

A FORCE TO FINALLY DEFEAT THE BOER

IT IS TOO SIMPLE AND TOO QUICK A JUDGEMENT to cast blame and recrimination for the crushing losses of an entire army on to the shoulders of one man; particularly when that man is the very one that can lift his men from defeat to victory. The British government, though, took the defeats at Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso badly and, with Kimberley, Mafeking and Ladysmith still under siege, saw this as the nadir of General Buller's career, sending in Lord Roberts as his replacement, together with yet more troops amounting to some 180000 men with further reinforcements being sought. It is widely reputed that this will be the largest force Britain has ever sent overseas and, in my diary notes for January, a number of observations suggest that, regardless of who is Commander-in Chief, this must be the force that finally defeats the Boer ...

1 January 1900 - Churchill confides to me and Burleigh that he will stand for Parliament in the next election - but first there is a war to win

1 January 1900 - No New Year celebrations but morale is high at the news that Lord Kitchener has joined Lord Roberts - arriving in a few days

2 January 1900 - General Buller must know that his time as commander is limited but he orders General Hildyard to prepare for another attack on Colenso

3 January 1900 - The floods on the Tugela are receding and the opportunity to exploit General Hildyard's plan to attack Hlangwane is now lost

3 January 1900 - Reports are filtering in that the Boer is building a dam on the Klip so that the river will overflow and flood Ladysmith

4 January 1900 - The recent Boer victories have led them to prepare a ludicrous plan for peace including the surrender of Mafeking and Ladysmith

5 January 1900 - Our scouts report that the Boer is withdrawing from Colenso in preparation for an all-out assault on the garrison at Ladysmith

5 January 1900 - General Buller decides that we can not follow the Boer because, although the flood is receding, the Tugela still blocks our route

6 January 1900 - At 2.00 am the Boer crept up against the Ladysmith defences, climbed Wagon Hill and attacked 'Caesar's Camp' south of the town

6 January 1900 - A day of skirmishes followed Joubert's dawn attack but never did the Boer make a greater mistake than to attack in the open

7 January 1900 - Seldom will history record a more prolonged or desperate duel between two bodies of resolute men than at Caesars Camp yesterday

8 January 1900 - Over 360 of General White's officers and men died in the battle for Caesar's Camp - but the Boer suffered even more heavily

8 January 1900 - Disheartened and angry, the Boer returns to Colenso and Joubert immediately redeploys his forces along the banks of the Tugela

9 January 1900 - Still blocked by the Tugela floods, officers with tiny escorts risked death by day and by night to sketch the Boer positions

9 January 1900 - Unable to engage in battle, this has become a war of the mind - of feint and subterfuge - neither side can gain any advantage

9 January 1900 - On the chess-board of Natal the skilled players, General Buller and General Joubert, are now able to anticipate each move of the other

10 January 1900 - High spirits and a mood of excitement sweeps camp at the news that Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener have landed at Cape Town

10 January 1900 - General Buller issues orders that we are to forge a crossing of the Tugela at Potgeiter's Drift, which lies 22 miles west of Frere

11 January 1900 - Lord Dundonald signals that he has seized the bridge over the little Tugela and is proceeding under forced march to Swartz Kop

11 January 1900 - After what seems like an eternity of inaction, we are on the move, making rapid progress with General Buller's traction engines

12 January 1900 - An entire army moved more than twenty miles across difficult country in less than 24 hours - an incredible achievement

13 January 1900 - General Warren has pressed into the township of Springfield and taken up a strong position overlooking the Little Tugela Bridge

13 January 1900 - Before nightfall General Clery has cleared the Boer from an area of two miles around Springfield and bivouacked outside the town

14 January 1900 - General Hildyard is now camped at Pretorius Farm within easy reach of Deel's Drift and the fords at Tugela junction

14 January 1900 - With the first gleam of the morning sun a heliograph on Swartz Kop blinked the welcome news that Dundonald held the ferry

14 January 1900 - General Warren moves his division westward against the Boer's extreme right flank, to cover General Hildyard's crossing of the Tugela

15 January 1900 - General Buller establishes camp at Spearman's Farm, awaiting the final positioning of his divisions before launching his attack

15 January 1900 - General Barton gains more time with a feint at Colenso, keeping the Boer occupied and allowing General Warren to advance further west

16 January 1900 - General Warren is ready to cross the Tugela at Trigaard's Drift, while Major Lyttleton's Rifles await orders at Potgeiter's Drift

16 January 1900 - General Buller orders the advance but excessive caution seems to have gripped our band of General - is Colenso to be repeated?

