the Boer right flank on Friday 8 June. The 2nd Cavalry Brigade, the 11th Brigade without the 1st York and Lancaster Regiment, the 13th and 69th R.F.A. batteries congregated at Geelboom Farm, and Hildyard established his headquarters there. The S.A.L.H., on retiring from Van Wykskop, joined this force. Van Wykskop was further reinforced by the arrival of two 4.7" guns and a 12 pounder naval gun. The latter was the gun that broke a wheel during its initial ascent. Hard work ensured its speedy return to action. During the course of the day the trail of the first 12 pounder to reach Van Wykskop broke, but his gun too, was repaired before the day was up. A little further east of Van Wykskop, on Skuinshoogte were two 5" guns, two 4.7" and two 12 pounders guns. The naval guns were guarded by the York and Lancaster Regiment. These six guns were positioned so as to fire at the Boers on or near Nkweloane, as were two 5" guns, placed on a southern spur of Nkwelo. Dundonald, with his R.H.A., the T.M.I. and Composite Regiment, took up a position near these guns, from where he looked south over the Harte River and towards Geelboom Farm. Near the junction of the Botha's Pass road and Newcastle-Charlestown road was the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, with the 7th, 64th and 61st (howitzers) batteries R.F.A. two maxims (pom-poms) and Hamilton's 2nd Brigade.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 89; Cd. 142, Jones to Buller, 14 June 1900, p. 36; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 270-271; Amery, IV, pp. 186-187; C. Burnett, The 18th Hussars in South Africa, p. 87; Kearsley, p. 71; Burne, pp. 66-68; Jeans, pp. 287-288; Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, S.R.O. GD



Buller played an active role in the preparations. At approximately 09:00 he arrived on Van Wykskop, intent on studying the area where the next attack was to be made, undaunted by the bitter cold which turned his lips blue. With the aid of the gunners' telescope he scanned the Drakensberg, from Botha's Pass in the west to the north-west and north of Van Wykskop. The slopes he saw included many folds and numerous spurs jutted into the basin that separated him from the Drakensberg. All was quiet in the basin and along the Boer positions. Having gained a satisfactory picture of what awaited his men during the next attack, Buller departed. At that instant the Boers launched an audacious attack from the spurs, advancing in skirmishing order, followed by ambulances and a gun mounted on a wagon. The fire-power they faced was overwhelming. The British naval guns immediately responded to this sudden threat and after knocking over some horsemen caused the Boers to retire. Within minutes all trace of the Boer attack had disappeared. Buller congratulated his gunners on their accurate and effective fire.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that prior to launching their attack, the Boers were unaware that the British had managed to place long range artillery on Van Wykskop during the night. They would therefore have been taken by surprise by the fire, and that would explain why they so quickly broke off their attack. Under the circumstances they had no option but to retire. Even though the gun mounted on the wagon was an effective 75mm Creusot, the British naval guns had a significantly longer range.

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233/124/2, 'Operation 3rd Mtd. Bde. 6-13 June 1900.'

<sup>12</sup> Burne, pp. 67-68.

Understandably the Boers failed to mount another attack that day.

The gunners with the 12 pounders on Van Wykskop still had much work to do that day, as their ammunition wagons could only be brought halfway up the slope. From there everything had to be carried to the summit. Both guns had one hundred shells, each weighing 5,7 kilograms carried to it, along with the powder required to launch the projectiles. During the course of the morning the long-range guns on Van Wykskop, as well as those near Geelboom Farm shelled the dongas near the Drakensberg and the ridge near Botha's Pass.<sup>13</sup> The artillery does not appear to have been aimed at specific targets. It was more of a speculative barrage and one to discourage the Boers from mounting any further counter-attacks. The rapid consolidation of the successful capture of Van Wykskop ensured that the Boers were unable to reverse their loss.

While these preparations were under way on the British left flank, Clery kept up a desultory long range artillery barrage along the British centre, firing on Majuba, Lang's Nek and Phokweni. The Boers replied to this fire, especially with their Long Tom. Trooper H.G. Bizley, with the Volunteer Composite Regiment, described the Long Tom operating at long range: "Long Tom firing - first puff of smoke from gun then report, then puff of smoke in air (shrapnel bursting) then sound of shell travelling and final sound of shrapnel bursting. Forty one

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<sup>13</sup> Burne, p. 68; D.D. Hall, "The Naval Guns in Natal 1899-1900". Military History Journal, IV, 3 June 1978, p. 81; Cd. 142, Jones to Buller, 14 June 1900.

seconds from puff of smoke from Long Tom till puff of smoke in air when shell burst." Although generally ineffective, the long range Long Tom fire seriously wounded one officer that day.<sup>14</sup> The mere presence of Clery's and Lyttelton's forces ensured that the Boers remained in their positions, in and around Lang's Nek, to prevent a British breakthrough there. By maintaining a long line of positions, Buller kept the Boers guessing as to the next point of attack, thereby forcing the Boers to stretch their limited resources very thinly.

A paucity of sources makes it extremely difficult to establish a precise picture of the Boers' activities on the right flank and what their morale was like on 7 June. From their elevated positions they must have been painfully aware of most of Buller's preparations. The sheer weight of British troops and artillery massing close to them was surely daunting, if not frightening. That, taken together with the knowledge of British successes in the Transvaal and mass desertions from the Lang's Nek area, must have stretched to the limit the will to resist in this isolated corner of the defence line. Chris Botha, in a telegram to his brother Louis on 2 June, had already mentioned that the Carolina and Lydenburg burghers had felt aggrieved by the mass desertions from the other commandos.<sup>15</sup>

With British infantry, cavalry and artillery already or almost

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<sup>14</sup> Trooper H.G. Bizley Diary, 7 June 1900; Amery, IV, p. 189.

<sup>15</sup> Leyds 726(d), Tel. no. 31, C. Botha to L. Botha, 2 June 1900, T.A.

in position, ready for an attack on Botha's Pass and Buller having already viewed the terrain over which the assault was to be made, he began issuing the necessary orders for an assault on Boer positions. Hildyard was to command the main attack to be made by the 11th Brigade led by Major-General A.S. Wynne, with the 13th and 69th batteries supporting. Wynne was to be supported by E.O.F. Hamilton's 2nd Brigade, aided by the 7th and 64th R.F.A. batteries and the 61st howitzer battery. While they were attacking, Major-General Talbot Coke with the 10th Brigade and the four naval guns, would hold Van Wykskop. The big guns on Van Wykskop, as well as the 5" guns on the spurs of Nkwelo were to sweep the Boer-held crest line along the Drakensberg. Buller anticipated that this fire would contain any artillery which the burghers might try to bring into action against his forces.<sup>16</sup> In support of the main attack Dundonald was to advance along the De Wet's Farm-Spitskop-Botha's Pass road. He was to take the R.H.A. with him and his purpose should be "to cover the right flank of the force, consisting of General Hildyard's Division and the Second Brigade which will be attacking Botha's Pass by the main road."<sup>17</sup> On the left flank the infantry would be covered by a squadron of the S.A.L.H., while another squadron was to seize Spitskop.<sup>18</sup> In instructions from Buller to Clery, ordering the transfer of certain units of infantry, cavalry and

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<sup>16</sup> Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, S.R.O. GD 233/124/2, Buller to Clery, 7 June 1900; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 270-271. Regrettably no complete instructions from Buller to Hildyard were found.

<sup>17</sup> Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, S.R.O. GD 233/124/2, Buller to Dundonald, 7 June 1900.

<sup>18</sup> Amery, IV, p. 187.

artillery to the left flank, Buller gave no express orders on how the British centre and right were to act during the planned attack. By the same token no restriction was placed on either Lyttelton's or Clery's forces. One assumes therefore that if they could support Hildyard's force, be it with artillery fire or feints, they were at liberty to do so. Earlier in the war, during the battle of Spioenkop, Clery had under similar circumstances failed to take aggressive and adventurous action at Ntabamnyama.<sup>19</sup> Buller must therefore have realised that he was unlikely to attempt anything beyond the necessary, now. By late on 7 June Buller had made all the necessary arrangements for the attack to commence on the Boer right flank the next morning.

The main Boer positions ran along a north-easterly line, the extreme right of which began at Botha's Pass. The pass lay almost directly west of Van Wykskop, about 7 1/2 kilometres away. At a point directly north of Van Wykskop, and about four kilometres distant, the Drakensberg and therefore also the Boer positions, swung directly north, towards Nkweloane.<sup>20</sup> For the British artillery, infantry and cavalry to advance beyond Van Wykskop in order to deploy before commencing their assault on the Boers' Drakensberg position, they would have to contend with topographical difficulties. The gap between Van Wykskop and the Drakensberg was so narrow that the British would have to pass

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<sup>19</sup> Amery, III, pp. 260 and 297-298.

<sup>20</sup> Nkweloane is referred to as Spioenkop on the 1:50 000 topographical maps. In all the Anglo-Boer literature this feature is however called Nkweloane and will therefore also be known by that name in this dissertation.

within 3 1/2 kilometres of the Boer line and, at most times, would be exposed. If the Boers held Spitskop, they would only be just over two kilometres from the advancing British. Under these circumstances one imagines Buller would rely heavily on his strategically placed long range artillery, to create an efficient protective screen.

Mid winter was rapidly approaching and especially the night temperatures steadily declined. As the war zone shifted up to the higher altitudes of the Drakensberg and its foothills, the biting night chill became ever more acute and eventually warmer clothes were released from their respective stores for the burghers and British soldiers alike. Private Tucker was of the opinion that they should have received them a month before they did, bitterly commenting that it was their colonel who delayed their issue because he "liked us to wear our khaki as we could wash it and so appear clean - he had no regard for our health and comfort."<sup>21</sup> So cold was it on Van Wykskop that some soldiers covered themselves with either grass or soil in an effort to keep warm, not everyone having been issued with blankets.<sup>22</sup> No doubt, the Boers at a higher altitude were having to endure even lower temperatures.

