

KIMBERLEY IS RELIEVED – LADYSMITH IS RELIEVED MAJUBA DAY IS AVENGED

WHETHER IT WAS THE CRUSHING DEFEATS OF JANUARY that changed the course of the war will, perhaps, never be known. What is certain, though, is that in February every man shared a morale so high that it brought an angel to every shoulder, and a confidence so great that it added the worth of an extra battalion to every conflict. Lord Roberts was rampant in the Orange Free State; General Buller strode the Natal as a giant. In just two weeks of brilliantly planned and heroically fought actions, the siege of Kimberley is broken; Cronje surrenders at Paadeberg; the Tugela Hills are won; Ladysmith is relieved and Botha's army is fleeing to the north. The happy coincidence that these successes synchronised on February 27th with the anniversary of Majuba Hill, wiping out a dishonour of nineteen years' standing felt throughout the British Army, will doubtless feature in the newspapers of the day more highly than the catalogue of courageous leadership and individual heroism that made them possible. My diary notes for the month are included here to provide the fine detail so easily missed when viewing the broad sweep of history ...

1 February 1900 - The forced crowding and inactivity after our withdrawal has led to outbreaks of sickness and many of the men are suffering with dysentery

2 February 1900 - The medical staff at Chieveley are working miracles to keep us free from the enteric fever that is sweeping Lord Roberts troops

3 February 1900 - After two days of difficult hauling our heavy artillery is now in place on Swartz Kop and the Boer positions are within range

3 February 1900 - General Buller prepares to assault Vaal Krantz in his third attempt to break through the Boer lines blocking the road to Ladysmith

3 February 1900 - I join Churchill with Major Lyttleton's Light Brigade and we move down the Tugela overnight to Mungers Drift opposite Vaal Krantz

4 February 1900 - General Buller outlines his plan to capture Vaal Krantz, move east from Brakfontein and drive a wedge through from ridge to ridge

4 February 1900 - If Buller succeeds with his Vaal Krantz plan the way will be open for a full frontal attack that will crumble the Boer defences

4 February 1900 - As evening falls, the Engineers prepare their equipment for bridging the Tugela at Munger's Drift under cover of darkness

5 February 1900 - Our attack is launched at first light with Colonel Murdoch, Lord Dundonald and Colonel Wynne leading a 3-pronged assault on Vaal Krantz

5 February 1900 - Guided by the war balloon above, a thunderous barrage from our field guns ravaged the Boer trenches and silenced their fire

5 February 1900 - Covered by our artillery, the Engineers bridge the Tugela and half of Major Lyttleton's force is across before the Boer realises

6 February 1900 - After a day of competing gunfire, the order was given to "fix bayonets and charge" at which point the Boer turned and fled

6 February 1900 - Vaal Krantz was ours but this was a victory destined not to last; by dusk the Boer had a Maxim in place raking our lines

6 February 1900 - Lacking cover on the veldt, Major Lyttleton's Light Brigade suffered terrible privations and at sunset was forced to withdraw

6 February 1900 - General Hildyard replaced Major Lyttleton and, with fresh troops in the field, routed the Boer and held the position at Vaal Krantz

7 February 1900 - In military terms, General Buller's plan was a success. Topographically, though, we were beaten and could not press our advantage

7 February 1900 - We had no advantage from Vaal Krantz and could not re-take Spion Kop - at dusk, General Buller calls his staff to a council of war

8 February 1900 - Nobody can believe that the decision of our generals is that we are to retreat again - just what has everybody died for?

8 February 1900 - Major General Hart is incensed at the decision to withdraw and demands that he is allowed another attempt to take Spion Kop

9 February 1900 - Hart's protestations are to no avail and by midday we are again south of the Tugela wending our miserable way back to Chieveley

10 February 1900 - What sadness must the hapless souls of Ladysmith be feeling as they hear of yet another British defeat and withdrawal

10 February 1900 - As General Buller regroups at Chieveley, Lord Roberts launches his main attack planning to outflank the Boer at Magersfontein

10 February 1900 - After supervising necessary command changes General Buller, shunning sleep, leaves for a reconnaissance of the Hlangwane foothills

11 February 1900 - General Buller calls a conference to announce that he is putting everything into his fourth attempt to break through to Ladysmith

