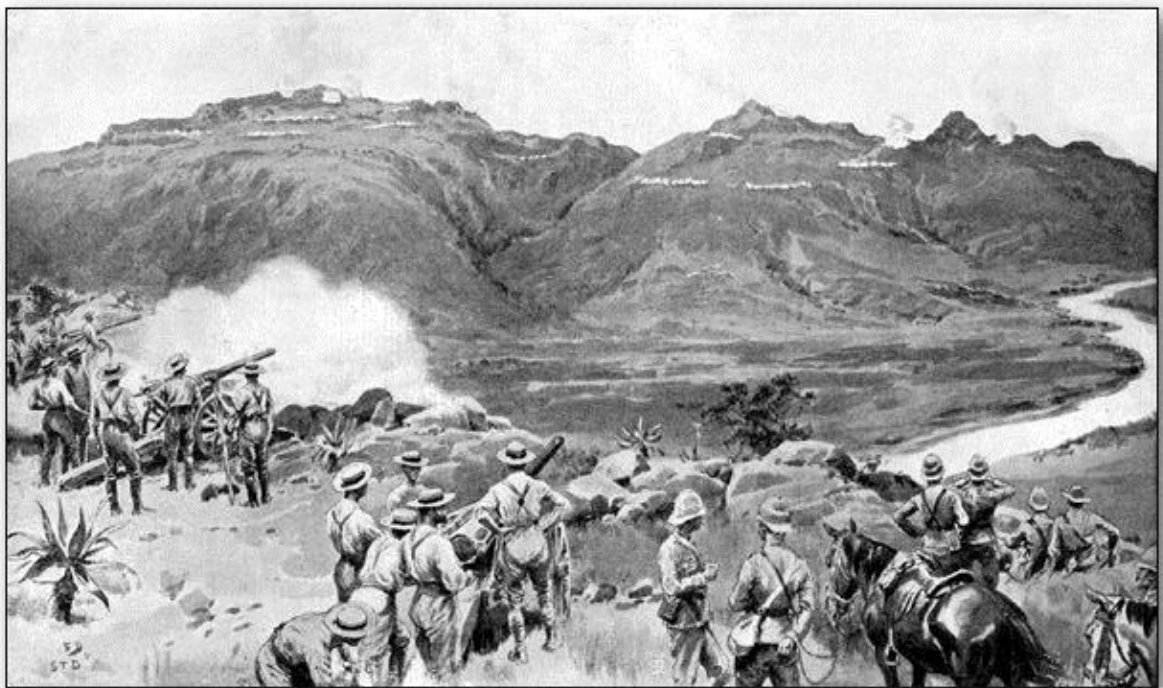


The Battle of Spioenkop

Staff Ride Guide

USNA LREC 2012



Royal Navy Gunners fire towards Boer positions around Spioenkop from Mt Alice

Spioenkop Staff Ride

'There cannot have been many battlefields where there was such an accumulation of horrors within so small a compass.' – Denys Reitz

The Battle of Spioenkop (also Spionkop or Spion Kop) was part of the second Anglo-Boer War. The battle began on the night of the 23rd of January 1900. By the next evening it was all over, with over 1800 soldiers from both sides having been killed, wounded or captured. While the exact number is debated it is estimated that 311 men were killed that day (243 British, 68 Boer), in what is considered to be the bloodiest single engagement of the Anglo-Boer War. Provided here is the information you will need to conduct a staff ride of the Spioenkop battlefield.

About Staff Rides¹

Staff rides were developed by the Prussian general staff early in the nineteenth century, and have been used intermittently by the American and other militaries since then. In the 1970's, the Army and the Marine Corps turned to them with particular vigor, and today they form a staple of instruction in advanced military schools such as the Army War College as well as in field units.

A staff ride differs from a guided battlefield tour in two respects. First, it is an educational technique for studying leadership. In a staff ride, participants ask the historian's questions "What happened?" "Why?" "With what result?" but then press further: "Did this commander make the right decision at this juncture?" "How would I have acted in his place?" "Should he have made a different decision given the information he had?" It is, to use an unpopular term, a judgmental exercise, and often a counterfactual one. A staff ride resembles a business school case study, but conducted, as it were, on-site.

Secondly, a staff ride requires active participation. The challenge and the pleasure of this activity lies in its character as a collective effort, and its success rests on the participants themselves. The staff ride director serves as a moderator or a seminar leader, and only in the last resort as a subject matter expert. What makes staff rides particularly stimulating is that they are group exercises, in which we examine many aspects of command and management. To that end each participant takes a turn giving a short talk, in most cases playing the role of one of the main participants in the battle, and is questioned by his or her colleagues about that participant's view of what has transpired on the battlefield.

What is the purpose behind a staff ride? Although participants plunge more deeply into a particular historical episode than do most casual visitors to a battlefield, the purpose is not to satisfy antiquarian interests, but to address larger issues. Some of the questions a group might explore are: "What are the limits imposed by loyalty on dissent against the chief's policies?" "How detailed should the guidance from a superior to a subordinate be?" "How can a senior leader make use of a competent, but

¹ Copied from the website of the Merrill Centre for Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins University, <http://www.sais-jhu.edu/programs/ir/strategic/trips/about.html>

overzealous and headstrong subordinate?" "Why do some leaders seem able to exploit opportunity, and others not?" "What explains repeated organizational success (or failure)?" The leadership issues posed in a staff ride transcend time and even the military frame of reference.

Central Characters of the Battle of Spionkop

The Strategic Level

President Paul Kruger

Cecil John Rhodes

Joseph Chamberlain

*General Sir Redvers Buller

The Operational Level

*General Louis Botha

*General Sir Charles Warren

*Colonel Lord Dundonald

The Tactical Level

Major General Woodgate

*Lt Colonel Alexander Thornycroft

*Major General Lyttleton

*Commandant Hendrik Prinsloo

Louis Bothma²

Denys Reitz

Notable Observers

Winston Churchill

Mohandas Ghandi

² Little direct information is known about this participant in the battle. The participant who is assigned this 'character' should focus on the type, capabilities and impact of the Boer artillery.

Information about the Battle of Spioenkop

The pages that follow contain a number of extracts relating to the battle. Beyond that you can gather additional information about the Anglo-Boer war from www.angloboerwar.com and, of course, from the dreaded Wikipedia. As always a careful web search is likely to yield useful results. First published in 1979, and available in various editions from several publishers, Thomas Pakenham's *The Boer War* offers one of the more respected single volume accounts of the conflict in print. For the more adventurous, the seven volume *Times History of the War in South Africa 1899 – 1902*, edited by L.S. Amery in 1902, is among the holdings of many libraries and is also available on a number of internet sites including www.pinetreeweb.com. Most recently published is Ron Lock's outstanding *Hill of Squandered Valour: The Battle for Spioenkop, 1900* (Casemate). Purchasing this book is highly recommended, and will add significantly to your staff ride experience.

1. Winston Churchill's Account of the Battle	page 5
2. Denys Reitz's Account of the Battle	page 11
3. Arthur Conan Doyle's Account of the Battle	page 19
4. Robert C. Daniels Analysis of the Battle	page 29
5. C.J. Barnard's Analysis of the Battle	page 46
6. Ghandi and the Battle of Spioenkop	page 61

1. Winston Churchill's Account of the Battle

Winston Churchill, *From London to Ladysmith via Pretoria*

THE BATTLE OF SPION KOP

Venter's Spruit: January 25, 1900.

It is the remarkable characteristic of strong races, as of honourable men, to keep their tempers in the face of disappointment, and never to lose a just sense of proportion; and it is, moreover, the duty of every citizen in times of trouble to do or say or even to think nothing that can weaken or discourage the energies of the State. Sir Redvers Buller's army has met with another serious check in the attempt to relieve Ladysmith. We have approached, tested, and assailed the Boer positions beyond the Tugela, fighting more or less continuously for five days, and the result is that we find they cannot be pierced from the direction of Trichardt's Drift any more than at Colenso. With the loss of more than two thousand men out of a small army, we find it necessary to recross the river and seek for some other line of attack; and meanwhile the long and brave resistance of Ladysmith must be drawing to a close. Indeed, it is the opinion of many good judges that further efforts to relieve the town will only be attended with further loss. As to this I do not pronounce, but I am certain of one thing—that further efforts must be made, without regard to the loss of life which will attend them.