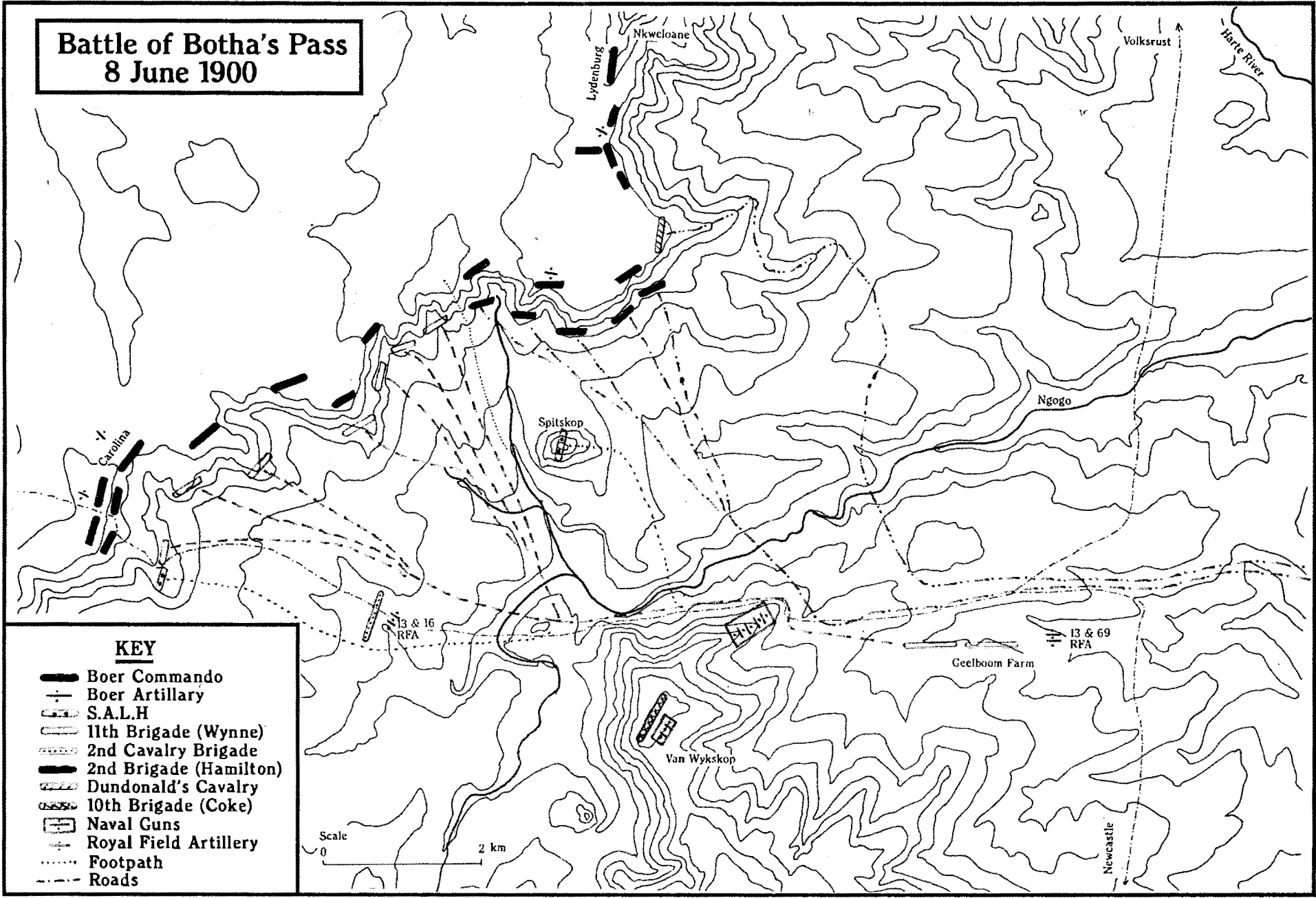
Early on 8 June the Carolina and Lydenburg burghers noted the British forces pressing ahead with their preparations for the

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<sup>21</sup> Todd and Fordham (eds.) p. 109; Leyds 726(f), Tel. no. 26, Von Wichmann to Lt. Malan, 7 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>22</sup> C.T. Atkinson, The Dorsetshire Regiment, II, p. 77.

# Battle of Botha's Pass 8 June 1900



## KEY

- Boer Commando
- Boer Artillery
- S.A.L.H
- 11th Brigade (Wynne)
- 2nd Cavalry Brigade
- 2nd Brigade (Hamilton)
- Dundonald's Cavalry
- 10th Brigade (Coke)
- Naval Guns
- Royal Field Artillery
- Footpath
- Roads

Scale  
0 2 km

launching of an attack on their positions on the Drakensberg.<sup>23</sup> Being outnumbered and outgunned there was nothing they could do about it. As the final preparations were made, Hildyard, at daylight gathered his senior cavalry, infantry and artillery officers on Van Wykskop, from where they had an uninterrupted view of the battlefield, and pointed out the lines along which they were to advance.<sup>24</sup> Hildyard ordered Spitskop to be captured by the S.A.L.H. to clear the way for the advancing infantry, in particular those units making for the more level ground west of it. Due west of Spitskop was a clearly visible track leading to the escarpment. This was to be the dividing line between the attacking infantry units with the 11th Brigade remaining to the left of it and the 2nd Brigade to the right.<sup>25</sup>

Viewing the battleground in such detail before the attack's commencement, enabled the officers to plan and discuss tactics and strategy in detail. Each senior officer would go into battle with a clear picture of the battlefield in his mind, and knowing precisely what was expected of him and also the roles the other units would play. Regrettably no detailed record survives of decisions taken early that morning on Van Wykskop, to establish whether or not the attack went "according to plan".

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<sup>23</sup> A 850 C.H.K., II, Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, p. 5 (no date) and VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A..

<sup>24</sup> It is uncertain who these senior officers were, but it is quite possible that Major-Generals E.O.F. Hamilton, A.S, Wynne, Talbot Coke, J.F. Brocklehurst and Lord Dundonald were among them.

<sup>25</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 89.



The situation existing just prior to this attack had numerous similarities to that just before the British forces made their final assault in the Thukela Heights. On that occasion too there was a great numerical imbalance, the Boers and British had their artillery in elevated positions, the Boers were entrenched on high ground and the British forces were planning to attack from below. The major differences were the absence of Louis Botha's energetic and effective leadership, and the fact that on this occasion Buller intended using cavalry in an active role. Boer morale too may have been lower, although it too was a problem at the Thukela Heights.

The British attack commenced at 10:00 with an artillery bombardment. Shells bursting in or over one of the Carolina encampments forced them to strike their tents, and take them to a safer place, somewhat further back.<sup>26</sup> The Boers also withdrew their guns further back to safer positions once the bombardment commenced. While the burghers were still busy transferring their tents and guns, they received reports that a large British force was advancing on their positions. This prompted the Carolina men to hasten to their trenches. They held the right flank, with a considerable concentration of men near Botha's Pass itself, most of these men belonged to Wards two and three of the commando, while the Lydenburgers held the left flank. Precisely where the commandos met is not known. The Lydenburgers' positions stretched to Nkweloane. Soon after shelling commenced, the squadron of

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<sup>26</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 89; A 850 C.H.K., VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.; Jeans, p. 289.

S.A.L.H. detailed to capture Spitskop, took possession of it without opposition. They managed to drag a Vickers-Maxim with them onto the summit. The Boers did not reply to the British bombardment as initially the long range precluded them from doing so.<sup>27</sup> Thus the "door" into the basin was now open.

At about 11:00 Wynne's 11th (Lancashire) Brigade, advancing from Geelboom Farm, along the Ngogo - Botha's Pass road, passed through the deep cutting between Van Wykskop and Spitskop and emerged in the broad basin to the west of it, where it rapidly deployed. On the extreme left flank of this Brigade was the squadron of the S.A.L.H. The 11th Brigade were able to deploy in the shelter created for them by the intensely heavy shellfire coming from the guns on Van Wykskop, those on its reverse slopes, the 5" guns on Nkwelo and the 13th and 69th R.F.A. batteries in position immediately behind Wynne's men.<sup>28</sup>

As the 11th Brigade advanced from Geelboom farm, so did Hamilton's 2nd Brigade, from Skuinshoogte. They took up their position immediately east of Wynne's men. The British infantry line had a front of about 6 1/2 kilometres facing towards the Drakensberg in a north-westerly direction. No exact details regarding the distances between the lines is available, but a

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<sup>27</sup> A 850 C.H.K., VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900 and II, Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, p. 5, T.A.; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 89; Burnett, p. 87; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 271.

<sup>28</sup> Cd. 142, Jones to Buller, 14 June 1900, pp. 36-37; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 89; Amery, IV, p. 187.

photograph of the troops deploying, suggests it varied between approximately 20 and 40 metres.<sup>29</sup> Every effort was therefore made to limit casualties, should strong resistance be encountered. The close order tactics employed by Major-General A.F. Hart in the battle of Colenso were certainly a thing of the past and the costly lessons learnt, had been remembered. The left flank headed for Botha's Pass. On the right flank Hamilton was joined by Dundonald with the T.M.I., Composite Regiment, six colt guns and the battery of R.H.A. Dundonald found that the De Wet's Farm-Spitskop-Botha's Pass road he originally intended following, passed too close to the occupied Drakensberg and therefore decided to take a slightly more southerly route. As Dundonald linked up with the 2nd Brigade whose right flank he was to cover, he found himself facing a spur coming from the Drakensberg in a south-easterly direction. It is at this point that the mountain range makes a sharp turn from its north-easterly line to one heading directly due north, towards Nkweloane.<sup>30</sup>

At approximately 13:00 the British attack commenced, with the 11th Brigade passing west of Spitskop and the 2nd Brigade east of it.<sup>31</sup> For between one and three kilometres, depending on which unit one was with, the advance was over easy terrain. Once the Drakensberg was reached the climb became extremely steep and progress was slow. Fortunately for the advancing soldiers the

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<sup>29</sup> With the Flag to Pretoria, XXIX, p. 682.

<sup>30</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 271; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, pp. 89-90; Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, S.R.O. GD 233/124/2, 'Operation 3rd Mtd Bde 6-13 June 1900'.

<sup>31</sup> Kearsley, p. 72; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 271.

continual artillery barrage kept the burghers off the forward crest line, thereby permitting them to advance in safety.

It was on the right flank that progress was most rapid. Here Dundonald sent the T.M.I. up the spur where the Drakensberg took a sharply northerly turn. Arriving on the summit they encountered a few Boers, but with little difficulty drove them off. As soon as the T.M.I. had secured their position, Dundonald followed with the rest of his brigade. The brigade was 700 strong at that stage. Once there, he noted that Nkweloane, lying directly due north, was extensively entrenched and strongly held. However, the trenches faced east, into the Harte River valley and by shifting slightly to his left, Dundonald would be able to enfilade them. He rapidly had six colt guns which had been brought to the summit, shifted to his left, and opened fire on the Boers there, some 2,3 kilometres away. The range was extreme, but the concentrated fire of the six colt guns caused the Boers to vacate their positions and head north in 'large numbers'.<sup>32</sup> Regrettably, Dundonald has left no precise record of what he meant by 'large numbers'.

There were no Boers on Dundonald's immediate left to threaten him. Any there may have been, had already retired, possibly to escape the shelling or when they saw the infantry advancing on them. The absence of Boers in this particular area, the ease with which the T.M.I. were allowed to gain a foothold on the

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<sup>32</sup> Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, GD 233/124/2, 'Operation 3rd Mtd Bde 6-13 June 1900'; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, p. 90; Dundonald, p. 161.

Drakensberg and the failure of the burghers on or near Nkweloane to launch a timely counter-attack, allowed the 3rd Mounted Brigade to take up a position from where they could move to either right or left, and enfilade Boer positions in either direction. It is somewhat puzzling that the Boers on or near Nkweloane, probably members of the Lydenburg commando, did not launch a counter-attack against the T.M.I. or even against Dundonald's entire force before the colt guns were brought to the summit. The T.M.I. were certainly vulnerable for a time, and it must have been clear to every burgher that if the British were allowed to gain a grip on the summit, their trenches would be of no use, as they would be enfiladed. Again, as at Helpmekeer, there was a lack of courageous and resilient leadership.

The Mounted Brigade's swift, effective action secured the 2nd Brigade's right flank, and soon after the Boers retired from Nkweloane the infantrymen arrived on Dundonald's left. It would appear that the entire forward infantry line, from where Dundonald was, to near Botha's Pass, breached the summit at much the same time - approximately 15:00.<sup>33</sup> Apparently the only person killed during the ascent of the Drakensberg was a black man who appeared to be signalling to the Boers. When he noted how close the British forces were to his homestead, from which flew a white flag, he ran down the mountain towards his home. He was, however, shot at and killed.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, GD 233/124/2, 'Operation 3rd Mtd Bde 6-13 June'; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 90; Amery, IV, p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> Kearsey, p. 73.