11 February 1900 - General Buller's plan is to capture Hlangwane and hold this position at all costs to render all the surrounding hills untenable

11 February 1900 - General Hildyard reports to General Buller that we have a superiority of ten-to-one in artillery and four-to-one in troop numbers

11 February 1900 - I join Lieutenant Colonel Byng on a reconnaissance to Huzzar Hill, south-east of Hlangwane, overlooking Colenso and the route to Ladysmith

11 February 1900 - We are massing a huge force but many Boer families have joined their menfolk in the laagers, fatally encumbering Botha's army

12 February 1900 - From our reconnaissance report General Buller decides that Huzzar Hill, Mt Cingolo and Monte Cristo must be taken before Hlangwane

12 February 1900 - Scouts report that Lord Roberts has outflanked the Boer at Magersfontein and Major General French is preparing to attack Kimberley

12 February 1900 - Lord Roberts signals General Buller to confirm battle plans - both forces will strike within days, leaving the Boer nowhere to run

12 February 1900 - News of our imminent attack has raised morale and re-ignited the mens' fire - General Buller is a man walking as a giant again

13 February 1900 - Signal from HQ confirms that Major General French has advanced 70 miles in 3 days and is now over the Modder with Kimberley in sight

13 February 1900 - Lord Kitchener has joined Major General French and they have taken control of the Modder river crossings at Rondeval and Klip Drift

13 February 1900 - New field guns arrive as General Buller prepares the advance to Huzzar Hill and Hlangwane, now referred to as the Tugela Heights

13 February 1900 - General Buller prepares for final push to Ladysmith and Major General French for Kimberley. Coincidence, or a signal that the end is near?

14 February 1900 - General Buller's entire army is now on the move eastward to mount a three-pronged attack on the Boer positions on Huzzar Hill

14 February 1900 - Our field guns blast the Boer but, as at Colenso, they repeat their tactic of silence allowing us to advance without hindrance

14 February 1900 - After three hours against only a handful of sniper shots, Lord Dundonald's mounted brigade is in position to lead the final charge

14 February 1900 - Late afternoon and hell is unleashed as the Boer open fire with everything they have - but too late - by dusk the Hill is ours

14 February 1900 - No news of Major General French but we hear he has promised Lord Roberts that if he is still alive he would be in Kimberley by 15th

15 February 1900 - After last night's capture, Huzzar Hill has today become a fortress with the full might of our artillery blasting the Boer

15 February 1900 - Signal received at HQ that Major General French has broken through and Kimberley is relieved - a thunderous cheer splits the sky

15 February 1900 - While still heavily defended by the Boer, the Tugela Heights are open before us and Hlangwane then Colenso must shortly fall

16 February 1900 - We hear that the people of Kimberley suffered terribly during their ordeal, spurring us even more towards freeing Ladysmith

17 February 1900 - General Buller's entire force sweeps from ridge to ridge towards Mount Cingolo, forcing the Boer to retreat to Monte Christo

17 February 1900 - By sunset, Mount Cingolo is cleared of the enemy, our guns are in position and Monte Christo and Hlangwane are under fire

17 February 1900 - With no rest from his actions at Kimberley, Major General French is in hot pursuit of Cronje's forces now fleeing for Bloemfontein

18 February 1900 - All day our guns have pounded the Tugela ridges and now the infantry is subduing resistance on the flanks of Monte Christo

18 February 1900 - With Monte Christo held, Hlangwane can not be long defended and after just a few hours rest Colonel Thorneycroft's troops sweep in

18 February 1900 - Major General French catches up with the fleeing Boer, trapping Cronje and 5000 troops in a laager at Paadeberg on the Modder River

18 February 1900 - Major General French and Lieutenant General Kelly-Kenny propose bombarding the Boer into submission but Lord Kitchener orders a frontal assault

18 February 1900 - Another day of disaster. Lord Kitchener's insistence on frontal assault leaves some 80 officers and 1000 men killed or wounded

19 February 1900 - Storming across the ridges towards Hlangwane, Colonel Thorneycroft's brigade disturbs the Boers preparing their breakfast

19 February 1900 - The Boers flee before us, leaving behind their entire camp equipment, tons of ammunition and the Transvaal flag hanging limp