I have seen and heard a good deal of what has passed here. I have often been blamed for the freedom with which I have written of other operations and criticised their commanders. I respectfully submit that I am as venomous an amateur strategist as exists at this time. It is very easy—and much more easy than profitable—when freed from all responsibility to make daring suggestions and express decided opinions. I assert that I would not hesitate to criticise mercilessly if I was not myself sobered by the full appreciation of the extraordinary difficulties which the relief of Ladysmith presents; and if there be anyone who has any confidence in my desire to write the truth I appeal to him to be patient and calm, to recognise that perhaps the task before Sir Redvers Buller and his subordinates is an actual impossibility, that if these generals are not capable men—among the best that our times produce—it is difficult to know where and how others may be obtained, and finally to brutally face the fact that Sir George White and his heroic garrison may be forced to become the prisoners of the Boers, remembering always that nothing that happens, either victory or defeat, in northern Natal can affect the ultimate result of the war. In a word, let no one despair of the Empire because a few thousand soldiers are killed, wounded, or captured. Now for the story as plainly and briefly as possible.

When Buller had arrived at Potgieter's he found himself confronted by a horseshoe position of great strength, enclosing and closing the debouches from the ford where he had secured a practical bridgehead. He therefore masked Potgieter's with seven battalions and twenty-four guns, and sent Warren with twelve battalions and thirty-six guns to turn the right, which rested on the lofty hill—almost mountain—of Spion Kop. The Boers, to meet this turning movement, extended their line westwards along

the heights of the Tugela valley almost as far as Acton Homes. Their whole position was, therefore, shaped like a note of interrogation laid on its side, —/\, the curve in front of General Lyttelton, the straight line before Sir Charles Warren. At the angle formed by the junction of the curve and the line stands Spion Kop—'look-out hill.' The curved position in front of General Lyttelton has been already described in a previous letter. The straight position in front of Sir Charles Warren ran in two lines along the edge and crest of a plateau which rises steeply two miles from the river, but is approachable by numerous long arêtes and dongas. These letters have completed the chronicle down to the evening of the 18th, when the successful cavalry action was fought on the extreme left.

I do not know why nothing was done on the 19th, but it does not appear that anything was lost by the delay. The enemy's entrenchments were already complete, and neither his numbers nor the strength of his positions could increase.

On the 20th Warren, having crept up the arêtes and dongas, began his attack. The brigades of Generals Woodgate and Hart pushed forward on the right, and the Lancashire and Irish regiments, fighting with the usual gallantry of her Majesty's troops, succeeded, in spite of a heavy fire of rifles and artillery, in effecting lodgments at various points along the edge of the plateau, capturing some portions of the enemy's first line of entrenchments. On the extreme left the cavalry under Lord Dundonald demonstrated effectively, and the South African Light Horse under Colonel Byng actually took and held without artillery support of any kind a high hill, called henceforward 'Bastion Hill,' between the Dutch right and centre. Major Childe, the officer whose squadron performed this daring exploit, was killed on the summit by the shell fire to which the successful assailants were subjected by the Boers. In the evening infantry reinforcements of Hildyard's Brigade arrived, and at dawn the cavalry handed over the hill to their charge. The losses during the day did not exceed three hundred and fifty officers and men wounded—with fortunately, a small proportion of killed—and fell mainly on the Lancashire Fusiliers, the Dublin Fusiliers (always in the front), and the Royal Lancaster Regiment. They were not disproportioned to the apparent advantage gained.

On the 21st the action was renewed. Hart's and Woodgate's brigades on the right made good and extended their lodgments, capturing all the Boer trenches of their first defensive line along the edge of the plateau. To the east of 'Bastion Hill' there runs a deep re-entrant, which appeared to open a cleft between the right and centre of the Boer position. The tendency of General Hildyard's action, with five battalions and two batteries, on the British left this day was to drive a wedge of infantry into this cleft and so split the Boer position in two. But as the action developed, the great strength of the second line of defence gradually revealed itself. It ran along the crest of the plateau, which rises about a thousand yards from the edge in a series of beautiful smooth grassy slopes of concave surface, forming veritable glacis for the musketry of the defence to sweep; and it consisted of a line of low rock and earth redoubts and shelter trenches, apparently provided with overhead cover, and cleverly arranged to command all approaches with fire—often with cross-fire, sometimes with converging fire. Throughout the 21st, as during the 20th, the British artillery, consisting of six field batteries and four howitzers, the latter apparently of tremendous power, bombarded the whole Boer position ceaselessly, firing on each occasion nearly three thousand shells. They claim to have inflicted considerable loss on the enemy, and

must have inflicted some, but failed utterly and painfully to silence the musketry, to clear the trenches, or reach and overpower the Dutch artillery, which did not number more than seven or eight guns and two Maxim shell-guns, but which were better served and manoeuvred and of superior quality. The losses in the action of the 20th were about one hundred and thirty officers and men killed and wounded, but this must be regarded as severe in the face of the fact that no serious collision or even contact took place.

During the 22nd and 23rd the troops held the positions they had won, and the infantry were subjected to a harassing shell fire from the Boer guns, which, playing from either flank, searched the re-entrants in which the battalions sheltered, and which, though they did not cause a greater loss than forty men on the 22nd and twenty-five on the 23rd, nevertheless made their position extremely uncomfortable. It was quite evident that the troops could not be fairly required to endure this bombardment, against which there was no protection, indefinitely. Nor was any good object, but rather the contrary, to be gained by waiting.

Three alternatives presented themselves to the council of war held on the 22nd. First, to attack the second Boer position frontally along the crest by moonlight. This would involve a great slaughter and a terrible risk. Secondly, to withdraw again, beyond the Tugela, and look elsewhere for a passage: a moral defeat and a further delay in the relief of Ladysmith; and thirdly, to attack by night the mountain of Spion Kop, and thence to enfilade and command the Boer entrenchments. Sir Redvers Buller, who has always disdained effect, was for the second course—unpalatable as it must have been to a fearless man; miserable as it is to call off infantry after they have made sacrifices and won positions, and to call them off a second time. The discussion was an informal one, and no votes were taken, but the General yielded to the advice of his subordinate, rightly, I hold, because now at least we know the strength of the enemy's position, whereas before we only dreaded it; and knowledge is a better reason for action than apprehension.

It was therefore decided to attack Spion Kop by night, rush the Boer trenches with the bayonet, entrench as far as possible before dawn, hold on during the day, drag guns up at night, and thus dominate the Boer lines. There is, of course, no possible doubt that Spion Kop is the key of the whole position, and the reader has only to think of the horizontal note of interrogation, and remember that the mountain at the angle divides, commands, and enfilades the enemy's lines, to appreciate this fact. The questions to be proved were whether the troops could hold out during the day, and whether the place could be converted into a fort proof against shell fire and armed with guns during the following night. Fate has now decided both.

General Woodgate was entrusted with the command, and Colonel Thorneycroft with much of the arrangement and direction of the night attack. It does not seem that anything but good resulted from this too soon broken co-operation. Thorneycroft declined to attack on the night of the 22nd because the ground had not been reconnoitered, and he wanted to be sure of his way. The infantry therefore had another day's shelling on the 23rd. Good reconnaissances were, however, made, Lyttelton was strengthened by two Fusilier battalions from Chieveley, Warren was reinforced by Talbot Coke's Brigade and the Imperial Light Infantry, and at one o'clock on the morning of January 24 General Woodgate started from his camp with the Lancashire

Fusiliers, the Royal Lancaster Regiment, two companies of the South Lancashires, and Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry. Guided by Colonel Thorneycroft the force made its way successfully up the southern spur of the mountain, over most difficult and dangerous ground, and surprised the Boers guarding the entrenchments on the summit. At three o'clock those listening in the plain heard the sudden outburst of musketry, followed by the loud cheers of the troops, and knew that the position had been carried. Ten soldiers were killed and wounded in the firing. Six Boers perished by the bayonet. The force then proceeded to fortify itself, but the surface of the hill was extremely unsuited to defence. The rocks which covered the summit made digging an impossibility, and were themselves mostly too large to be built into sangars. Such cover, however, as had been made by the Boers was utilised and improved.