The appearance of the British troops over the crest line was the moment some burghers had waited for. With the soldiers slightly out of breath after the steep, long climb and therefore for a while unable to deliver a steady, accurate fire, the Boers opened fire on them with rifles, two pom-poms and a 75mm Creusot gun. Initially, only an occasional soldier was visible to them, but the numbers steadily increased. The Boers fired from the natural folds in the ground, or trenches they occupied, situated a little distance from the crest line. The Boers were between 500 and 1 500 metres from where the British came into view.<sup>35</sup> Hamilton's men appear to have encountered the sharpest resistance and were initially checked. However, the Boers offering resistance to the 2nd Brigade, soon found their position untenable. On their right the South Lancashires of the 11th Brigade managed to drive the Boers before them back, and therefore threatened to outflank and cut off the burghers resisting the 2nd Brigade. To create cover these Boers set the veld alight, forcing the South Lancashires to retire and enabling them to re-occupy their trenches partially for a while, so that they could cover the withdrawal of their guns and wagons.

Meanwhile on the left flank of the Boer resisters a new threat appeared. Dundonald's men came into action with two R.H.A. guns which, with double teams of horses, they had managed to drag to the summit. These guns focused their attention on the pom-poms

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<sup>35</sup> A 850 C.H.K., VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.; Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, S.R.O. GD 233/124/2, 'Operation 3rd Mtd Bde 6-13 June 1900'; Amery, IV, pp. 187-188; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 90.

in the area, and soon silenced them. By 16:00 Boer resistance against the 2nd Brigade had ceased, the British having brought pressure to bear on both the Boer front and flanks. As had become the custom, these burghers made good their retreat under cover of smoke swirling up from the mass of grassfires they lit along the crest of the Drakensberg.<sup>36</sup>

Simultaneously to the Boer left flank coming under infantry attack, so did their right flank. Here the Carolina burghers hurried back to their trenches on hearing the British were advancing. Hardly had the burghers reached their trenches, when the first soldiers of the 11th Brigade came into view. All the time shells were continuously bursting. Added to this noise, was the firing from Lee-Metford and Mauser rifles. The crescendo of noise prompted J.H.Janson to describe it as "'t Werd waarlyk een helsch lawaai!".<sup>37</sup> In this sector too, the Boers for a while offered considerable resistance, but they were outgunned by the artillery and numerically overwhelmed. Ward two and three burghers of the Carolina commando massed together in and around Botha's Pass, saw a section of the British infantry line make directly for them. It was between 300 and 500 metres from them when it came into view in relatively open terrain. Despite the concentration of Boers in this area, the British advance continued relentlessly, forcing the Boers to retire. A little

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<sup>36</sup> Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, S.R.O. GD 233/124/2, 'Operation 3rd Mtd Bde 6-13 June 1900', Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 90; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 271-272; Amery, IV, pp. 187-188.

<sup>37</sup> A 850 C.H.K. VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.

further right, the York and Lancasters advanced, and were also subjected to fairly heavy fire - Mauser bullets, pom-pom and field-gun shells. Despite the fire, they maintained an unbroken line and a steady pace. Here too the Boers were forced to retire - again under cover of veld fires and smoke.<sup>38</sup> By 16:00 the British forces had taken possession of a section of the Drakensberg, some nine kilometres long. The Carolina and Lydenburg commandos were now in full retreat, heading either north, north-west or westward, and always setting the veld alight behind them to impede any pursuers.<sup>39</sup>

The 2nd Cavalry Brigade and 13th and 69th R.F.A. batteries followed slowly in the wake of the left flank of the 11th Brigade, making their way towards Botha's Pass. As soon as the Pass was in British hands, the cavalry and artillery were ordered up the steep and winding road to the summit. The last stretch of road was exceptionally steep and stony, hampering progress. When the head of the pass was reached, they found their view onto the plains beyond severely impeded by undispersed smoke. Nevertheless, the first four guns to arrive at the top opened fire at the Boer artillery just visible in the distance, the Boers soon withdrawing with their guns. Efforts to catch up to and close with the fleeing Boers, made by the S.A.L.H., which had crossed the mountains just south of the Pass in their initial attack, and the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, over a distance of some 6

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<sup>38</sup> Kearsley, pp. 73-75; A 850 C.H.K., II, Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, p. 5 and VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.

<sup>39</sup> Maurice, III, p. 272; Kearsley, p. 75; Burnett, p. 88.



kilometres, were unsuccessful.<sup>40</sup> The British forces had dislodged the Boer right flank with ease, and were now in a position to advance into the Orange River Colony.<sup>41</sup> Here the going would be far easier over a gentle rolling countryside and only now would many a British soldier understand why Roberts had been able to cover such exceptional distances. Nature had not impeded him and exhausted his men and their animals.

Hildyard's force of approximately 10 000 men and 45 pieces of artillery had gained easy success in an area well suited to fighting a defensive action.<sup>42</sup> His success can be ascribed to a number of factors. Numerically, in both artillery and men, he possessed a massive superiority and he took full advantage of this by attacking on a broad front - thus increasing the chances of finding a weakness somewhere in the Boer defensive line. By attacking on a broad rather than a narrow front, he prevented the Boers from pooling their resources to defend with strength a small area. Furthermore, by spacing his men well apart, he reduced his losses to a minimum - a tactic which Janson of the Carolina commando saw fit to comment on. The artillery was put to effective use, providing covering fire as the attack developed and by being dragged up the steep mountain very rapidly in two

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<sup>40</sup> Kearsey, p. 75; Burnett pp. 87-88; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 90; A 850 C.H.K., II, Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, p. 5, T.A.

<sup>41</sup> Breytenbach, V, p. 519. On 24 May 1900 Roberts issued a proclamation annexing the Orange Free State and renamed it the Orange River Colony. This proclamation was only made known on 28 May 1900. Spies, p. 60.

<sup>42</sup> The 10 000 men does not include those on Van Wykskop.

places to assist the infantry. On the right flank this assistance was of material consequence just when required. The R.H.A. came into action as the infantry became pinned down. To ensure that no Boer reinforcements were sent from Lang's Nek, Clery's guns kept up a steady bombardment throughout the day.<sup>43</sup> In a telegram to Roberts that evening Buller was full of praise, stating:

General Hildyard to-day assaulted all the spurs of the berg between Botha's Pass and (Nkweloane), the attack which was well planned by General Hildyard and carried out with immense dash by the troops for whom no mountains were too steep outflanked the enemy who were forced to retire from their very strong positions... I hope I have obtained a position (from) which I can render Laing's Nek untenable."<sup>44</sup>

Buller was clearly a happy man and an optimistic one too.

That the Boers, with only about 1 000 men and three guns, stood their ground at all is surprising, though it is evident that tactical errors were made. The most serious one was allowing Dundonald's T.M.I. to gain a foothold almost uncontested. This lapse was compounded by the burghers on or near Nkweloane. Conscious that no force lay directly before or east of them, and noting that the T.M.I., by taking up positions to the south, would be able to enfilade their trenches, they made very little or no effort to take any action against this threatening development. Once the colt guns were there, it was too late. Elsewhere along the firing line it would appear that little could

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<sup>43</sup> Burne, pp. 68-69.

<sup>44</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, No Tel. no., Buller to Roberts, 8 June 1900.

be done to check the advance of an overwhelmingly superior British force.

The British pursuers, unable to close in anywhere on the fleeing Boers, returned to a position near the crest line. The 3rd Mounted Brigade and most of the infantry settled down to rest on the escarpment. Sleep was very unlikely, as it was bitterly cold, with dense, moist mist about and most men were without greatcoats or blankets. The 2nd Brigade returned to a homestead at the foot of the pass.<sup>45</sup> The Boers continued to make good their retreat under the cover of darkness. They too spent a miserable and cold night.

Boer casualties were only five wounded and all or most of these were eventually taken to Volksrust in a Swiss ambulance, there to be cared for kindly by a Hollander, Van Gelden. During the battle of Botha's Pass British soldiers captured an ambulance serving the Carolina commando. This ambulance was manned by Drs Neethling and Luther, both Cape Afrikaners.<sup>46</sup> There is no mention of their capture in British sources. British casualties too were very slight - two killed and fourteen wounded. These casualties consisted of five West Lancashiremen, four York and Lancasters, one T.M.I. and one South Lancashireman.<sup>47</sup> Limited casualties on both sides underlines the lack of significant Boer

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<sup>45</sup> Burnett, p. 88; Kearsley, pp. 75-76.

<sup>46</sup> Penning, p. 751; A 850 C.H.K., VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.

<sup>47</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 0983, Buller to Roberts, 10 June 1900.

resistance.

That night between 19:30 and 20:00 orders were received on Van Wykskop for the 10th Brigade and four naval guns to come off the summit. The gunners sprang into action, loading the guns, ammunition and all other equipment onto wagons, inspanned the oxen and moved to a gully where they were to be assisted by the Dublin Fusiliers. Being pitch dark however, the Dublins lost their way and spent the rest of the night stumbling about, trying to find the guns. The gunners waited patiently for some time but, with the help of two companies of Dorsets, who acted as escorts to the guns, eventually set about bringing the artillery down. The operation was exhausting. The oxen had to be outspanned at the crest, and then, with every available man hanging onto drag ropes or chains, the wagons were slowly let down the initial steep decline for about a kilometre. Where the slope began levelling out, the oxen could again be inspanned as the journey continued into the valley. Eleven times the men had to lower a wagon down the steep slope. On one descent control was lost of a wagon, which smashed into two oxen, which had to be put down. By 04:00 the task was completed and the exhausted men rested for two hours.

Buller was delighted with the stupendous efforts of these men, reporting: "...hard and well as Captain Jones and the men of the Naval Brigade have worked during the war, I do not believe they ever had harder work to do or did it more willingly than getting

their guns up and down Van Wyk."<sup>48</sup> The tired and famished Dublins finally found the guns - too late to be of any assistance, but in time to make short work of the unfortunate oxen that had been put down.<sup>49</sup>

Saturday, 9 June was spent by the British force essentially consolidating their position around Botha's Pass. Guns, the 10th Brigade and an endless stream of supply wagons wended their way up the pass. It was hard, laborious work, but essential if Buller was to consolidate his gains effectively and place himself in position to pursue the retreating Boers. Only by evening had everyone reached the top of Botha's Pass. During the afternoon the 11th Brigade moved about eight kilometres in a north-westerly direction, across the Orange River Colony plains, there to bivouac near a fine double story stone house. Here they encountered Boer doctors tending their wounded, but except for a few other burghers found in homes near the pass, no further contact with their adversaries was made that day. The burghers discovered in the homes near the pass were taken prisoner.<sup>50</sup>

The Boers holding Lang's Nek were soon informed - on 8 June - of the British attack and Erasmus promptly ordered Chris Botha with

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<sup>48</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 90; Cd. 142, Jones to Buller, 14 June 1900, p. 37; Jeans, pp. 289-290; Burne, p. 69.

<sup>49</sup> Jeans, p. 290.

<sup>50</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 90; Kearsley, p. 76; Burnett, p. 88.