17 January 1900 - We are in position to attack but our Generals insist that we await a thorough build-up of logistics, supplies and reserves

17 January 1900 - The Boer sits exposed on the ridges before us, awaiting developments but we are doing nothing, offering them no challenge

18 January 1900 - General Buller's plan is for General Weller to force a way through the Boer lines and strike across the open country towards Ladysmith

18 January 1900 - If General Weller's assault to cut through the Boer lines is quickly pressed, it will almost certainly be assured of success

19 January 1900 - Cable from General Warren to HQ is received explaining the reason for delaying his attack on the Boer lines ... it makes little sense

19 January 1900 - Lord Dundonald reaches the extreme flank of the Boer lines with a clear run to Ladysmith but is recalled to guard supplies

19 January 1900 - General Clery has made no progress at Tabanyama in three days, and Major Lyttleton is still awaiting orders at Potgeiter's Drift

20 January 1900 - The first hard blow is struck - with General Hildyard we leave Deel's Drift in a swift advance to support General Warren's right flank

20 January 1900 - Churchill is with Lt Colonel Byng's South African Light Horse as they storm a high Kopje under fire to reinforce General Warren's left

21 January 1900 - Corporal Tobin, an American with the Light Horse, climbs alone to the summit of a Boer kopje - and announces that the hill is his

21 January 1900 - Under a massive bombardment from the rear, we charge across the intervening valley and take the line of kopjes below Spion Kop

22 January 1900 - Signal from Lord Roberts HQ relieves General Buller as Commander in Chief but he temporarily retains control of current operations

22 January 1900 - Our guns blast the Boer positions from dawn to dusk but fail to make any impact and we remain entrenched for the entire day

23 January 1900 - General Buller arrives to survey our positions and, dismayed at the men's exposed conditions, he advised General Warren to retire

23 January 1900 - At 6.30 pm General Woodgate and Lt Colonel Thorneycroft's Infantry advanced in the dusk to surprise the Boer positions on Spion Kop

23 January 1900 - After 9 hours hard climbing the treacherous summit of Spion Kop was gained in complete surprise, the Boer fleeing in confusion

24 January 1900 - By dawn a vicious rifle fire was opened on our position by a handful of Boer marksmen, who had crept up unseen in the fog

24 January 1900 - In two hours the Boer fired over a thousand shells from Tabanyama against the exposed summit held by our thin line of khaki

24 January 1900 - We held the Kop summit but despair, the final weapon that sometimes achieves victory, stimulated the Boers to heroic exertion

24 January 1900 - Behind the cover of rocks and outcrops, the Boer crept to within yards of our position and opened a fire of slaughter upon us

24 January 1900 - General Woodgate is shot through the head and dies before us - most of the officers are fallen and at least half of the men dead

24 January 1900 - Major Lyttleton's brigade mounts a frontal attack, obtaining a ledge on the north spur, which they hold tenaciously under fire

24 January 1900 - General Coke arrives with reinforcements but finds the ground littered with dying and dead - and turns back to General Warren's HQ

24 January 1900 - With the men battered and shot at until few had escaped injury, Colonel Thorneycroft is now in command and orders a withdrawal

24 January 1900 - Carrying all our wounded but leaving our dead on the field, Colonel Thorneycroft leads us down quietly, evacuating in the darkness

25 January 1900 - Last night's withdrawal was accomplished without the loss of a man, but many wounded were not able to be moved and died today

25 January 1900 - Our retirement was a heart-breaking experience and it now seems that each of those precious lives has been uselessly expended

25 January 1900 - General Buller orders our forces to fall back across the Tugela for rest and recuperation - has all of this then been for nought?