Morning broke, and with it the attack. The enemy, realising the vital importance of the position, concentrated every man and gun at his disposal for its recapture. A fierce and furious shell fire was opened forthwith on the summit, causing immediate and continual loss. General Woodgate was wounded, and the command devolved on a regimental officer, who, at half-past six, applied for reinforcements in a letter which scarcely displayed that composure and determination necessary in such a bloody debate.

Sir Redvers Buller then took the extreme step of appointing Major Thorneycroft—already only a local lieutenant-colonel—local Brigadier-General commanding on the summit of Spion Kop. The Imperial Light Infantry, the Middlesex Regiment, and a little later the Somersets, from General Talbot Coke's Brigade, were ordered to reinforce the defence, but General Coke was directed to remain below the summit of the hill, so that the fight might still be conducted by the best fighting man.

The Boers followed, and accompanied their shells by a vigorous rifle attack on the hill, and about half-past eight the position became most critical. The troops were driven almost entirely off the main plateau and the Boers succeeded in reoccupying some of their trenches. A frightful disaster was narrowly averted. About twenty men in one of the captured trenches abandoned their resistance, threw up their hands, and called out that they would surrender. Colonel Thorneycroft, whose great stature made him everywhere conspicuous, and who was from dawn till dusk in the first firing line, rushed to the spot. The Boers advancing to take the prisoners—as at Nicholson's Nek—were scarcely thirty yards away. Thorneycroft shouted to the Boer leader: 'You may go to hell. I command on this hill and allow no surrender. Go on with your firing.' Which latter they did with terrible effect, killing many. The survivors, with the rest of the firing line, fled two hundred yards, were rallied by their indomitable commander, and, being reinforced by two brave companies of the Middlesex Regiment, charged back, recovering all lost ground, and the position was maintained until nightfall. No words in these days of extravagant expression can do justice to the glorious endurance which the English regiments—for they were all English—displayed throughout the long dragging hours of hell fire. Between three and four o'clock the shells were falling on the hill from both sides, as I counted, at the rate of seven a minute, and the strange discharges of the Maxim shell guns—the 'pom-poms' as these terrible engines are called for want of a correct name—lacerated the hillsides with dotted chains of smoke and dust. A thick and continual stream of wounded flowed rearwards. A village of ambulance waggons grew up at the foot of the

mountain. The dead and injured, smashed and broken by the shells, littered the summit till it was a bloody, reeking shambles. Thirst tormented the soldiers, for though water was at hand the fight was too close and furious to give even a moment's breathing space. But nothing could weaken the stubborn vigour of the defence. The Dorset Regiment—the last of Talbot Coke's Brigade—was ordered to support the struggling troops. The gallant Lyttelton of his own accord sent the Scottish Rifles and the 3rd King's Royal Rifles from Potgieter's to aid them. But though their splendid attack did not help the main action; though the British artillery, unable to find or reach the enemy's guns, could only tear up the ground in impotent fury; though the shell fire and rifle fire never ceased for an instant—the magnificent infantry maintained the defence, and night closed in with the British still in possession of the hill.

I find it convenient, and perhaps the reader will allow me, to break into a more personal account of what followed. It drove us all mad to watch idly in camp the horrible shelling that was directed on the captured position, and at about four o'clock I rode with Captain R. Brooke, 7th Hussars, to Spion Kop, to find out what the true situation was. We passed through the ambulance village, and leaving our horses climbed up the spur. Streams of wounded met us and obstructed the path. Men were staggering along alone, or supported by comrades, or crawling on hands and knees, or carried on stretchers. Corpses lay here and there. Many of the wounds were of a horrible nature. The splinters and fragments of the shell had torn and mutilated in the most ghastly manner. I passed about two hundred while I was climbing up. There was, moreover, a small but steady leakage of unwounded men of all corps. Some of these cursed and swore. Others were utterly exhausted and fell on the hillside in stupor. Others again seemed drunk, though they had had no liquor. Scores were sleeping heavily. Fighting was still proceeding, and stray bullets struck all over the ground, while the Maxim shell guns scourged the flanks of the hill and the sheltering infantry at regular intervals of a minute. The 3rd King's Royal Rifles were out of reach. The Dorset Regiment was the only battalion not thrown into the fight, and intact as an effective unit.

I had seen some service and Captain Brooke has been through more fighting than any other officer of late years. We were so profoundly impressed by the spectacle and situation that we resolved to go and tell Sir Charles Warren what we had seen. The fight had been so close that no proper reports had been sent to the General, so he listened with great patience and attention. One thing was quite clear—unless good and efficient cover could be made during the night, and unless guns could be dragged to the summit of the hill to match the Boer artillery, the infantry could not, perhaps would not, endure another day. The human machine will not stand certain strains for long.

The questions were, could guns be brought up the hill; and, if so, could the troops maintain themselves? The artillery officers had examined the track. They said 'No,' and that even if they could reach the top of the hill they would only be shot out of action. Two long-range naval 12-pounders, much heavier than the field-guns, had arrived. The naval lieutenant in charge said he could go anywhere, or would have a try any way. He was quite sure that if he could get on the top of the hill he would knock out the Boer guns or be knocked out by them, and that was what he wanted to find out. I do not believe that the attempt would have succeeded, or that the guns could have been in position by daylight, but the contrast in spirit was very refreshing.

Another informal council of war was called. Sir Charles Warren wanted to know Colonel Thorneycroft's views. I was sent to obtain them. The darkness was intense. The track stony and uneven. It was hopelessly congested with ambulances, stragglers, and wounded men. I soon had to leave my horse, and then toiled upwards, finding everywhere streams of men winding about the almost precipitous sides of the mountain, and an intermittent crackle of musketry at the top. Only one solid battalion remained—the Dorsets. All the others were intermingled. Officers had collected little parties, companies and half-companies; here and there larger bodies had formed, but there was no possibility, in the darkness, of gripping anybody or anything. Yet it must not be imagined that the infantry were demoralised. Stragglers and weaklings there were in plenty. But the mass of the soldiers were determined men. One man I found dragging down a box of ammunition quite by himself. 'To do something,' he said. A sergeant with twenty men formed up was inquiring what troops were to hold the position. Regimental officers everywhere cool and cheery, each with a little group of men around him, all full of fight and energy. But the darkness and the broken ground paralysed everyone.

I found Colonel Thorneycroft at the top of the mountain. Everyone seemed to know, even in the confusion, where he was. He was sitting on the ground surrounded by the remnants of the regiment he had raised, who had fought for him like lions and followed him like dogs. I explained the situation as I had been told and as I thought. Naval guns were prepared to try, sappers and working parties were already on the road with thousands of sandbags. What did he think? But the decision had already been taken. He had never received any messages from the General, had not had time to write any. Messages had been sent him, he had wanted to send others himself. The fight had been too hot, too close, too interlaced for him to attend to anything, but to support this company, clear those rocks, or line that trench. So, having heard nothing and expecting no guns, he had decided to retire. As he put it tersely: 'Better six good battalions safely down the hill than a mop up in the morning.' Then we came home, drawing down our rearguard after us very slowly and carefully, and as the ground grew more level the regiments began to form again into their old solid blocks.

Such was the fifth of the series of actions called the Battle of Spion Kop. It is an event which the British people may regard with feelings of equal pride and sadness. It redounds to the honour of the soldiers, though not greatly to that of the generals. But when all that will be written about this has been written, and all the bitter words have been said by the people who never do anything themselves, the wise and just citizen will remember that these same generals are, after all, brave, capable, noble English gentlemen, trying their best to carry through a task which may prove to be impossible, and is certainly the hardest ever set to men.

The Lancashire Fusiliers, the Imperial Light Infantry—whose baptism of fire it was—Thorneycroft's, and the Middlesex Regiment sustained the greater part of the losses.

We will have another try, and, if it pleases God, do better next time.