100 men to hasten to Fourie's assistance.<sup>51</sup> This order is puzzling, for it was Chris Botha who, having been instructed during May to replace Meyer, was presumably in overall command. Indeed the tone of some of his telegrams to Kruger convey this impression. Suddenly however, Erasmus was giving instructions. So who in fact was in command? Did Erasmus, having previously held a more senior rank than Chris Botha, feel piqued when this man was suddenly promoted above him, and therefore refused to accept his authority? Unfortunately, it is impossible to obtain answers to these questions, source material being limited because of the rapidity of British movements at this time. One wonders though, whether there was dissension among the Boer senior officers and, if so, to what extent. It also is probable that C. Botha failed to reach Botha's Pass to participate in the action, as nowhere does he report becoming involved.<sup>52</sup>

With Buller's left wing safely on the highveld, he was again confronted with choices of what direction to take next. He could either head for Vrede or swing north towards Volksrust. From his report to Roberts on 8 June, it would seem that he decided to follow the latter option, for he ended his message with the statement: "I hope I have obtained a position (from) which I can render Laing's Nek untenable."<sup>53</sup> Although he believed they

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<sup>51</sup> Leyds, 726(f), Tel. no. 27, Erasmus to Kruger, 8 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>52</sup> Leyds 726 (f), Tel. no. 2, C. Botha to Erasmus, 9 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>53</sup> Roberts Papers T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, No Tel. no., Buller to Roberts, 8 June 1900.

would both have the same effect eventually, namely to force the Boers to vacate Lang's Nek, Roberts had other ideas. He urged Buller to advance into the north-eastern Orange River Colony, where Lieutenant-General Sir L. Rundle was meeting with significant opposition. Once Buller reached Standerton, and cut the rail link with Lang's Nek, Roberts felt sure the Boers would leave the Drakensberg.<sup>54</sup> This telegram was followed by another from Roberts on the same day in which he suggested to Buller that he head for Vrede, this being the speediest way of making himself felt by the active Boers. He tempered this proposal however, by stating: " I hardly know enough of the country between Newcastle and that place (Vrede) to justify my giving you a direct order to go there."<sup>55</sup> Roberts did, nevertheless, make it patently clear that he expected decisive and quick action from Buller by ending his telegram with the injunction: "I sincerely trust however you will not remain inactive."<sup>56</sup> In terms of inactivity Buller was not going to disappoint his commander, but as to strategy, he clearly wanted to gain control of Lang's Nek as soon as possible and was therefore not going to co-operate with Roberts as regards the north-eastern Orange River Colony. A desire to secure his lines of communication and to unify his force once again, is likely to have been the motive for the course of action he decided upon. The possibility of cutting

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<sup>54</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 2018, Roberts to Buller, 10 June 1900.

<sup>55</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 2024, Roberts to Buller, 10 June 1900.

<sup>56</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XVIII, W.O. 105/13, Tel. no. 2024, Roberts to Buller, 10 June 1900.

Erasmus's retreat route, may also have been a consideration. Securing his lines of communication and unifying his force, prior to resolving the problems the British had in the north-eastern Orange River Colony, was surely the more logical strategy to follow. It would provide Buller and the British forces in general with a sounder base from which to operate.



## Chapter 7. ALLEMAN'S NEK

In a relatively short period of time, from the beginning of May to 8 June 1900, the British forces had had several successes. These had resulted in the annexation and renaming of the Orange Free State, the capture of Johannesburg and Pretoria and the loss of the Biggarsberg position and a portion of the defence line held in the Drakensberg by the Boers. Burghers under the command of Chris Botha and Erasmus were conscious that military circumstances had deteriorated radically since the heady days at the end of 1899 and beginning of 1900. It is therefore hardly surprising that burghers were deserting daily from the Natal front.

Erasmus's greatest problems stemmed from trying to keep burghers of the Pretoria and Soutpansberg commandos in their positions. By 8 June he was quite exasperated, reporting to his President: "...ik ben op het oogenblik buiten raad met burgers van Pretoria en Zoutpansberg om die hier te houden."<sup>1</sup> Day and night the field-cornets and officers had to guard against more burghers deserting. Despite their vigilance men continued to leave in significant numbers. On Friday, 8 June, Erasmus reported that 30 men had deserted. The following day another 60 burghers had left, and approximately the same number on 10 June.<sup>2</sup> On Saturday, 9 June, he bemoaned the fact that he and his officers were tired

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<sup>1</sup> Leyds 726(f), Tel. no 27, Erasmus to Kruger, 8 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>2</sup> Leyds 726(f), Tel. no. 21, Erasmus to Kruger, 8 June 1900 and Tel. no. 29, Erasmus to Kruger, 9 June 1900; Leyds 749(b), No Tel. no., Erasmus to L. Botha, 10 June 1900, T.A.

of keeping an eye on their own men, rather than a lookout for the enemy! In an effort to stabilise the situation, the remainder of the Soutpansberg commando were persuaded on 8 June to remain in position until 11 or 12 June, by which time it was hoped to replace them with burghers of the Bethal, Standerton or Ermelo commandos.<sup>3</sup>

The morale and discipline problems experienced by Erasmus and Chris Botha at this stage, were not unique. Similar problems had manifested themselves already among the Free Staters when Bloemfontein fell and in the South African Republic under the Transvalers. So despondent did the senior Transvaal leadership become after the fall of Johannesburg and the subsequent wholesale desertions, that on 1 June they had considered suing for peace. The following day however, it was decided to continue with the war.<sup>4</sup>

But was there any further purpose for the Boers on the Natal front even to attempt to prevent Buller's forces from uniting on the highveld? There were in fact several sound reasons for their doing so. Once Buller's whole Natal Field Force was over the Drakensberg barrier and united, it would constitute another large force for the ever-diminishing Republican forces to have to contend with, and then in terrain generally less favourable to themselves. Furthermore, the remaining Boer strongholds in the

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<sup>3</sup> Leyds 726(f), Tel. no. 27, Erasmus to Kruger, 9 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>4</sup> Breytenbach, V, pp. 535-541 and 550-556.

eastern Transvaal, such as Ermelo, Bethal, Carolina, Machadodorp, the new capital and Lydenburg, would then become susceptible to attacks from the west (Roberts) as well as from the south. Lydenburg and Barberton contained large reserves of food and arms. Also, for what it was worth, the Boers' rail link with the sea at Lourenco Marques (Maputo) ran through the eastern Transvaal. Finally, it would be of considerable advantage to the British forces if they could control as much of the Durban-Johannesburg rail link as possible, it being the shortest route to the sea from the highveld. A key strategic feature on this line was the Lang's Nek tunnel which the Boers had damaged and which was still under their control. There was thus much to be gained or lost on this front. Louis Botha and his men were certainly determined to contest Roberts's entry into the eastern Transvaal. They took up positions straddling the railway line on a ridge just east of Pretoria, occupying both Donkerhoek and Diamond Hill.<sup>5</sup>

With Hildyard's force breaking through at Botha's Pass and the British force massing there with the obvious intention of exploiting their success, it was essential for the Boers to move quickly and decisively in an effort to occupy the best positions possible to prevent further strategic gains being made. The British could either head for Vrede, in the west, or try to sweep in behind Erasmus via Alleman's Nek. While the British moved supplies up Botha's Pass and made no major incursion into the Orange River Colony, it remained a mystery as to what option they

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<sup>5</sup> Amery, IV, pp. 276-277; Breytenbach, V, p. 538.

would choose.<sup>6</sup> If they made for Vrede, Chris Botha and Erasmus would be powerless to halt them. However, should they try to make for Volksrust or Perdekop via Alleman's Nek and Joubert's Nek respectively, the topography lent itself to the Boers fighting yet another defensive action.

Jutting out from the Drakensberg in a north-westerly direction, opposite Majuba, is a high and very precipitous spur known as Langkrans. Langkrans links up with the Versamelberg further west. Where Langkrans and the Versamelberg meet, there is a spur jutting out at right angles, running in a south-westerly direction and culminating in the fairly high Barnardskop, towering over the junction of the Gansvlei Spruit and the Klip River. These features separated the British forces from Volksrust. Langkrans, with its extremely steep sides, could not be crossed by a large body of troops. The Versamelberg could be crossed at the two above-mentioned neks. Otherwise the countryside in the vicinity of Botha's Pass and the Versamelberg was relatively flat, other than the occasional low rolling hill.

Information of Boer movements, positions and numbers for the period immediately after the battle at Botha's Pass, is so sketchy and vague that it is not possible to establish a clear, cohesive and reliable image of the state of affairs. One has to make do with mere snippets of information. This situation is probably the result of two factors. Firstly, events occurred in

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<sup>6</sup> Leyds 726(f), Tel. no. 52, Erasmus to Kruger, 9 June 1900, T.A.

such rapid succession that only a small percentage of them were reported and recorded, and secondly, in the area where events were unfolding, there was no easy access to a signal line. Consequently, when reports were despatched, only the most important details were mentioned. Often, too, despatches were further pared down to include only those developments likely to have a major impact on future events. To complicate matters further, details contradict one another from time to time.

The day the British spent massing at the head of Botha's Pass and bringing their supplies and artillery into the Orange River Colony, gave the Boers the opportunity to make good their retreat. Fourie, with the majority of the members of his two commandos, probably retired in the direction of Barnardskop before heading north-east towards the Versamelberg and taking up positions there. Some of the retiring burghers did not stop at the Versamelberg, but continued to retire until ordered to turn back and take up positions with the others already there.<sup>7</sup> While the Carolina and Lydenburg burghers retired, Chris Botha occupied Langkrans, probably with reinforcements ordered earlier to go to Botha's Pass. Botha did not meet up with Fourie that day, but clearly encountered a field-cornet of the Wakkerstroom commando who witnessed or participated in the battle at Botha's Pass, as he was able to provide Erasmus with some details of that engagement. In the same message Chris Botha gave orders for the

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<sup>7</sup> A 850 C.H.K., VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900 and II, Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, p. 5 and VII, Diary of I. Stoltz, p. 13, T.A. The diary of Stoltz is not subdivided under dates and therefore page numbers are given to provide a fuller reference.

Swaziland commando to occupy Langkrans and 200 Middelburgers to take up positions on a spur of Langkrans.<sup>8</sup> It is probable that Botha was near the western extremity of Langkrans, where his presence would have been of some value for defensive purposes, rather than further east where the very steepness of the slope would prevent a force from advancing with heavy equipment and supplies.

Later in the day, Botha reported the British were heading for Vrede and that the possibility existed that they would also advance along the Klip River towards Standerton. He therefore proposed to gather as many Carolina and Lydenburg burghers as possible, in an attempt to check them. At the same time he gave orders for the Standerton field-cornets to call up their men and make for Vrede. The majority of Standerton burghers were at home. The Standerton commandant reported that his men would be called up and that he would proceed to Vrede with 300 mounted burghers on 11 June.<sup>9</sup> Some time later it became evident to Botha that the British force was remaining at the pass and were not advancing as reported. He therefore ordered Erasmus not to send reinforcements, but none the less to hold them in readiness. In the meantime he intended to check on the British force's movements personally.<sup>10</sup> This suggests Botha initially responded

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<sup>8</sup> Leyds 726 (f), Tel. no. 2, C. Botha to Erasmus, 9 June 1900, T.A. The Veld-Cornet's name regrettably, is illegible.

<sup>9</sup> Leyds 726(f), Tel. no. 35, C. Botha to Erasmus and Tel. no. 38, C. Botha to H.T.D. and Tel. no. 44, Cmdt Standerton to C. Botha, 9 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>10</sup> Leyds 726(f), Tel. no. 46, C. Botha to Erasmus, 9 June 1900, T.A.

to misleading information, especially as he personally now intended establishing what the situation was. The misleading information or at least interpretation thereof, may have been based on the initial British pursuit of the Boers across the Orange River Colony plains the previous evening. It was not unreasonable to conclude that such a move would be continued the following morning. This little episode highlights the value of detailed and accurate intelligence in warfare. Such information provides a commander with significant advantages.

It appears that at this critical period for the Boers, more than half the Standerton, Bethal and Ermelo commandos were at home, as well as a significant number of the Wakkerstroom men. Erasmus issued orders to the commandants of Bethal and Standerton to call up their men. Those from Bethal were all to go to Lang's Nek, while 200 of the best Standerton horsemen were to make for Alleman's Nek and the rest had to join Botha.<sup>11</sup> Whether these burghers were merely to reinforce his positions or to replace the Soutpansberg commando, is not clear. In all probability it was the latter, as the Soutpansbergers had effectively been promised they could leave on 11 or 12 June.