19 February 1900 - As the Boer abandons Hlangwane and the entire south of the Tugela, General Hildyard calls up our heavy artillery to bear on Colenso

19 February 1900 - Lord Roberts arrives at Paadeberg and, surprisingly, refuses Cronje's request for a cease-fire to recover and bury the dead

19 February 1900 - Lord Kitchener calls for more frontal assaults but, after a day of staff meetings, it is agreed that bombardment is better

20 February 1900 - Boer positions are falling like dominoes and our infantry have now occupied Colenso and advanced the front to Colenso Station

20 February 1900 - The Dublin Fusiliers press forward to the river under heavy shelling from a Boer brigade that has regrouped on the north bank

20 February 1900 - Botha is forced to abandon Fort Wylie, his last defended position south of the Tugela - the Boer line must now give way

20 February 1900 - With the Tugela still muddied by the fleeing Boer, our Engineers are already throwing pontoons across the river behind them

20 February 1900 - Unable to withstand the increasingly heavy bombardment at Paadeberg, De Wet withdraws his commandos and abandons Cronje

20 February 1900 - Signal received today from Lord Roberts HQ that we must press ahead with all haste or they will defeat the Boer before we do

21 February 1900 - Under heavy fire General Coke leads three brigades across the Tugela, forcing the Boer to withdraw from the ground before Colenso

21 February 1900 - Major General Wynne's 11th Brigade follow General Coke's troops across the river and capture the key Boer position at Horse-shoe Hill

21 February 1900 - Confidence is now surging through all of us but we must remember the cost: almost 3000 killed and missing in the past month

21 February 1900 - With De Wet gone, Cronje has 4500 men left at Paadeberg: he has said he will not surrender and they will surely die for nought

22 February 1900 - Botha rallies his troops atop Grobler's Kloof and Pieter's Hill but gathering at the foothills are General Coke's three brigades

22 February 1900 - After eight days and nights of continuous fighting, Botha's resistance is still costing us many lives for every yard gained

22 February 1900 - The Inniskillings take appalling fire at Pieter's Hill - at roll call just 1 officer and 43 men answer for the 500 that had gone in

22 February 1900 - Major General Wynne pushes forward from Horseshoe to a hill-top position north of Colenso and reports that Ladysmith is in sight

22 February 1900 - Lord Roberts learns that women and children are with Cronje's men but his offer of a safe passage out for them is refused

23 February 1900 - We are across the Tugela but every step of our way is frustrated by snipers and sharpshooters lurking in the brush and dongas

23 February 1900 - Every division is now in conflict with the Boer over an area of four square miles between Grobler's Kloof and Pieter's station

23 February 1900 - They defend to the death but a heliograph from Ladysmith tells us that lines of Boer wagons are already racing back to the Drakensberg

23 February 1900 - It was just an hour before sunset when Colonel Thackeray's brigade crested Grobler's Kloof and won the first advantage of the day

24 February 1900 - Without waiting for reinforcements Major General Hart storms the next hill to the north but his brigade is routed by a Boer rearguard action

24 February 1900 - The Boer cling doggedly to their hill-top and more than 500 officers and men die in Major General Hart's valiant but failed action

24 February 1900 - Pride swells every heart as we watch Lieutenant Inkson carry his wounded comrade over four hundred yards under brutal fire to safety

24 February 1900 - As chess pieces, General Buller moves his troops to strategic positions in a bid to outthink and outflank the Boer in the end-game

25 February 1900 - As dawn breaks General Buller sends reinforcements to every forward position but the Boer resistance prevents any further advance

25 February 1900 - Signals from Ladysmith indicate that behind their defiant lines of defence the Boer are abandoning their laagers and retiring

25 February 1900 - A 6 hour truce is agreed to recover our wounded but from one bloodied Tugela hillside we recover just 3 survivors and 80 dead

25 February 1900 - Report from Lord Roberts HQ tells us that hundreds of our troops are dead but the Boer is being crushed by our rolling bombardment

25 February 1900 - General Buller orders the Engineers to move the pontoons north where, hidden by a bend in the river, we can form a new bridgehead

26 February 1900 - General Buller orders a massive two-pronged assault - General Warren to attack the Boer left, Major Lyttleton the centre and the right

26 February 1900 - For once it appears that General Buller has outthought Botha - having failed to anticipate our moves, the Boer retreat gathers pace