2. Denys Reitz's Account of the Battle

Denys Reitz, *Commando*, Chapter 9

ABOUT a week later, Mr Zeederberg said I could go to Pretoria for a fortnight, so leaving my brother in charge of my horses, I once again boarded a north-bound goods train and travelled home in a cattle-truck, getting-there in three days time. My father did not know I was coming, and although he gave me a warm welcome, he insisted on my returning at once, as he said the British were on the eve of delivering another great blow on the Tugela, and that my place was in Natal. I told him that the burghers thought there would be no more serious fighting, but he shook his head and said he only wished he could share our optimism.

I was disappointed, as I had been looking forward to the luxury of home life and good food for a little while, but I saw his point and started back on the second day.

I reached our camp at Ladysmith on January 23rd (1900) to find that volunteers were being called for to go to the Tugela, and I now heard that General Buller had moved the English army twenty-five miles upstream from Colenso in preparation for another big-scale attack in the vicinity of Spion Kop, a Prominent hill forming part of the Boer line on the north bank of the Tugela. Already they were hammering away at different points, seeking a weak spot at which to thrust; so my father had been right, and, indeed, the situation was so critical that reinforcements were being sent from every commando lying around Ladysmith.

From the Pretoria laager fifty volunteers were asked for, and more than three times that number immediately offered themselves. The Field-Cornet made a selection which included Isaac Malherbe, my brother and myself and our three remaining tent-mates, Charles Jeppe, de Vos and Heinecke, as well as several more of our corporalship.

We set out within an hour of my arrival from Pretoria, and crossed the Klip River after dark, riding all night round by the west until we reached the rear of Spion Kop at day-break. As we rode, we could hear the sound of heavy gun-fire from the forward hills, and it never ceased for any length of time although we were still too far back to be in it, danger.

After a short halt to rest our horses and cook breakfast, we were ordered to the top of a steep ridge lying about a mile to the right, where we had to dig a reserve trench. A mule-wagon had accompanied us from Ladysmith carrying provisions, ammunition and a supply of pick-axes and shovels, with which unaccustomed tools we started up the slope, horses and all.

When we had dug for some time, Field-Cornet Zeederberg, who was always very kind to me, said that as I was the youngest I need not dig any more and could go down to where the wagon had been left for a rest. Nothing loath, I made haste to reach the halting-place, and, leaving my horse in charge of the mule-drivers, I started out to see

what was going on in the front positions, which were out of sight from where we had been digging.

Ever since sunrise there had come the unbroken boom of guns and the rattle of small arms, and now that I was free I decided to walk across the intervening hills to the firing-line. As I went, the gun and rifle-fire grew louder, and before long I reached a point from which I could see the Boer front strung out along the top of the next rise.

Black mushrooms of earth and smoke hung along the course of the positions from the heavy shells flung across the Tugela, and puff's of shrapnel flecked the air above. From the noise I judged that a battle was in full progress and, after some hesitation, I hurried on and reached the line in safety. The spectacle from here was a fine one. Far below on the plain the Tugela wound shining in the sun, and the bank beyond was alive with English foot and horse. From the wooded hills farther back came the flashes of the British guns, and in the din I asked myself more than once why I had been foolish enough to come.

During the preceding days the English had effected a lodgment at numerous points on our side of the river, and their troops were occupying such spurs and ridges running up from the water's edge as they had been able to seize. The Boers, on being pushed back, had reformed along the crest of the height, where they were now holding a series of hastily dug trenches and whatever natural cover they could find, and were stoutly resisting any further encroachments of the enemy, who in places were lying within a few hundred yards of us.

The Positions here were held by Free State commandos while downstream lay the Transvaalers. There were probably ten or twelve thousand burghers in all on these hills, with the bastion of Spion Kop standing like a pivot in the centre. For the most part the men made slight reply to the fire in order to husband their ammunition, and our artillery kept silent for the same reason, although it was estimated that there were over two hundred guns firing at us, and I have heard that this was the heaviest concentration of gun fire that has been seen in any war up to the present.

The casualties were considerable and I saw some men fearfully mutilated, including a father and son of the Frankfort commando who were torn to pieces by a howitzer shell, their rifles being sent spinning down the incline at the back of us.

It was a day of strain. Not only was there the horror of seeing men killed and maimed, but there was the long-drawn tension and fear of the approaching shells.

This tremendous volume of fire indicated an early attack, and throughout the day we looked to see the storm break at any moment, but, as it turned out, the bombardment was a feint, the real blow being delivered after midnight at a different point.

I was entitled to quit the line as my unit lay in the rear, but I did not like to go, and remained until things died down towards sunset, when I could return without loss of face. I found the Pretoria volunteers where I had left them digging that morning. They must have worked well, for they had completed quite a long trench.

I joined Isaac Malherbe and others sitting round the fires cooking their supper, and, watching the light fade away over the distant Drakensbergen, I chatted for a quiet hour with men who were mostly dead next morning.

Field-Cornet Zeederberg now ordered me down with him to the supply wagon. He said he was going to spend the night there, and, as he might require to send a message up to the trench, I was to come with him for I had good climbing legs.

When we got below, a tent had been pitched for him which I was allowed to share, and I was soon fast asleep. It rained at intervals during the night, and towards three in the morning we were waked by an angry stutter of rifle-fire coming from Spion Kop. We sat up listening, but as there was nothing we could do in the rain and darkness, and as after a while the firing died down, we fell asleep again.

At sunrise loud gun - and rifle-fire broke out along the front on which I had been the day before; but, as it was no worse than it had then been, Mr Zeederberg and I were not unduly perturbed and sat sipping our morning coffee in the lee of the wagon out of the way of the spent bullets that whined over our heads.

As we breakfasted one of our Pretoria men galloped up with a message from; Isaac Malherbe to say that the British had made a night attack and had captured Spion Kop. This was most serious, for if the hill went-the entire Tugela line would go with it, and we could hardly bring ourselves to believe the news. The man, however, assured us that it was true, but he said that a strong force of burghers was assembling below the hill and that Isaac Malherbe had ridden down by a short cut with all the men who were with him, so we shouted to the mule-drivers to saddle our horses, and filling up with ammunition from a box on the wagon we followed on the heels of our guide.

Heavy shells were lobbing over as we went but we had not far to go and in less than fifteen minutes reached the bottom of Spion Kop. Here stood hundreds of saddled horses in long rows, and we looked up at an arresting sight.

The Boer counter-attack had started shortly before. Eight or nine hundred riflemen were climbing up the steep side of the hill in face of a close-range fire from the English troops who had established themselves on the flat summit overnight. Many of our men dropped, but already the foremost were within a few yards of the rocky edge which marked the crest, and soldiers were rising from behind their cover to meet the final rush. For a moment or two there was confused hand-to-hand fighting, then the combatants surged over the rim on to the plateau beyond, where we could no longer see them. Spellbound, we watched until our men passed out of view, and then, recovering ourselves, dismounted, and tying our horses with the rest, hurried up in the wake of the attack.

Dead and dying men lay all along the way, and there was proof that the Pretoria men had gone by, for I soon came on the body of John Malherbe, our Corporal's brother, with a bullet between his eyes; a few paces farther lay two more dead men of our commando. Farther on I found my tent-mate, poor Robert Reinecke, shot through the head, and not far off L. de Villiers of our corporalship lay dead. Yet higher up was Krige, another of Isaac's men, with a bullet through both lungs, still alive, and beyond him Walter de Vos of my tent, shot through the chest, but smiling cheerfully as we

passed. Apart from the Pretoria men there were many other dead and wounded, mostly Carolina burghers from the eastern Transvaal, who formed the bulk of the assaulting column. Spion Kop, although steep, is not very high on the northern slope where we went up, and it did not take us long to reach the top. Here we found that the advance had got no farther than the fringe of loose rocks that runs like a girdle around the upper tableland. For the rest of the flat stretch beyond was still wholly in the hands of the British, who lay in a shallow trench behind a long low wall of stone about twenty yards away. From here came a vicious rifle-fire that made further progress impossible. It was marvellous that the Boors had got even thus far, for they had swarmed up the bare hillside in the face of a devastating fire, and they had pushed home the attack with such vigour that the narrow belt of rocks was thickly strewn with their dead.

I met my brother coming down in charge of captured soldiers and did not see him again as he had orders to escort them to Ladysmith, and he took no further part in the battle.