At 06:30 on Sunday 10 June Hildyard's force, assembled at the head of Botha's Pass, set off in cold misty conditions advancing in a north-westerly direction towards the junction of the Klip River and the Gansvlei Spruit. The mist eventually cleared about

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<sup>11</sup> Leyds 725(f), Tel. no. 27, Erasmus to Kruger, 8 June 1900 and Tel. nos. 56 and 57, Erasmus to Cmdts Bethal and Standerton, 9 June 1900, T.A.

three and a half hours later, allowing a wintry sun to warm the chilled soldiers crossing the highveld. It was important for the British to make rapid progress through to Volksrust and Charlestown in order to link up with the rest of their forces in that region, for they had only about three days' supplies with them.<sup>12</sup> By moving with such limited supplies Hildyard was certainly taking a risk, but this suggests that he expected to succeed very quickly.

Hildyard's front was covered by the S.A.L.H. and his left flank by the second Cavalry Brigade. Behind the S.A.L.H. followed the 10th Brigade, Halsey and his two naval twelve pounders and then the rest of the force. Over much easier terrain than that experienced in Natal, the British force was able to cover up to five kilometres in an hour. They had approximately eighteen to twenty kilometres to cover that day. Along the way they passed farm houses flying white flags.<sup>13</sup> To provide an effective screen the 2nd Cavalry Brigade crossed the Klip River soon after the mist had cleared away. It was reported that on their left flank, on the Gemsbokberg, a few kilometres away, was the Vrede commando. These Boers, however, made no effort to close in on the

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<sup>12</sup> Burnett, p. 88; Jeans, p. 292; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 90; Cd. 142, Jones to Buller, 14 June 1900, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Burne, p. 70; Burnett, pp. 88-89; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 272. The raising of white flags had also occurred along the route taken by Roberts. Where this was abused and British troops were sniped at from such homes, Roberts had them burnt to the ground. The situation was not always clear-cut though, as Boers operating in the area of a house with a white flag, but in no way responsible for its raising, did not consider themselves bound by it. This could result in the home of non-combatants being burnt down. Spies, pp. 44-45.



British left flank.<sup>14</sup> Occasional pockets of burghers were encountered en route, but were always driven off with assistance of the naval and field guns, during the course of the morning.<sup>15</sup>

Chris Botha soon noticed the British advance - presumably after the mist had cleared and therefore only from 10:00 onwards. He linked up with about 120 Lydenburgers and the Steenkampsberg ward of the Carolina commando. These Boers offered what resistance they could during the course of the morning.<sup>16</sup> But such a small force without artillery could do little to check Hildyard's advance. They did however, complicate it. That their resistance was spirited and courageous is doubtless, for at about 13:00 the 2nd Cavalry Brigade received news that the S.A.L.H. had become hotly engaged. Botha and his men had taken up positions just north of Gansvlei Spruit, on Barnardskop. From there they refused to move despite the close attention of three squadrons of the S.A.L.H.. At one stage, a mere 40 metres separated the Lydenburgers and the S.A.L.H. "B" Squadron of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade hurried to the assistance of the S.A.L.H., attempting to approach the Boers from the west. As "B" Squadron advanced towards a koppie from which they hoped to engage the Boers, they came under hot fire. This forced the squadron to move further north, and by making use of a ridge north-west of the Boer

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<sup>14</sup> Burnett, p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> Jeans, p. 291; Cd. 142, Jones to Buller, 14 June 1900, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 31, C. Botha to Kruger, 10 June 1900; A 850 C.H.K., VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.

position, they were able to proceed to within 500 metres of the Boers, from where they provided covering fire for the S.A.L.H., enabling them to retire at dusk. Eventually "B" Squadron itself helped cover their movements. In a telegram reporting the skirmish to his President, Botha was full of praise for the courage of his men.<sup>17</sup>

The casualties suffered in this skirmish were high compared to most other engagements since Buller's departure from Ladysmith, confirming that the Boers had stood their ground with courage. There is considerable discrepancy regarding the Boer losses. Chris Botha reported 6 killed and 3 wounded, while Janson gives a figure of 8 killed and 12 wounded from the Steenkampsberg ward (Carolina commando) alone. If the casualties mentioned by Botha were all Lydenburgers, the total losses were 14 killed and 15 wounded. Buller reported that the British buried 10 Boers that day and 12 the next, while Maurice and Grant give the losses as 10 burghers killed. There can therefore be no precision as regards the losses. British losses appear to have been slightly less, with Buller reporting 6 killed and 7 wounded, all of the S.A.L.H.. The Official History records 6 killed and 10 wounded. Burnett reports four 18th Hussars wounded. It is therefore probable that 6 S.A.L.H. were killed, while a total of at least twenty five men were wounded.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 31, C. Botha to Kruger, 10 June 1900; Burnett, pp. 88-89; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 91; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 272.

<sup>18</sup> Leyds (g), Tel. no. 31, C. Botha to Kruger, 10 June 1900; A 850 C.H.K., VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 91; Maurice and

Earlier in the day Chris Botha informed Erasmus of the British advance along the Klip River. In response he immediately despatched 250 burghers to reinforce the Carolina and Lydenburg commandos, jointly numbering between 1 200 to 1 300 in total at this stage. The 250 were additional to the 200 Standerton burghers already ordered to Alleman's Nek.<sup>19</sup>

The British force on elevated ground beyond Gansvlei Spruit, reported seeing a large body of Boer horsemen somewhat further north, making for Alleman's Nek. Its estimated size was 3 000. These were probably the Carolina and Lydenburg commandos along with some reinforcements, and would therefore not have numbered anywhere near 3 000.<sup>20</sup> Late in the afternoon the 5th Division, 2nd Brigade, 2nd Cavalry Brigade, 3rd Mounted Brigade, transport and artillery arrived at or near the junction of the Klip River and Gansvlei Spruit. There they settled down to endure a frosty night. Hildyard's force had reached the western most point of its advance en route to Volksrust. Chris Botha and his men retired to the Versamelberg. Botha himself made for Joubert's Nek, while Fourie headed for Alleman's Nek.<sup>21</sup> Hildyard was now poised to drive the Boers out of their last possible defensive position, before moving behind Erasmus at Lang's Nek. The large number of

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Grant, III, p. 272; Burnett, p. 89.

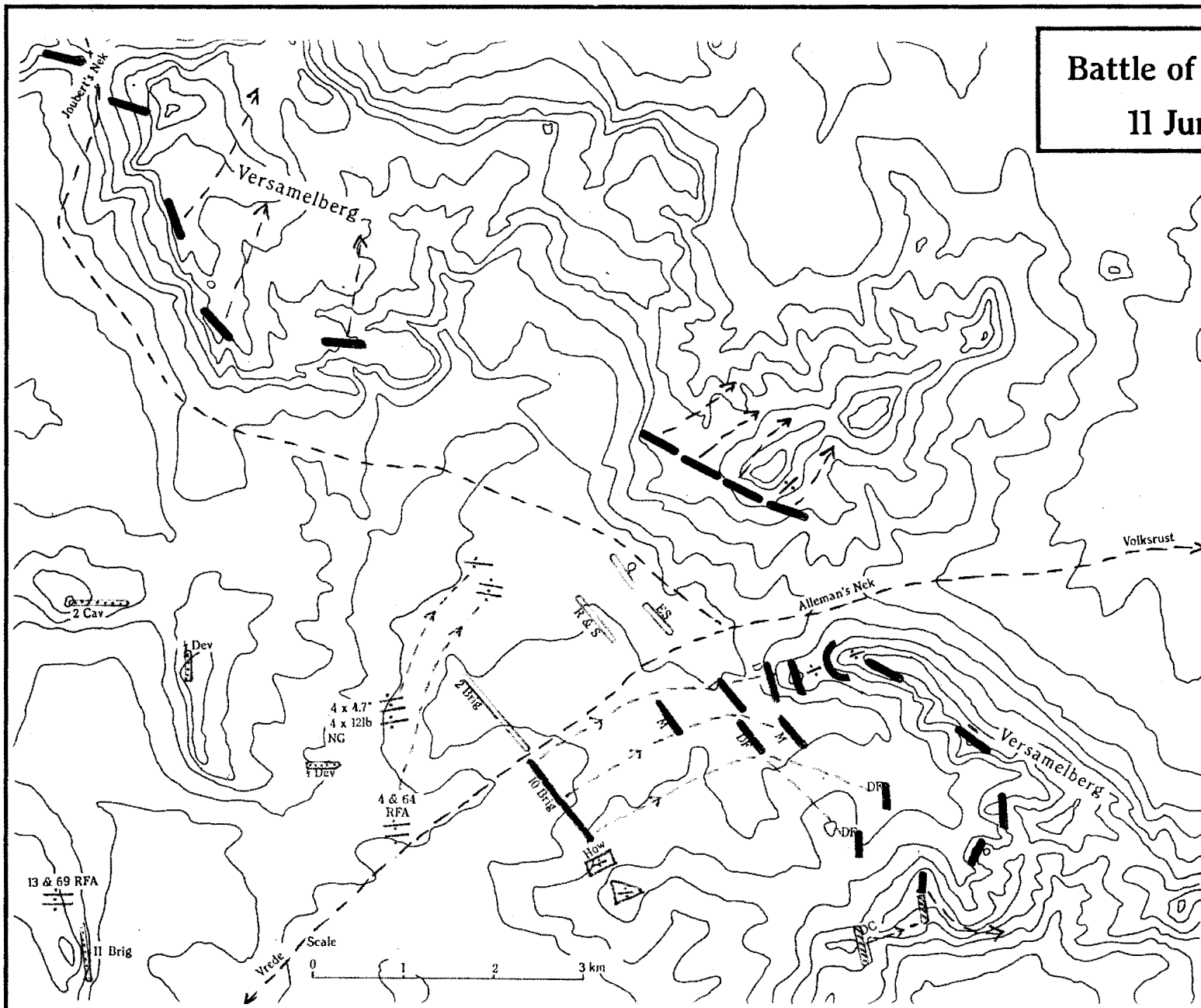
<sup>19</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 19, Erasmus to Kruger, 10 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 272-273; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 31, C. Botha to Kruger, 10 June 1900, T.A.; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 273, Amery, IV, p. 189.

# Battle of Alleman's Nek

## 11 June 1900



### KEY

- Boer Positions
- Boer Artillery
- Boer Retreat Routes
- Royal Field Artillery
- Naval Guns
- Royal Horse Artillery
- 2nd Cavalry Brigade
- Devons
- 11th Brigade
- 10th Brigade
- 2nd Brigade
- Queens
- East Surreys
- Reserves & Supports
- Dorsets
- Dublin Fusiliers
- Middlesex
- Dundonald's Cavalry
- British Advance Routes
- Roads & Tracks

Boer horsemen seen riding about was an indication that they had not yet securely entrenched themselves. Considerable dividends could therefore be reaped by advancing with utmost haste the following morning.