25 January 1900 - With hopes dashed once more, the hapless Ladysmith must settle again in despair to further fight their starvation and disease

26 January 1900 - Only this morning did we discover that after our retreat the Boer had also withdrawn and, had we stayed, the battle was won

26 January 1900 - We re-unite with Churchill who tells us that, as a courier for HQ, he carried the signal promoting Colonel Thorneycroft to General

27 January 1900 - Three thousand reinforcements from Chieveley, together with a horse battery and more cavalry, arrived opportunely today

27 January 1900 - The reports and analysis after Spion Kop identified a catalogue of poor decisions, command errors and communication failures

27 January 1900 - General Buller blames General Warren: General Warren blames General Coke: General Coke blames General Warren: it seems that all are at fault

28 January 1900 - Lord Roberts is now only days away and, despite his orders, General Buller decides to launch another attack to re-take Spion Kop

28 January 1900 - Our final casualty count reveals 243 men killed and 1250 wounded or captured: the Boer has 335 casualties of which 68 are dead

29 January 1900 - General Buller orders our heavy guns to be positioned atop Swartz Kop from where the Boer on Spion Kop will be within our range

30 January 1900 - General Buller ignores the recriminations of the Spion Kop disaster and orders preparations for a further assault on Vaal Krantz

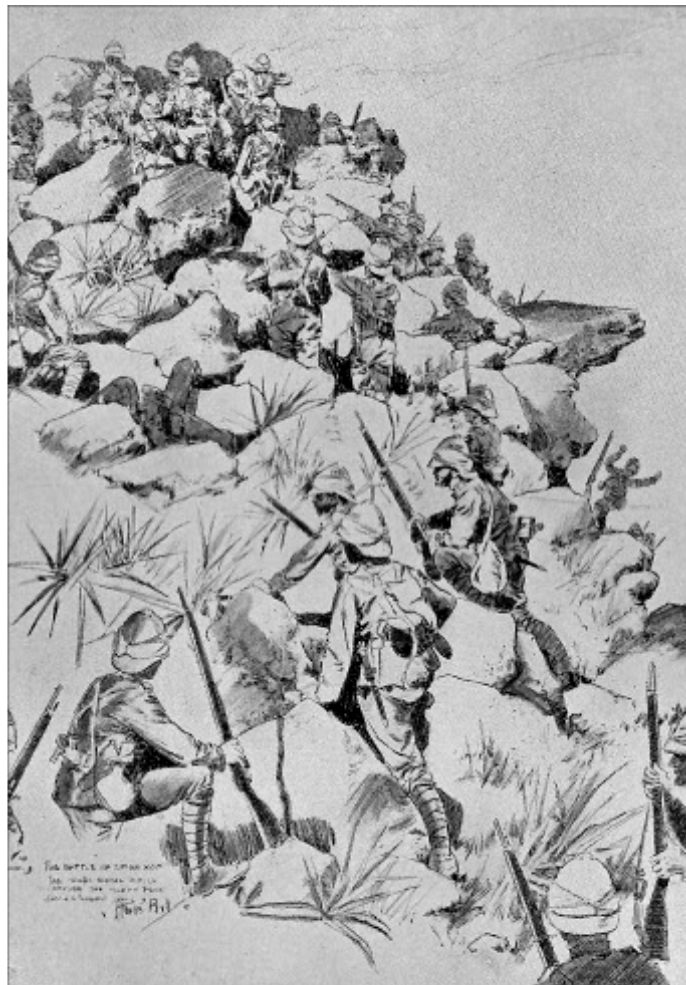
30 January 1900 - Signal received from HQ to inform General Buller that Lord Roberts' forces are now positioned at Orange River and will advance to Kimberley

31 January 1900 - Lord Roberts and Lord Methuen have now combined their forces of more than 40000 under the overall command of Major-General French

31 January 1900 - Despite our recent losses and defeats there is a confidence beginning to spread from man to man like a bush fire on the veldt

"LEFT FLANK 19th January."
TO THE CHIEF OF THE STAFF - I find there are only two roads by which we could possibly get from Trichard's Drift to Potgeister's, on the north of the Tugela; one by Acton Homes, the other by Fair View and Rosalie. The first I reject as too long; and the second is a very difficult road for a large number of wagons, unless the enemy is thoroughly cleared out. I am, therefore, going to adopt some special arrangements which will involve my staying at Venter's Laager for two or three days. I will send for further supplies and report progress.
"WARREN"

General Warren's Message to HQ Staff



REINFORCEMENTS SCALING SPION KOP
Drawn by René Bull