Giving him a hurried handshake, I went forward to the firing-line a few yards farther on. During the short delay I lost touch with Mr Zeederberg, and when I inquired from the men crouching behind the rocks for Isaac Malherbe, I was told by Red Daniel Opperman, the officer in command, that he had sent the Pretorians round to the ledge a few minutes earlier to rake the English flank. Working my way in that direction, I reached a spot where the out-crop of rocks came to a dead end. From here spread a patch of open ground until the ledge reappeared a hundred yards beyond.

One of the men holding this point told me that the Pretoria men had doubled across the gap shortly before and were now lying among the rocks on the far side, so I decided to follow; but the moment I left cover I drew so hot a fire that I was thankful to dive back for shelter and give up the attempt. Halfway across lay the huddled body of a dead man, and now that I had time to look more carefully at him I recognized Charles Jeppe, the last of my tent-mates. His death affected me keenly, for we had been particularly good friends. Outwardly he was a surly man, but he had shown me many a kindness since first we messed together on the Natal border. As I was unable to find my Corporal, I now returned to where I had first reached the top and took my place in the firing-line.

During my absence about fifty soldiers had run forward to surrender, but otherwise things were going none too well. We were sustaining heavy casualties from the English '*schans*' immediately in front of us, and the men grew restive under the galling point-blank fire, a thing not to be wondered at, for the moral effect of Lee-Metford volleys at twenty yards must be experienced to be appreciated. The English troops lay so near that one could have tossed a biscuit among them, and whilst the losses which they were causing us were only too evident, we on our side did not know that we were inflicting even greater damage upon them. Our own casualties lay hideously among us, but theirs were screened from view behind the breastwork, so that the comfort of knowing that we were giving worse than we received was denied us.

Fortunately, towards nine o'clock the situation eased, for the Transvaal artillerists got their guns into action on a commanding spur a mile away, and they began to fire over

our heads into the troops crowded on the restricted space on the plateau before us. As the guns searched the hill-top the English fire slackened, and from then onward our losses were less. The position, however, remained unsatisfactory. The sun became hotter and hotter, and we had neither food nor water. Around us lay scores of dead and wounded men, a depressing sight, and by midday a feeling of discouragement had gained ground that was only kept in check by Commandant Opperman's forceful personality and vigorous language to any man who seemed to be wavering. Had it not been for him the majority would have gone far sooner than they did, for the belief spread that we were being left in the lurch. We could see large numbers of horsemen collecting at the laagers on the plain behind, but no reinforcements reached us throughout the day. I repeatedly heard old Red Daniel assure the men that help would be forthcoming, but from the way he kept scanning the country below I could see that he was getting uneasy himself.

As the hours dragged on a trickle of men slipped down the hill, and in spite of his watchful eye this gradual wastage so depleted our strength that long before nightfall we were holding the blood-spattered ledge with a mere handful of rifles. I wanted to go too, but the thought of Isaac and my other friends saved me from deserting. No further attempt was made to press forward, and for the rest of this terrible day both sides stubbornly held their ground, and, although the battle remained stationary, the heavy close-range rifle-fire continued hours after hour, and the tale of losses mounted while we lay in the blazing heat.

I saw a strange incident during the morning. Near me was a German named von Brusewitz. He had been an officer in the German army, but the year before he had run a civilian through with his sword during some scuffle in a Berlin cafe. There was a great outcry over the incident, and to allay popular clamour the German Emperor broke him from his regiment. They say that in Germany the word '*Brusewitzerei*' is still used to denote the arrogance of the officer caste. However that may be, von Brusewitz was now on top of Spion Kop, where he seemed bent on getting killed, for although we warned him not to expose himself too recklessly, he paid no heed, and repeatedly stood out from among the rocks to fire.

As the English soldier were so close to us this was sheer folly, and after he had tempted providence several times the inevitable happened. I saw him rise once more, and, lighting a cigarette, puff away careless of the flying bullets until we heard a thud, and he fell dead within a few feet of me, shot through the head. Not long after this something similar happened. An old Kaffir servant came whimpering up among us from below, looking for his master's body. I advised him to be careful as he went from rock to rock peering over to examine the dead men lying in the open, but he would not listen, and soon he too had a bullet through his brain.

The hours went by; we kept watch, peering over and firing whenever a helmet showed itself, and in reply the soldiers volleyed unremittingly. We were hungry, thirsty and tired; around us were the dead men covered with swarms of flies attracted by the smell of blood. We did not know the cruel losses that the English were suffering, and we believed that they were easily holding their own, so discouragement spread as the shadows lengthened.

Batches of men left the line, openly defying Red Daniel, who was impotent in the face of this wholesale defection, and when at last the sun set I do not think there were sixty men left on the ledge.

Darkness fell swiftly; the firing died away, and there was silence, save for a rare shot and the moans of the wounded. For a long time I remained at my post, staring into the night to whew the enemy lay, so close that I could hear the cries of their wounded and the murmur of voices from behind their breastwork.

Afterwards my nerve began to go, and I thought I saw figures with bayonets stealing forward. When I tried to find the men who earlier in the evening had been beside me, they were gone. Almost in a panic I left my place and hastened along the fringe of rocks in search of company, and to my immense relief heard a gruff '*Wer da?*' It was Commandant Opperman still in his place with about two dozen men. He told me to stay beside him, and we remained here until after ten o'clock, listening to the enemy who were talking and stumbling about in the darkness beyond.

At last Opperman decided to retreat, and we descended the hill by the way which he had climbed up nearly six-teen hours before, our feet striking sickeningly at times against the dead bodies in our path. When we reached the bottom most of the horses were gone, the men who had retired having taken their mounts and ridden away, but our own animals, and those belonging to the dead or wounded were still standing without food or water where they had been left at daybreak.

The first thing to do was to quench our raging thirst and that of our horses at a spring near by. We then consulted as to our next move. Most of the wounded had been taken off in the course of the day, but we found a few serious cases that would not bear transport. Collected in charge of an old man, who, by the dim light of a lantern, was attending to their wants. We could get no coherent information and stood discussing what to do next, for we did not know that the English had also been fought to a standstill, and that they in turn were at that very moment retreating down their own side of Spion Kop. We fully believed that the morning would see them streaming through the breach to the relief of Ladysmith, and the rolling up of all our Tugela line.

While we were talking, Mr Zeederberg came out of the dark. I had lost sight of him during most of the day, but he had been on the hill all the time, and had only come down shortly before us. He had seen nothing of Isaac Malherbe and the rest of our Pretoria men, and had no idea of what had become of them. A few more stragglers joined us and we agreed to lead our horses to the Carolina wagon-laager that, as we knew, lay not far off. We foraged for food in the saddlebags of such horses as were left, and then went off. When we reached the laager we found everything in a state of chaos. The wagons were being hurriedly packed, and the entire Carolina commando was making ready to retire. They had borne the brunt of the day's battle and had fought bravely, but, now that the struggle was over, a reaction had set in and there was panic in the camp. Fortunately, just as the foremost wagons moved away and the horsemen were getting ready to follow, there came the sound of galloping hoofs, and a man rode into our midst who shouted to them to halt. I could not see his face in the dark, but word went round that it was Louis Botha, the new Commandant-General, appointed in place of Piet Joubert who was seriously ill. He addressed the men from the saddle, telling them of the shame that would be theirs if they deserted their posts in this hour

of danger; and so eloquent was his appeal that in a few minutes the men were filing off into the dark to reoccupy their positions on either side of the Spion Kop gap. I believe that he spent the rest of the night riding from commando to commando exhorting and threatening, until he persuaded the men to return to the line, thus averting a great disaster.

As for Commandant Opperman and our party, now that the Carolina burghers were returning we led our horses back to the foot of Spion Kop, to wait there.

We woke with the falling of the dew and, as the sky lightened, gazed eagerly at the dim outline of the hill above, but could make out no sign of life.

Gradually the dawn came and still there was no movement. Then to our utter surprise we saw two men on the top triumphantly waving their hats and holding their rifles aloft. They were Boers, and their presence there was proof that, almost unbelievably, defeat had turned to victory—the English were gone and the hill was still ours.