Consequently the next day while it was still dark, the men began eating breakfast and preparing for another long day's work. In the darkness all the naval guns and field artillery advanced to higher ground, due north of the bivouac position. From there some rounds were fired in the direction of the intended line of advance, that is, north-eastwards.<sup>22</sup> Under cover and supported by the artillery, the 11th Brigade (Wynne's) advanced at 07:00 to a line of low koppies, north and slightly west of the bivouac position, which were seized without opposition. Wynne was under orders to halt once he held a position on which the rest of the force could pivot, in its intended advance on Alleman's Nek. To enable him to reach such a position, he swung right and moved through a shallow depression, to occupy the next low ridge on the route to the objective. He was now next to the Vrede - Volksrust road facing Alleman's Nek, a mere seven kilometres away. Directly before Wynne lay the Versamelberg. To his left the terrain was relatively open for about ten kilometres, but to his right and right front a mere five to six kilometres away lay broken, high ground. Covering the left flank, as on the previous day, was the 2nd Cavalry Brigade (Brocklehurst) and on the right was the 3rd Mounted Brigade (Dundonald), less the S.A.L.H., which did

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<sup>22</sup> Cd. 142, Jones to Buller, 14 June 1900, p. 37; Jeans, p. 292; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 273.

rearguard duty that day, leaving Dundonald with only the T.M.I., the Composite regiment and R.H.A. - 700 men in all.<sup>23</sup> The cavalry and Wynne's Brigade were followed by the transport and 2nd and 10th Brigades. The transport and 13th and 69th R.F.A. batteries eventually parked alongside Wynne's force.<sup>24</sup>

The Boers occupying elevated positions would fairly soon have noticed the early British movements. There is no description of precisely where the Boer positions began and ended. It appears though, that they stretched from Joubert's Nek in the west to Alleman's Nek and to the high ground east of Wynne's front. Alleman's Nek and the immediately surrounding terrain was held by the Lydenburgers and Ward Two of the Carolina commando. Wards one and three of the Carolina commando held the positions south and east of Alleman's Nek, while it is probable that Chris Botha was supported by Wakkerstroom burghers at Joubert's Nek. Between Alleman's and Joubert's Nek the positions were manned by the Lydenburg commando and, possibly some Wakkerstroomers as well. It is impossible to establish how many of the 350 burghers sent to Alleman's Nek by Erasmus arrived there, but references by C. Botha to the Wakkerstroom and Swaziland commandos confirms that some burghers of these commandos were present at some stage of the battle. Where the Swazilanders took up their position is not

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<sup>23</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 273-274; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 96.

<sup>24</sup> Knox. p. 264.

recorded.<sup>25</sup> The total Boer strength was probably between 1 200 and 1 500 men. There is also much uncertainty as to where the Boer artillery was positioned and its numbers. Janson mentions in his diary that they had one pom-pom gun and one Creusot gun. Amery, however, suggests that there were two high velocity guns<sup>26</sup> and two pom-pom guns, while the Official History mentions one long range field piece and two pom-poms. Janson was probably only referring to the Carolina's artillery. Whatever the case, the Boers were numerically much weaker than the British, in men and guns.<sup>27</sup>

At 11:00, with Wynne in position, the heavy artillery advanced, flanked by the 2nd and 10th Brigades respectively.<sup>28</sup> Some time after the advance commenced Hildyard's two flanks, that is the cavalry, came under fire. The engaged flanks were approximately eleven kilometres apart. Fire on the left flank was less intense than that on the right, where Dundonald's Composite Regiment was operating on the extreme right and closest to the hilly, broken terrain. This terrain was ideally suited to a defensive action. This engagement was to prove an intense and protracted

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<sup>25</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 45, C. Botha to Erasmus, 11 June 1900 and Tel. no. 8, C. Botha to L. Botha, 12 June 1900; A 850 C.H.K., II, Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, p. 6, T.A.

<sup>26</sup> By high velocity Amery probably means either a Krupp or Creusot 75mm gun.

<sup>27</sup> Amery, IV, p. 191; A 850 C.H.K., VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.

<sup>28</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 91.

affair.<sup>29</sup> It is possible the left flank was engaged by Chris Botha and 50 Wakkerstroomers, for he reported taking the forward patrols under fire and repulsing them. Despite this success Botha anxiously informed Erasmus: "Zaken zun hier zeer ernstig vyand trekt met groote macht in richting de nek over de Rand na Paardenkop."<sup>30</sup> Botha's anxiety and concern can well be understood. As the morning wore on he noted an enormous force of cavalry, infantry and artillery advancing remorselessly on his position, the three infantry brigades together numbering some 10 000 men. The cavalry numbered approximately 2 000 and the artillery consisted of four field batteries R.F.A., one battery R.H.A., one howitzer battery, four 4.7", six twelve pounder naval guns and two Vickers maxims. As the British advance continued, Botha decided to join Fourie at Alleman's Nek and ordered all ammunition to be placed on wagons in case they were forced to retreat suddenly. He did not wish to lose the ammunition and so effectively, be disarmed.<sup>31</sup>

Dundonald, noticing that the front towards Alleman's Nek was not being scouted, ordered forward patrols. They soon returned, reporting the position to be occupied. This news prompted Dundonald to advance with the T.M.I. on to a low rise some three and a half kilometres from the Nek, from where he commenced

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<sup>29</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 91; Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, S.R.O. G.D. 233/124/2, 'Operation 3rd Mtd Bde 6-13 June 1900'.

<sup>30</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 45, C. Botha to Erasmus, 11 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>31</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 45, C. Botha to Erasmus, 11 June 1900, T.A.



shelling it and the terrain to the south-east of it. The R.H.A. guns were joined on their left by the howitzer battery. At about 13:30 these guns came under a sudden and hot bombardment. One of the shells decapitated a soldier with the R.H.A. guns, but other than that no damage was caused.<sup>32</sup> As the artillery-duel raged, the heavy guns moved onto another low rise about three kilometres northwest of Dundonald's guns, and from there came into action at about 14:00. The 7th and 64th R.F.A. batteries had also come into action, in the vicinity of the howitzers and/or naval guns. The intensity of the bombardment initially caused a slackening in the Boer firing, and by 14:30 forced a temporary cessation.<sup>33</sup>

While the artillery duel continued, the British infantry readied itself, under cover of the last fold of the ground, for an all out assault on the Boer positions at and on either side of Alleman' Nek. The task was a daunting one, for there was hardly a vestige of cover over the approximately three and a half kilometres they would advance. Hopefully however, the artillery barrage, which still continued, would weaken the Boer fire power. The nek was a sharply defined feature, the ground rising steeply on either side. On the right of the nek, at its entrance, was a distinctive conical koppie, commanding the defile. It was

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<sup>32</sup> Dundonald Papers, T.M. III, S.R.O. G.D. 233/124/2, 'Operation 3rd Mtd Bde 6-13 June 1900'; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 274; Amery, IV, p. 190; Knox, p. 266.

<sup>33</sup> A 850 C.H.K., II, Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, p. 6 and VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, 8 July 1900, T.A.; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 91; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 274; With the Flag to Pretoria, XXIX, pp. 683-684.

connected by a saddle to the higher ground behind and right of it. To the left of the nek there was no such distinctive feature as the koppie. The ground here rose less steeply and ended in a hill set slightly left and back from the beginning of the nek. All these features were occupied by Boers.

As the Boer artillery was silenced at 14:30, the 2nd (Hamilton's) and 10th (Talbot Coke's) Brigades commenced their advance from sheltered positions behind the guns. Initially the advance was under cover and had the support of naval and field gun fire. The 2nd Brigade advanced west of the dusty gravel track leading to the nek. This track was the demarcating feature between the two brigades. In Hamilton's front line were two companies of the 2nd East Surreys with orders to attack the nek and hill immediately west of it. On their left were two companies of the Queens, with orders to attack the ridge still further west. Two companies from each respective battalion followed in immediate support and the remaining five companies of each followed as reserves. The 2nd West Yorkshires, on the rear left of these two battalions, followed as additional support.<sup>34</sup> Hamilton's 2nd Devonshires did not accompany the Brigade. Half were detailed to guard the guns and the other half, with a Vickers-Maxim, occupied a koppie a little distance west of the naval artillery, to cover the left flank. Some Boer scouts were noticed in that vicinity.<sup>35</sup> Immediately east of the track advanced four companies of the 2nd

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<sup>34</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 274-275; Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 91; "Linesman", Words of an Eyewitness, p. 192; Pearse, I, pp. 419 and 421.

<sup>35</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 275.

Dorsetshires, followed by the remaining five companies. Immediately right of the Dorsets were the 1st Dublin Fusiliers. The 2nd Middlesex Regiment followed as supports. The Dorsets were ordered to attack and occupy the conical koppie, while the Dublins were to assist them by outflanking the hill.<sup>36</sup> On the right Dundonald's artillery and men were still heavily engaged.

The long, wavy lines of khaki-clad soldiers moved up the gentle slope, which provided the initial cover, past the guns and into full view of the Boers. For a while the advance passed uneventfully, with the lines disturbed only here and there, where a soldier was forced to avoid bad ground. The British artillery barrage continued unabated. So organized was the whole movement that it must have looked somewhat like a military exercise at home. It appears that initially the Boers offered no resistance to the 7 000 to 8 000 infantry advancing on them.<sup>37</sup> This unfolding spectacle accompanied by bursting shells, was viewed by one, Izak Stoltz, of the Carolina commando from Alleman's Nek, who stood next to Fourie and exchanged jokes with other comrades - possibly to relieve some of the nervous tension.<sup>38</sup>

The Boers eventually opened fire with rifles and pom-poms from their elevated positions, directing it initially at Hamilton's men, the more exposed brigade at the time. To determine the range

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<sup>36</sup> Amery, IV, p. 191; Atkinson, II, p. 78.

<sup>37</sup> Linesman, p. 192; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 276; A 850 C.H.K., VII, Diary of I. Stoltz, p. 14, T.A.

<sup>38</sup> A 850 C.H.K., Diary of I. Stoltz, p. 14, T.A.

at which the Boers opened fire is difficult, as the conflicting figures available vary between approximately 700 and 1 400 metres. The majority suggest it was approximately 1 400 metres.<sup>39</sup> Major H.W. Benson, 2nd East Surrey Regiment, described events as follows: "On arrival of the firing line at about 800 yards from the Nek a heavy rifle and Pom-pom fire was opened on it from the hills on both sides of the Nek. The first casualty occurred here. The firing line advanced steadily until close in front of the Nek where there was a dip affording some cover."<sup>40</sup> It was now 15:15. At this stage Hamilton's supports provided rapid covering fire from approximately 1 100 metres, directed chiefly at the conical koppie and saddle behind it, and also opened up with a Vickers-Maxim from between the battalion supports. This concentrated barrage caused a slackening in the Boers' firing, but not sufficient to enable their advance to continue.<sup>41</sup> The earlier British artillery barrage had clearly failed to break either the Boers' will or ability to defend their strong positions in the rocky terrain of the Versamelberg. The British force would have to make a concentrated and brave effort over the exposed terrain that lay before them, if they were to be successful in achieving their objective.

As a result of the heavier fire directed at Hamilton's men, Coke's brigade began to advance more rapidly and was also soon

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Diary of I. Stoltz, p. 14, T.A.; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 276; Amery, IV, p. 191; Pearse, I, p. 421; Atkinson, II, p. 78.

<sup>40</sup> Pearse, I, p. 421; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 276.

<sup>41</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 276.

engaged. The Dublin Fusiliers on the right flank were subjected to an enfilading fire from their right by those Boers also engaged against Dundonald's men. This caused the Fusiliers to veer to their right to face the direction of fire and themselves to open fire on those particular Boer positions. Very soon a large gap appeared between the Dorsets and Dublins. Coke vainly attempted to recall the Dublins with signals. The brigade-major was ordered to recall them to their proper position. So involved did they become on the right however, that only one and a half companies managed to rejoin the brigade by nightfall.<sup>42</sup> Despite the Dublins having been drawn to their right, the Dorsets pressed their attack towards the conical koppie. Their front line consisted, from left to right, of the A, C, E and B companies. The rest followed behind. B company's left and E company's right were given the conical koppie as their objective. When they were within about 1 400 metres of the koppie, the Boers opened up with rifle fire, which at that range was quite harmless. When the range was down to about 900 metres, casualties began to occur, among them, Captain Mansel. Despite these casualties the Boer defenders, to their dismay, saw no faltering in the British advance. The Dorsets passed through a donga and then rapidly moved ahead until they eventually passed from view, reaching the safety of dead ground at the foot of the steep slopes. In this shelter the Dorsets halted to fix bayonets and gird themselves for the last steep climb to the summit of the conical hill.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 276-277; Atkinson, II, pp. 78-79.