26 February 1900 - Our three goals are Pieter's Hill, the Railway and the hill that has become known as Harts - confidence is high for all of them

26 February 1900 - Even in retreat the Boer hotly contests every yard of ground before finally turning and fleeing in the face of our forces

26 February 1900 - Lord Roberts and General Buller both intend to force their enemy to defeat tomorrow to remove the festering sore that is Majuba

27 February 1900 - Covered by a fearsome barrage, General Barton closes in first, then General Wynne and Col Norton - the Boer is now in full retreat

27 February 1900 - Driven from Pieter's Hill, the Railway and Grobler's Kloof, Botha's line is broken at last and the road to Ladysmith is open

27 February 1900 - A final charge by General Norcott's 4th Brigade clears the last crest and a huge cheer erupts as the Boer flee - it is Majuba Day

27 February 1900 - Under cover of darkness, the Royal Canadians advance and entrench within yards of Cronje's positions for a final dawn attack

27 February 1900 - The Boer awake at dawn to find themselves staring into the muzzles of Canadian rifles - surrender is now their only option

27 February 1900 - Cronjé surrenders at 6.00am with some 4000 men and 50 women and the slaughter at Paadeberg is at last over - it is Majuba Day

28 February 1900 - We watch a great column of Boer horsemen and wagons moving rapidly north from Ladysmith but General Buller orders us not to follow

28 February 1900 - Cyclists scorched into the city to confirm the news, signal rockets lit the sky and a ragged, shoeless crowd raced to meet us

28 February 1900 - It is 5pm as two squadrons of British infantry commanded by Major Gough ride into Ladysmith to be greeted by General White

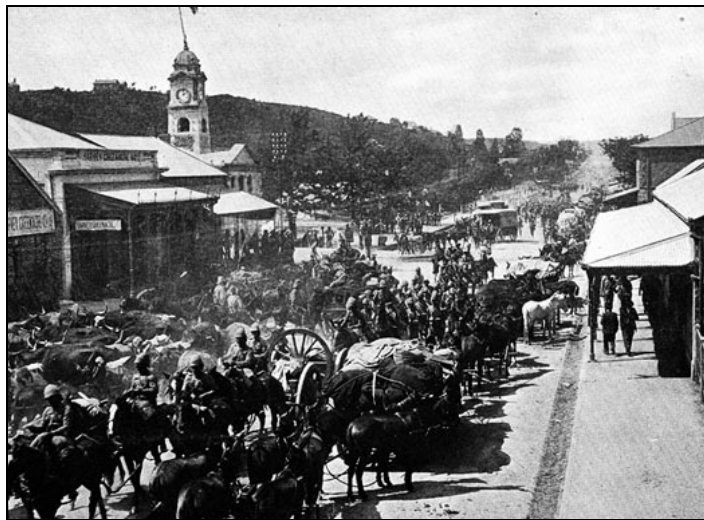
28 February 1900 - Within just 24 hours, General Buller has broken through, Cronje has surrendered and Ladysmith is relieved - Majuba Day is avenged



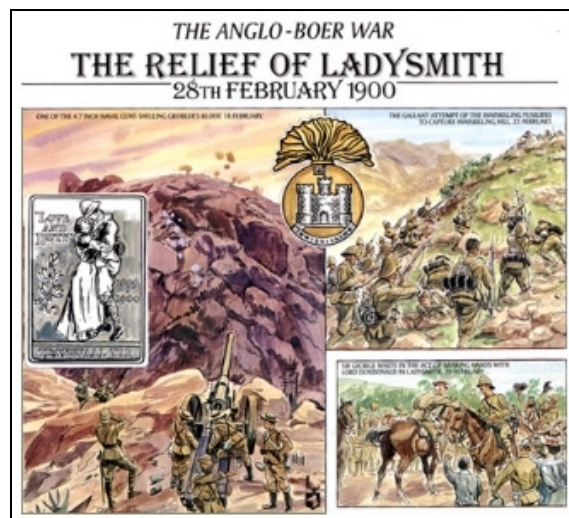
General French crossing Klip Drift en route to Kimberley



General Cronje after surrender at Paadeberg



Major Gough's relief force in Ladysmith - 28th February 1900



Media celebrations of the relief of Ladysmith