Leaving our horses to fend for themselves, We were soon hastening up the slope past the dead until we reached yesterday's bloody ledge. From here we hurried across to the English breastworks, to find them abandoned. On our side of the fighting-line there had been many casualties, but a worse sight met our eyes behind the English *schanses*.

In the shallow trenches where they had fought the soldiers lay dead in swathes, and in places they were piled three deep.

The Boer guns in particular had wrought terrible havoc and some of the bodies were shockingly mutilated. There must have been six hundred dead men on this strip of earth, and there cannot have been many battlefields where there was such an accumulation of horrors within so small a compass.

Shortly after I reached the top, Isaac Malherbe and the remaining Pretoria men came up. They had spent the night somewhere below the kop, and like ourselves had come up the moment they realized that the English were gone. Isaac looked grim and worn, grieved at the death of his brother and of our other companions, but he was full of courage, and so were we all, for from where we stood we could look down on the Tugela River, and we were now able to grasp the full significance of our unexpected success.

Long columns of troops and long convoys of transport were re-crossing to the south bank, and everywhere the British were in full retreat from the positions which they had captured on this side of the streams and the clouds of dust rising on the Colenso road told us that General Buller's second great attempt to pierce the Tugela defences had failed. We spent the next hour or two helping the English Red Cross doctors and bearer parties that came up to bury their dead and carry away their wounded. By now hundreds of other burghers had arrived, mostly men who had retreated the day before, but like ourselves had loitered in neighbouring kloofs and gullies to see if they could renew the fight.

Towards midday Isaac Malherbe ordered us to collect our Pretoria dead. We carried them down in blankets, and when the commando wagon came up we placed the bodies on board and escorted them to Ladysmith, whence they were sent to Pretoria for burial. So we rode behind the wagon which carried all that was left of our friends and companions, their horses trotting alongside with empty saddles.

I personally came home to a deserted tent, for within a few weeks four good friends had gone from it to their death, and our fifth messmate, de Vos, was lying dangerously wounded at some laager below Spion Kop. Only my brother and I were left, and he had been sent to Pretoria with the prisoners, so I was all alone, except for our faithful old native retainer, who did what he could to cheer me up.

3. Arthur Conan Doyle's Account of the Battle

**Arthur Conan Doyle,
The Great Boer War
London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1902
CHAPTER XV**

Spion Kop

Whilst Methuen and Gatacre were content to hold their own at the Modder and at Sterkstroom, and whilst the mobile and energetic French was herding the Boers into Colesberg, Sir Redvers Buller, the heavy, obdurate, inexplicable man, was gathering and organising his forces for another advance upon Ladysmith. Nearly a month had elapsed since the evil day when his infantry had retired, and his ten guns had not, from the frontal attack upon Colenso. Since then Sir Charles Warren's division of infantry and a considerable reinforcement of artillery had come to him. And yet in view of the terrible nature of the ground in front of him, of the fighting power of the Boers, and of the fact that they were always acting upon internal lines, his force even now was, in the opinion of competent judges, too weak for the matter in hand.

There remained, however, several points in his favour. His excellent infantry were full of zeal and of confidence in their chief. It cannot be denied, however much we may criticise some incidents in his campaign, that he possessed the gift of impressing and encouraging his followers, and, in spite of Colenso, the sight of his square figure and heavy impassive face conveyed an assurance of ultimate victory to those around him. In artillery he was very much stronger than before, especially in weight of metal. His cavalry was still weak in proportion to his other arms. When at last he moved out on January 10th to attempt to outflank the Boers, he took with him nineteen thousand infantry, three thousand cavalry, and sixty guns, which included six howitzers capable of throwing a 50-lb lyddite shell, and ten long-range naval pieces. Barton's Brigade and other troops were left behind to hold the base and line of communications.

An analysis of Buller's force shows that its details were as follows:

Clery's Division Hildyard's Brigade 2nd West Surrey 2nd Devonshire 2nd West Yorkshire 2nd East Surrey Hart's Brigade 1st Inniskilling Fusiliers 1st Border Regiment 1st Connaught Rangers 2nd Dublin Fusiliers Field Artillery, three batteries, 19th, 28th, 63rd; one squadron 13th Hussars; Royal Engineers.

Warren's Division Lyttelton's Brigade 2nd Cameronians 3rd King's Royal Rifles 1st Durham Light Infantry 1st Rifle Brigade Woodgate's Brigade 2nd Royal Lancaster 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers 1st South Lancashire York and Lancasters Field Artillery, three batteries, 7th, 78th, 73rd; one squadron 13th Hussars.

Corps Troops Coke's Brigade Imperial Light Infantry 2nd Somersets 2nd Dorsets 2nd Middlesex 61st Howitzer Battery; two 4.7 naval guns; eight naval 12-pounder guns; one squadron 13th Hussars; Royal Engineers.

Cavalry 1st Royal Dragoons 14th Hussars Four squadrons South African Horse One squadron Imperial Light Horse Bethune's Mounted Infantry Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry One squadron Natal Carabineers One squadron Natal Police One company King's Royal Rifles Mounted Infantry Six machine guns.

This is the force whose operations I shall attempt to describe.

About sixteen miles to the westward of Colenso there is a ford over the Tugela River which is called Potgieter's Drift. General Buller's apparent plan was to seize this, together with the ferry which runs at this point, and so to throw himself upon the right flank of the Colenso Boers. Once over the river there is one formidable line of hills to cross, but if this were passed there would be comparatively easy ground until the Ladysmith hills were reached. With high hopes Buller and his men sallied out upon their adventure.

Dundonald's cavalry force pushed rapidly forwards, crossed the Little Tugela, a tributary of the main river, at Springfield, and established themselves upon the hills which command the drift. Dundonald largely exceeded his instructions in going so far, and while we applaud his courage and judgment in doing so, we must remember and be charitable to those less fortunate officers whose private enterprise has ended in disaster and reproof. There can be no doubt that the enemy intended to hold all this tract, and that it was only the quickness of our initial movements which forestalled them. Early in the morning a small party of the South African Horse, under Lieutenant Carlisle, swam the broad river under fire and brought back the ferry boat, an enterprise which was fortunately bloodless, but which was most coolly planned and gallantly carried out. The way was now open to our advance, and could it have been carried out as rapidly as it had begun the Boers might conceivably have been scattered before they could concentrate. It was not the fault of the infantry that it was not so. They were trudging, mud-spattered and jovial, at the very heels of the horses, after a forced march which was one of the most trying of the whole campaign. But an army of 20,000 men cannot be conveyed over a river twenty miles from any base without elaborate preparations being made to feed them. The roads were in such a state that the wagons could hardly move, heavy rain had just fallen, and every stream was swollen into a river; bullocks might strain, and traction engines pant, and horses die, but by no human means could the stores be kept up if the advance guard were allowed to go at their own pace. And so, having ensured an ultimate crossing of the river by the seizure of Mount Alice, the high hill which commands the drift, the forces waited day after day, watching in the distance the swarms of strenuous dark figures who dug and hauled and worked upon the hillsides opposite, barring the road which they would have to take. Far away on the horizon a little shining point twinkled amid the purple haze, coming and going from morning to night. It was the heliograph of Ladysmith, explaining her troubles and calling for help, and from the heights of Mount Alice an answering star of hope glimmered and shone, soothing, encouraging, explaining, while the stern men of the veldt dug furiously at their trenches in between. 'We are coming! We are coming!' cried Mount Alice. 'Over our bodies,' said the men with the spades and mattocks.