<sup>43</sup> Atkinson, II, pp. 78-79; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 276; A 850 C.H.K., VII, Diary of I. Stoltz, p. 14, T.A.

With the British soldiers so close to the Boers, their artillery ceased firing lest it cause casualties among their own men. This lull was an indication to the Boers that the final charge was about to commence.<sup>44</sup> Indeed soon after the cessation, the Dorsets began swarming up the steep, rocky conical koppie, with Lieutenant Anson leading B company, being the first to arrive on the summit. The Boer defenders of the koppie had retired at the last possible moment, dashing across the saddle to the next ridge. Some burghers retired down to a farmstead on the Dorsets' right. A pom-pom, active to the end in the area, was dragged away in the nick of time. The Boers now opened a furious fire against the Dorsets on the koppie, fire coming from the front and left front across the defile,<sup>45</sup> the Boers no doubt being determined to prevent the British from making further threatening gains. The British were in the process of securing a small foothold, on the Boers' last possible defence line. If they lost this line, Lang's Nek would also be lost and Buller would be able to consolidate his position in the South African Republic. B company was soon joined by A, C and E companies. B and E companies were directed to reply to the frontal fire, while A and C answered that from across the defile. Further assistance came from machine guns and supporting companies. However, the Boers were artfully concealed in the rocky terrain, thus providing few targets and, at the same time, making conditions rather uncomfortable for the Dorsets.<sup>46</sup> Soon after the infantrymen gained control of the koppie, they

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<sup>44</sup> A 850 C.H.K., II, Diary of J.J. van Rensburg, p. 6, T.A.

<sup>45</sup> Atkinson, II, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

were joined by the Signalling Officer, who informed headquarters of their success. Hildyard promptly ordered forward the 7th and 64th R.F.A. batteries and two naval twelve pounders. They took up positions to the left and rear of the 2nd Brigade. From there they were able to see the saddle connecting the conical koppie and the hill north of it onto which many of the Boers had retired. The gunners were now in a position to re-open their fire without jeopardising the Dorsets. They also opened fire on the hill north-west of the defile.<sup>47</sup>

Prior to this Lieutenant Utterson, E company, and approximately 60 men tried to rush across the saddle to drive the Boers off the next hill. This section drew a furious fire from the burghers, who managed to knock all those in front over and force the remainder to seek cover, before they could make much headway. Ideally, the Dublins at this stage should have been lending support on the Dorsets' right, but they were now too far away to be of material assistance. Colonel Law, noting the difficulties experienced in trying to cross the saddle, ordered Major Lynch and Captain Butler to arrange an advance around the south-eastern side of the koppie. Then he ordered Captain Rowley (F company) to fix bayonets, go over the top of the koppie and attempt to cross the saddle.<sup>48</sup>

Under cover on the south-western side of the koppie, Rowley and his men prepared themselves. Well led by Rowley, the company went

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 79; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 276.

<sup>48</sup> Atkinson, II, p. 79.

over the top, only to be met by a fierce hail of fire as soon as the Boers spotted them. A number of men fell, but the charge continued down the slope, now well supported by artillery fire from those guns brought forward a little earlier. Utterson's men joined Rowley's band as they continued. The attack was also supported by heavy fire poured in by B company, and the remainder of E and the Volunteer companies. Partway across the saddle the men encountered a barbed wire fence, but as its top strand was already broken, it proved of little hindrance. The advance, executed in a series of short rushes and supported by the Middlesex Regiment, was so rapid that Rowley had to halt it momentarily while the gunners were ordered to raise their sights a little. As soon as this was done, the charge continued, with F company in the van. The British infantrymen scabbled up the steep stony hill before them and finally captured it with relative ease. H company came around the south-eastern side of the hill to add their fire to that of Rowley's. On the plains in the distance the British soldiers could also see some 200 Boers in full flight. Volleys were fired at them to speed them on their way. Boer resistance in this area had ceased to exist. It was about 17:00.<sup>49</sup> While the first hole had now been punched in this Boer defence line, in other areas along it there was, however, still heavy fighting.

Hamilton's brigade pinned down in a donga earlier by heavy frontal and cross fire, found that, once the Dorsets had captured the conical koppie and the artillery had been brought forward to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-80; Maurice and Grant, III, pp. 276-277.



support the right front attack, opposition to them virtually ceased. This brigade resumed its advance and gained its objective at much the same time as the Dorsets captured their second hill. Hamilton's men, too, fired at the retiring Boers, who, as usual, set the veld alight to provide a smoke screen. With darkness setting in, pursuit was no longer possible and therefore both Hamilton's and Coke's men settled down to sleep on the high ground, astride the nek. But bitter cold permitted little sleep.<sup>50</sup>

On Hildyard's right, Dundonald's men had earlier met with stiff resistance. While Dundonald was scouting towards Alleman's Nek with the T.M.I. and also engaging Boers with the R.H.A., the Composite Regiment made for the spur that jutted out in a south-westerly direction and culminated in Barnardskop. The Composite Regiment managed to drive some Boers off two low lying hills onto higher ones on the same ridge. There the Boers put up a stubborn resistance. Only when Dundonald turned his artillery on to these men did they retire, and then only to take up further defensive positions on yet another hill, where they congregated in considerable numbers and also behind schanzes about 1 300 metres away. The Boers' tenacious resistance forced Dundonald to reinforce the Composite Regiment with two colt guns, two companies T.M.I. and his artillery. This was all to no avail, as the Boers managed to retain their position until nightfall, when

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<sup>50</sup> Pearse, I, pp. 421-422; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 279; Amery, IV, p. 193.

they finally withdrew.<sup>51</sup> These burghers on the British right flank had no option but to retire, after the success at Alleman's Nek. The British centre could very quickly have cut off their line of retreat the following morning. Dundonald left strong pickets on the hills, but withdrew and bivouacked in a more central position with the rest of his men. During that night all burghers, both east and west of Alleman's Nek, made good their retreat.

The number of British casualties suggests that Boer resistance was significantly more determined than it was at either Helpmekaar or Botha's Pass, despite the burghers having had less time to prepare themselves, and the Alleman's Nek position offering less of a natural barrier than the former two had presented. However, Chris Botha was present from the beginning, and it is possible that this was a major factor in the burghers and other officers involved being inspired to hold their positions. According to Buller's report British casualties were 19 killed and 123 wounded, of whom four died soon afterwards. Casualties were thus higher than those for the combined Helpmekaar and Botha's Pass battles. As can be expected, the Dorsets paid the highest price for the British success with 64 casualties. The rest of the 10th Brigade suffered 27 casualties, while the 2nd Brigade suffered 46.<sup>52</sup> To determine precise Boer casualty figures, is impossible. Chris Botha reported to his

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<sup>51</sup> Dundonald Papers, T.M., III, S.R.O GD 233/124/2, 'Operation Mtd Bde 6-13 June 1900'.

<sup>52</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 91.

brother Louis: "Verlies aan onse kant is my onbekend. Sover ik weet zyn drie lyken in handen van vyand gevallen andere dooden en gewonden werd van tyd tot tyd uit gebracht van Swazieland zeven gewonden geen dooden."<sup>53</sup> From diary entries it is evident that at least seven Carolina men died, but no figure for wounded burghers is mentioned. No casualty figure for the Lydenburg, Middelburg and Wakkerstroom burghers are recorded. Given the intensity of the British artillery bombardment and the lack of adequate trenches, it is probable that there were significantly more casualties than those mentioned. Due to the rapidity of the British advance and the veld being set ablaze either by shell fire or the retiring burghers, at least two Boer corpses were burnt.<sup>54</sup>

While Hildyard's force was engaged in getting up Botha's Pass and taking possession of Alleman's Nek, Clery's artillery maintained a steady barrage on the Boer positions before them. While there is no evidence of this action causing casualties, Von Wichmann's Long Tom wounded two officers and four men during this time.<sup>55</sup> Clery's men launched no major offensive during this period. Their mere presence none the less, forced the majority of those Boers before them, to remain in their positions and thereby made Hildyard's task as easy as possible.

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<sup>53</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 8, C. Botha to L. Botha, 12 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>54</sup> A 850 C.H.K., III, Diary of A.W. Korf, p. 3 and VIII, Diary of J.H. Janson, p. 16, T.A. As Korf's diary is not subdivided into dates, the page number is given as a reference.

<sup>55</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 92.

The British success at Alleman's Nek can be ascribed mainly to their numerical superiority, in both men and artillery. This is confirmed in a message Chris Botha sent to his brother Louis, stating: "Wy hadden en hard gevecht te Allermansnek van omtrent twaalf uur middag tot zonsondergang. Door de groot overmacht en wenig kanon waren wy verplicht ons posities te verlaten."<sup>56</sup> Hildyard fully exploited the advantage of numerical superiority, a factor that needs to be considered, as the British commanders had not always taken advantage of their strength, especially during Buller's relief of Ladysmith campaign. Furthermore, Hilyard's tactical deployment of the artillery partway through the battle materially assisted Coke's men as they undertook the most difficult part of their assault and this no doubt eased the burden on the infantry and probably diminished the casualties they suffered.

The British success posed a major threat to the Boers still in position at or near Lang's Nek. Realizing this, Chris Botha sent a message through to them, ordering that all guns be removed from their positions, that everyone retire in proper order and also that von Wichmann be informed of developments.<sup>57</sup> Under the cover of darkness these Boers retired from their positions, either by train or on horseback.<sup>58</sup> The way was now open for

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<sup>56</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 8, C. Botha to L. Botha, 12 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>57</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel no. 48, Militaire Secs to Erasmus, 11 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>58</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 6, Erasmus to Kruger, 12 June 1900, T.A.

both Clery's and Hildyard's forces to take possession of Volksrust and so to launch themselves into the South African Republic. The Boer reverse at Alleman' Nek undoubtedly had major long-term implications for their overall cause.

## Chapter 8. CONCLUSIONS

While the British forces tried to obtain some sleep in the bitter cold of the night after the battle, the Boer forces of Chris Botha and Erasmus continued to make good their escape from the Versamelberg and Drakensberg. The loss of one of their defensive positions meant that the remaining one, in the Drakensberg, became vulnerable to encirclement, so a speedy escape was essential.

Rest for some British units was short lived. Lieutenant C.R.N. Burne reported that their guns were on the move again one hour before dawn.<sup>1</sup> Quite clearly the funnelling effect Alleman's Nek had on Hildyard's forces resulted in their being slowed down, for it was only at 10:00 that the 18th Hussars received orders to advance to the Nek and beyond.<sup>2</sup> At this stage Hildyard and Buller appeared to be in no great hurry to try and catch up to the Boers, or to cut off their retreat, by gaining control of the Volksrust-Standerton road or rail links. Atkinson in fact has suggested that a more vigorous pursuit, possibly from immediately after the battle, might have resulted in the railway being cut north-west of Volksrust and have led to guns, stores and prisoners falling into British hands.<sup>3</sup> This criticism requires some analysis. There were a number of factors to inhibit an immediate pursuit. Hildyard's force had covered a fair distance on 11 June and by the end of the day, must have been relatively

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<sup>1</sup> Burne, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Burnett, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Atkinson, II, p. 81.

tired. As the battle ended at about sunset, a pursuit over unknown terrain would have had to be made in darkness. The Versamelberg presented an insurmountable barrier for wagons and artillery, except at Joubert's and Alleman's Neks. This topographical configuration would, therefore, have caused a significant time lapse, before an adequate force could assemble to the north of the Versamelberg. The more mobile British forces were some distance away from Alleman's Nek, having operated on the flanks during the course of the battle.

As Botha had communicated to Erasmus the loss of the Versamelberg soon after it occurred, and taking into account all the above drawbacks facing Hildyard's men, it is improbable that his force would have reached the rail line before the Boers were able to escape along their main retreat route. This, none the less, does not detract from the fact that no real effort was made to press a pursuit as hard as possible, especially as the gun crews at Van Wykskop had shown their ability to work long and hard hours, even through the night.

As Sandspruit station was approached, the last retreating Boer horsemen were seen and promptly shelled with 4.7" guns from a range of 9 000 metres. They soon disappeared from view.<sup>4</sup> The British advance on Volksrust continued and at nightfall Hildyard's force bivouacked approximately 6 kilometres from the village.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile Clery, aware of Buller's success and

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<sup>4</sup> Jeans, p. 294.

<sup>5</sup> Cd. 458, Buller to Sec for War, 19 June 1900, p. 91.

probably suspecting that the Boers holding positions at Lang's Nek had vacated them, confirmed this in a probing action by mounted troops under Dartnell's command. Clery therefore ordered forward the 4th Brigade, supported by artillery. Dartnell meanwhile cautiously pushed on with scouts to Charlestown and that very evening was still able to cross the border and occupy Volksrust.<sup>6</sup> During this advance it became abundantly evident that the line the Boers had held before Clery, from Phokweni via Lang's Nek to Majuba, had been abandoned.

The following day Buller entered the little village of Volksrust. From all the houses and farm establishments his men passed, white flags fluttered. The Boer men had all departed, leaving the women behind, some weeping for their lost ones. In the village the British troops managed to capture wagons and forage, as well as some coffins - an uncomfortable reminder of the realities of war. Buller's men also pushed on to Charlestown. The force was based on these two villages for the next few days, while they attended to certain essentials.<sup>7</sup> Firstly it was imperative that the railway line be repaired, the most serious damage being at Lang's Nek where both ends of the tunnel had been dynamited. By sheer hard work, the rubble was cleared and line repaired within a few days and on 18 June the first train passed through the tunnel.<sup>8</sup> With the line intact to Volksrust it was Buller's intention to

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 279; Amery, IV, p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> Burne, p. 72; Maurice and Grant, III, p. 280.

<sup>8</sup> Principal Events, IV, pp. 74 and 84.



build up sufficient supplies prior to moving on.<sup>9</sup>

While this process was in progress the telegraph section, Royal Engineers, accompanied by two squadrons of the T.M.I. returned to Gansvlei to recover telephone lines laid out as the advance on Alleman's Nek had been made. The telegraph section was spotted and fired upon by mounted burghers, superior in numbers to the T.M.I. squadrons. The next day the opposing forces merely kept a watchful eye on each other, but eventually the T.M.I. considered it prudent to withdraw, leaving the lines lying in the veld.<sup>10</sup>

Further east around Wakkerstroom, the Boers for a while proved equally resistant. Buller considered it necessary to gain control of the town. On 15 June Lyttelton despatched the mounted infantry of the 4th Division, 6 companies K.R.R. and 6 companies Liverpool Regiment under command of Major-General F. Howard, to carry out the task. As this force approached Wakkerstroom from the south, large numbers of Boers gathered before the town to resist them. This show of force prompted Buller to order the immediate withdrawal of Lyttelton's men. Instead Hildyard was to act in co-operation with Lyttelton's men, and carry out the task. His force comprised the 3rd Mounted Brigade, 61st (Howitzer) battery, a 12 pounder naval gun battery, the 13th and 69th batteries R.F.A. and the 11th Brigade. Lyttelton's force was strengthened with the

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<sup>9</sup> Roberts Papers, T.A. XXI, Tel. no. 282, Buller to Roberts, 18 June 1900. No War Office reference number could be located for this source. It may however be in W.O. 105/13.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice and Grant, III, p. 280.

addition of the 53rd battery R.F.A., one Vickers-Maxim gun, six companies Leicester Regiment and six companies K.R.R..<sup>11</sup> With such an immense force, Buller was quite clearly determined to crush any resistance and force the capitulation of the town. On 16 June, Hildyard approached Wakkerstroom along a relatively easy route from the north-west. The following day Lyttelton joined in, by again approaching from the south. This time the British force entered the town without opposition and the landdrost officially surrendered the town. In addition, 193 burghers capitulated and 197 firearms and 80 000 round of ammunition were handed in as well as other supplies.<sup>12</sup> Buller's flanks were now relatively secure and his main supply line operational.

Piecing together the movements of the Boer commandos once they lost control of the Versamelberg and had given up the Drakensberg is exceptionally difficult as records for this particular period and area are virtually non-existent. It would appear that Roberts's move through the centre of the two republics and the loss of the Natal front presented such pressures and threats that, to a great extent, the forces under Erasmus and Botha disintegrated. Erasmus reported to President Kruger that this force initially made for Houtsnek via the rail line, while those on foot headed for Paardekop.<sup>13</sup> A day later Commandant Joubert telegraphing from Amersfoort reported having a mere 150 men with

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 280-281.

<sup>13</sup> Leyds 726(g), Tel. no. 6, Erasmus to Kruger, 12 June 1900, T.A.

him, that the Carolina, Lydenburg and Pretoria burghers had fled and that the Wakkerstroom commando no longer wished to fight.<sup>14</sup> The final comment is partially supported by the capitulation of men to Hildyard at Wakkerstroom a few days later, although it should be borne in mind that, in the circumstances, they hardly had a choice and, that a little earlier had shown spirited resistance to Lyttelton. Meanwhile Chris Botha mentioned having 400 Wakkerstroomers and 100 Swazilanders with him.<sup>15</sup> There were thus some Wakkerstroomers determined to continue the fight. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that only 193 burghers surrendered to Hildyard.

After fighting so proudly, valiantly and long in Natal, those same Boer forces were now, almost pathetically, disintegrating. None the less, being hopelessly outnumbered and seemingly defending a lost cause, with the Orange Free State already a British colony and the two major South African Republic urban centres now under British control, it would be unreasonable to have expected the burghers to remain unquestioningly in their positions. In some respects, it is, in fact, surprising that some of the burghers, such as those from Pretoria, remained there so long. The Carolina and Lydenburg commandos were at least still serving a purpose by resisting. The British forces had not yet invaded their territories.

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<sup>14</sup> Leyds 727(g), No tel. no., Cmdt Joubert to Kruger, 13 June 1900, T.A.

<sup>15</sup> Leyds 727(g), No Tel. no., C. Botha to H.T.D., 13 June 1900, T.A.

To understand why events turned out as they did, it will be helpful to review Boer and British strategies briefly, as well as factors which had an impact on the northern Natal campaign. The Boer strategy during the northern Natal campaign was virtually identical to that which they employed in the Thukela River valley. They occupied strategic high ground, dug trenches or built schanzes and placed their artillery out of view of the enemy. However, the northern Natal campaign was not nearly as effective as that waged in the Thukela valley. For this there were specific reasons. Boer numbers, both in men and artillery, were reduced compared to the Thukela campaign, while the British had more in both categories. Furthermore, British strategy had improved, probably as a result of lessons learnt along the Thukela. They made good use of their numerical superiority, forcing the Boers to hold their lines only thinly. Where possible, the British commanders employed their artillery more efficiently. This was particularly evident at Botha's Pass and Alleman's Nek. Not only was the artillery used to exert more pressure, but the mobility of the cavalry was more effectively utilised, either by being in the vanguard of an attack as at Helpmekaar and Botha's Pass or by stretching the Boer flanks as at Alleman's Nek. No longer were they, to all intents and purposes, almost exclusively infantry attacks, with the cavalry bringing up the rear as at Ntabamyama (20-21 January 1900), Spioenkop (24 January 1900) and Wynne Hill (22 February 1900). Although Buller nowhere expressly stated it, he did seem prepared to take more risks. This was well illustrated by the capture of Uithoek near Helpmekaar. The capture of this hill enabled the

infantry to follow and gain a strategic foothold on the plateau. More careful planning by the British officers is also evident. The meticulous preparation before the attack at Botha's Pass is a case in point, as is the outflanking movement at Helpmekaar which, combined with the rest of his force carefully strung out, misled the Boers as to his real intentions. By stringing out his force over a long front, Buller left it somewhat vulnerable to a counter attack, wherever the Boers chose to carry this out. However, experience would have taught Buller that Boer counter attacking and moving into the open was generally not their style.

British strategy employed in northern Natal was therefore significantly more effective than that employed in the Thukela valley. In addition to these improved British tactics, the Boers had further drawbacks to overcome. One of the major ones was the absence of their charismatic and dynamic leader, Louis Botha. Leadership, or the absence thereof, especially while they were still active in the Biggarsberg, was a particular weakness. The Boers themselves realised this, subsequently rebelling against Lucas Meyer and having him replaced. Chris Botha appears to have been the only leader able to motivate burghers to hold their positions when they were confronted by a concerted British attack. Losses suffered by both sides at Alleman's Nek were significantly higher than those at Helpmekaar or Botha's Pass. Botha did not arrive at Helpmekaar during the initial attack, but only later, by which time he could no longer materially influence the outcome. Low morale, brought on in part by the apparent futility of holding the Natal front when all else behind them was

collapsing, increased the difficulty of officers to mount a resilient campaign.

The departure of the Boers from the Drakensberg meant that, once again, the entire colony of Natal was under British control. News of this achievement was greeted with delight by the then Governor of Natal, Sir W.F. Hely-Hutchinson, who in a telegram announced: "Natal clear of the enemy after 242 days."<sup>16</sup> The Secretary of State for War congratulated Buller by telegraphing: "I congratulate you heartily on the manner in which you have cleared Natal of the enemy, and wish you not less success on the other side."<sup>17</sup> To this Buller replied: "Many thanks for your congratulations. The troops it is my honour and pleasure to command can go anywhere."<sup>18</sup> In typical Buller fashion, he gave credit to those men who most deserved it. He himself must surely also have felt a sense of triumph, having come to South Africa as commander-in-chief of the British forces in October 1899 and, after a series of reverses, suffering the indignity of being replaced by Roberts and reduced to the command of the Natal Field Force only. Now in the space of a month, he had inflicted three defeats on the Boers and, in the process, driven them out of Natal. As yet no significant assessment of Buller's role in the war has been undertaken, neither his successes in northern Natal nor, for that matter, his positive exploits in the eastern Transvaal, have been taken into account in forming any sort of

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<sup>16</sup> Principal Events, IV, p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

full and balanced judgement of his role in the Second Anglo-Boer War. Instead, Buller's defeats in the Thukela valley are the focus of attention. Thomas Pakenham has made some effort to reassess these criticisms, but as stated earlier, has paid no detailed attention to the northern Natal campaign.<sup>19</sup>

In more general terms, Buller's arrival on the highveld with yet another large British force to support that of Roberts's army, was another blow to the Boer military cause. Furthermore, a second supply line, this time a much shorter one than that from Cape Town, became available to the British. Formal pitched battles would soon become impractical for the Boers if they wished to continue the war. Already Christiaan de Wet had opted for a more mobile type of warfare in which supply lines and smaller garrisons were harassed. In October 1900 this became an overall Boer strategy.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pakenham, pp. 368-370 and 453-454.

<sup>20</sup> Pakenham, pp. 470-474.

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