RESCUING A DROWNING TROOPER OF THE 13TH HUSSARS NEAR THE FERRY CROSSING

From: H. W. Wilson, With the Flag to Pretoria, 1902

On Thursday, January 12th, Dundonald seized the heights, on the 13th the ferry was taken and Lyttelton's Brigade came up to secure that which the cavalry had gained. On the 14th the heavy naval guns were brought up to cover the crossing. On the 15th Coke's Brigade and other infantry concentrated at the drift. On the 16th the four regiments of Lyttelton's Brigade went across, and then, and only then, it began to be apparent that Buller's plan was a more deeply laid one than had been thought, and that all this business of Potgieter's Drift was really a demonstration in order to cover the actual crossing which was to be effected at a ford named Trichard's Drift, five miles to the westward. Thus, while Lyttelton's and Coke's Brigades were ostentatiously attacking Potgieter's from in front, three other brigades (Hart's, Woodgate's, and Hildyard's) were marched rapidly on the night of the 16th to the real place of crossing, to which Dundonald's cavalry had already ridden. There, on the 17th, a pontoon bridge had been erected, and a strong force was thrown over in such a way as to turn the right of the trenches in front of Potgieter's. It was admirably planned and excellently carried out, certainly the most strategic movement, if there could be said to have been any strategic movement upon the British side, in the campaign up to that date. On the 18th the infantry, the cavalry, and most of the guns were safely across without loss of life. The Boers, however, still retained their formidable internal lines, and the only result of a change of position seemed to be to put them to the trouble of building a new series of those terrible entrenchments at which they had become such experts. After all the combinations the British were, it is true, upon the right side of the river, but they were considerably further from Ladysmith than when they started. There are times, however, when twenty miles are less than fourteen, and it was hoped that this might prove to be among them. But the first step was the most serious one, for right across their front lay the Boer position upon the edge of a lofty plateau, with the high peak of Spion Kop forming the left corner of it. If once that main ridge could

be captured or commanded, it would carry them halfway to the goal. It was for that essential line of hills that two of the most dogged races upon earth were about to contend. An immediate advance might have secured the position at once, but, for some reason which is inexplicable, an aimless march to the left was followed by a retirement to the original position of Warren's division, and so two invaluable days were wasted. We have the positive assurance of Commandant Edwards, who was Chief of Staff to General Botha, that a vigorous turning movement upon the left would at this time have completely outflanked the Boer position and opened a way to Ladysmith.

A small success, the more welcome for its rarity, came to the British arms on this first day. Dundonald's men had been thrown out to cover the left of the infantry advance and to feel for the right of the Boer position. A strong Boer patrol, caught napping for once, rode into an ambush of the irregulars. Some escaped, some held out most gallantly in a kopje, but the final result was a surrender of twenty-four unwounded prisoners, and the finding of thirteen killed and wounded, including de Mentz, the field-cornet of Heilbron. Two killed and two wounded were the British losses in this well-managed affair. Dundonald's force then took its position upon the extreme left of Warren's advance.

The British were now moving upon the Boers in two separate bodies, the one which included Lyttelton's and Coke's Brigades from Potgieter's Drift, making what was really a frontal attack, while the main body under Warren, who had crossed at Trichard's Drift, was swinging round upon the Boer right. Midway between the two movements the formidable bastion of Spion Kop stood clearly outlined against the blue Natal sky. The heavy naval guns on Mount Alice (two 4.7's and eight twelve-pounders) were so placed as to support either advance, and the howitzer battery was given to Lyttelton to help the frontal attack. For two days the British pressed slowly but steadily on to the Boers under the cover of an incessant rain of shells. Dour and longsuffering the Boers made no reply, save with sporadic rifle-fire, and refused until the crisis should come to expose their great guns to the chance of injury.

On January 19th Warren's turning movement began to bring him into closer touch with the enemy, his thirty-six field guns and the six howitzers which had returned to him crushing down the opposition which faced him. The ground in front of him was pleated into long folds, and his advance meant the carrying of ridge after ridge. In the earlier stages of the war this would have entailed a murderous loss; but we had learned our lesson, and the infantry now, with intervals of ten paces, and every man choosing his own cover, went up in proper Boer form, carrying position after position, the enemy always retiring with dignity and decorum. There was no victory on one side or rout on the other - only a steady advance and an orderly retirement. That night the infantry slept in their fighting line, going on again at three in the morning, and light broke to find not only rifles, but the long-silent Boer guns all blazing at the British advance. Again, as at Colenso, the brunt of the fighting fell upon Hart's Irish Brigade, who upheld that immemorial tradition of valour with which that name, either in or out of the British service, has invariably been associated. Upon the Lancashire Fusiliers and the York and Lancasters came also a large share of the losses and the glory. Slowly but surely the inexorable line of the British lapped over the ground which the enemy had held. A gallant colonial, Tobin of the South African Horse, rode up one hill and signaled with his hat that it was clear. His comrades followed closely

at his heels, and occupied the position with the loss of Childe, their Major. During this action Lyttelton had held the Boers in their trenches opposite to him by advancing to within 1,500 yards of them, but the attack was not pushed further. On the evening of this day, January 20th, the British had gained some miles of ground, and the total losses had been about three hundred killed and wounded. The troops were in good heart, and all promised well for the future. Again the men lay where they had fought, and again the dawn heard the crash of the great guns and the rattle of the musketry.

The operations of this day began with a sustained cannonade from the field batteries and 61st Howitzer Battery, which was as fiercely answered by the enemy. About eleven the infantry began to go forward with an advance which would have astonished the martinets of Aldershot, an irregular fringe of crawlers, wrigglers, writhers, crouchers, all cool and deliberate, giving away no points in this grim game of death. Where now were the officers with their distinctive dresses and flashing swords, where the valiant rushes over the open, where the men who were too proud to lie down? - the tactics of three months ago seemed as obsolete as those of the Middle Ages. All day the line undulated forward, and by evening yet another strip of rock-strewn ground had been gained, and yet another train of ambulances was bearing a hundred of our wounded back to the base hospitals at Frere. It was on Hildyard's Brigade on the left that the fighting and the losses of this day principally fell. By the morning of January 22nd the regiments were clustering thickly all round the edges of the Boer main position, and the day was spent in resting the weary men, and in determining at what point the final assault should be delivered. On the right front, commanding the Boer lines on either side, towered the stark eminence of Spion Kop, so called because from its summit the Boer voortrekkers had first in 1835 gazed down upon the promised land of Natal. If that could only be seized and held! Buller and Warren swept its bald summit with their field-glasses. It was a venture. But all war is a venture; and the brave man is he who ventures most. One fiery rush and the master-key of all these locked doors might be in our keeping. That evening there came a telegram to London which left the whole Empire in a hush of anticipation. Spion Kop was to be attacked that night.

The troops which were selected for the task were eight companies of the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers, six of the 2nd Royal Lancasters, two of the 1st South Lancshires, 180 of Thorneycroft's, and half a company of Sappers. It was to be a North of England job.

Under the friendly cover of a starless night the men, in Indian file, like a party of Iroquois braves upon the war trail, stole up the winding and ill-defined path which led to the summit. Woodgate, the Lancashire Brigadier, and Blomfield of the Fusiliers led the way. It was a severe climb of 2,000 feet, coming after arduous work over broken ground, but the affair was well-timed, and it was at that blackest hour which precedes the dawn that the last steep ascent was reached. The Fusiliers crouched down among the rocks to recover their breath, and saw far down in the plain beneath them the placid lights which showed where their comrades were resting. A fine rain was falling, and rolling clouds hung low over their heads. The men with unloaded rifles and fixed bayonets stole on once more, their bodies bent, their eyes peering through the mirk for the first sign of the enemy - that enemy whose first sign has usually been a shattering volley. Thorneycroft's men with their gallant leader had threaded their

way up into the advance. Then the leading files found that they were walking on the level. The crest had been gained.

With slow steps and bated breath, the open line of skirmishers stole across it. Was it possible that it had been entirely abandoned? Suddenly a raucous shout of 'Wie da?' came out of the darkness, then a shot, then a splutter of musketry and a yell, as the Fusiliers sprang onwards with their bayonets. The Boer post of Vryheid burghers clattered and scrambled away into the darkness, and a cheer that roused both the sleeping armies told that the surprise had been complete and the position won.

In the grey light of the breaking day the men advanced along the narrow undulating ridge, the prominent end of which they had captured. Another trench faced them, but it was weakly held and abandoned. Then the men, uncertain what remained beyond, halted and waited for full light to see where they were, and what the work was which lay before them - a fatal halt, as the result proved, and yet one so natural that it is hard to blame the officer who ordered it. Indeed, he might have seemed more culpable had he pushed blindly on, and so lost the advantage which had been already gained.

About eight o'clock, with the clearing of the mist, General Woodgate saw how matters stood. The ridge, one end of which he held, extended away, rising and falling for some miles. Had he the whole of the end plateau, and had he guns, he might hope to command the rest of the position. But he held only half the plateau, and at the further end of it the Boers were strongly entrenched. The Spion Kop mountain was really the salient or sharp angle of the Boer position, so that the British were exposed to a cross fire both from the left and right. Beyond were other eminences which sheltered strings of riflemen and several guns. The plateau which the British held was very much narrower than was usually represented in the press. In many places the possible front was not much more than a hundred yards wide, and the troops were compelled to bunch together, as there was not room for a single company to take an extended formation. The cover upon this plateau was scanty, far too scanty for the force upon it, and the shell fire - especially the fire of the pom-poms - soon became very murderous. To mass the troops under the cover of the edge of the plateau might naturally suggest itself, but with great tactical skill the Boer advanced line from Commandant Prinsloo's Heidelberg and Carolina commandos kept so aggressive an attitude that the British could not weaken the lines opposed to them. Their skirmishers were creeping round too in such a way that the fire was really coming from three separate points, left, centre, and right, and every corner of the position was searched by their bullets. Early in the action the gallant Woodgate and many of his Lancashire men were shot down. The others spread out and held on, firing occasionally at the whisk of a rifle-barrel or the glimpse of a broad-brimmed hat.

From morning to midday, the shell, Maxim, and rifle fire swept across the kop in a continual driving shower. The British guns in the plain below failed to localise the position of the enemy's, and they were able to vent their concentrated spite upon the exposed infantry. No blame attaches to the gunners for this, as a hill intervened to screen the Boer artillery, which consisted of five big guns and two pom-poms.

Upon the fall of Woodgate, Thorneycroft, who bore the reputation of a determined fighter, was placed at the suggestion of Buller in charge of the defence of the hill, and he was reinforced after noon by Coke's brigade, the Middlesex, the Dorsets, and the

Somersets, together with the Imperial Light Infantry. The addition of this force to the defenders of the plateau tended to increase the casualty returns rather than the strength of the defence. Three thousand more rifles could do nothing to check the fire of the invisible cannon, and it was this which was the main source of the losses, while on the other hand the plateau had become so cumbered with troops that a shell could hardly fail to do damage. There was no cover to shelter them and no room for them to extend. The pressure was most severe upon the shallow trenches in the front, which had been abandoned by the Boers and were held by the Lancashire Fusiliers. They were enfiladed by rifle and cannon, and the dead and wounded outnumbered the hale. So close were the skirmishers that on at least one occasion Boer and Briton found themselves on each side of the same rock. Once a handful of men, tormented beyond endurance, sprang up as a sign that they had had enough, but Thorneycroft, a man of huge physique, rushed forward to the advancing Boers. 'You may go to hell!' he yelled. 'I command here, and allow no surrender. Go on with your firing.' Nothing could exceed the gallantry of Louis Botha's men in pushing the attack. Again and again they made their way up to the British firing line, exposing themselves with a recklessness which, with the exception of the grand attack upon Ladysmith, was unique in our experience of them. About two o'clock they rushed one trench occupied by the Fusiliers and secured the survivors of two companies as prisoners, but were subsequently driven out again. A detached group of the South Lancashires was summoned to surrender. 'When I surrender,' cried Colour-Sergeant Nolan, 'it will be my dead body!' Hour after hour of the unintermitting crash of the shells among the rocks and of the groans and screams of men torn and burst by the most horrible of all wounds had shaken the troops badly. Spectators from below who saw the shells pitching at the rate of seven a minute on to the crowded plateau marvelled at the endurance which held the devoted men to their post. Men were wounded and wounded and wounded yet again, and still went on fighting. Never since Inkerman had we had so grim a soldier's battle. The company officers were superb. Captain Muriel of the Middlesex was shot through the cheek while giving a cigarette to a wounded man, continued to lead his company, and was shot again through the brain. Scott Moncrieff of the same regiment was only disabled by the fourth bullet which hit him. Grenfell of Thorneycroft's was shot, and exclaimed, 'That's all right. It's not much.' A second wound made him remark, 'I can get on all right.' The third killed him. Ross of the Lancasters, who had crawled from a sickbed, was found dead upon the furthest crest. Young Murray of the Scottish Rifles, dripping from five wounds, still staggered about among his men. And the men were worthy of such officers. 'No retreat! No retreat!' they yelled when some of the front line were driven in. In all regiments there are weaklings and hang-backs, and many a man was wandering down the reverse slopes when he should have been facing death upon the top, but as a body British troops have never stood firm through a more fiery ordeal than on that fatal hill.

The position was so bad that no efforts of officers or men could do anything to mend it. They were in a murderous dilemma. If they fell back for cover the Boer riflemen would rush the position. If they held their ground this horrible shell fire must continue, which they had no means of answering. Down at Gun Hill in front of the Boer position we had no fewer than five batteries, the 78th, 7th, 73rd, 63rd, and 61st howitzer, but a ridge intervened between them and the Boer guns which were shelling Spion Kop, and this ridge was strongly entrenched. The naval guns from distant Mount Alice did what they could, but the range was very long, and the position of the

Boer guns uncertain. The artillery, situated as it was, could not save the infantry from the horrible scourging which they were enduring.

There remains the debated question whether the British guns could have been taken to the top. Mr. Winston Churchill, the soundness of whose judgment has been frequently demonstrated during the war, asserts that it might have been done. Without venturing to contradict one who was personally present, I venture to think that there is strong evidence to show that it could not have been done without blasting and other measures, for which there was no possible time. Captain Hanwell of the 78th R.F.A., upon the day of the battle had the very utmost difficulty with the help of four horses in getting a light Maxim on to the top, and his opinion, with that of other artillery officers, is that the feat was an impossible one until the path had been prepared. When night fell Colonel Sim was despatched with a party of Sappers to clear the track and to prepare two emplacements upon the top, but in his advance he met the retiring infantry.

Throughout the day reinforcements had pushed up the hill, until two full brigades had been drawn into the fight. From the other side of the ridge Lyttelton sent up the Scottish Rifles, who reached the summit, and added their share to the shambles upon the top. As the shades of night closed in, and the glare of the bursting shells became more lurid, the men lay extended upon the rocky ground, parched and exhausted. They were hopelessly jumbled together, with the exception of the Dorsets, whose cohesion may have been due to superior discipline, less exposure, or to the fact that their khaki differed somewhat in colour from that of the others. Twelve hours of so terrible an experience had had a strange effect upon many of the men. Some were dazed and battle-struck, incapable of clear understanding. Some were as incoherent as drunkards. Some lay in an overpowering drowsiness. The most were doggedly patient and long-suffering, with a mighty longing for water obliterating every other emotion.

Before evening fell a most gallant and successful attempt had been made by the third battalion of the King's Royal Rifles from Lyttelton's Brigade to relieve the pressure upon their comrades on Spion Kop. In order to draw part of the Boer fire away they ascended from the northern side and carried the hills which formed a continuation of the same ridge. The movement was meant to be no more than a strong demonstration, but the riflemen pushed it until, breathless but victorious, they stood upon the very crest of the position, leaving nearly a hundred dead or dying to show the path which they had taken. Their advance being much further than was desired, they were recalled, and it was at the moment that Buchanan Riddell, their brave Colonel, stood up to read Lyttelton's note that he fell with a Boer bullet through his brain, making one more of those gallant leaders who died as they had lived, at the head of their regiments. Chisholm, Dick-Cunyngham, Downman, Wilford, Gunning, Sherston, Thackeray, Sitwell, MacCarthy O'Leary, Airlie - they have led their men up to and through the gates of death. It was a fine exploit of the 3rd Rifles. 'A finer bit of skirmishing, a finer bit of climbing, and a finer bit of fighting, I have never seen,' said their Brigadier. It is certain that if Lyttelton had not thrown his two regiments into the fight the pressure upon the hill-top might have become unendurable; and it seems also certain that if he had only held on to the position which the Rifles had gained, the Boers would never have reoccupied Spion Kop.

And now, under the shadow of night, but with the shells bursting thickly over the

plateau, the much-tried Thorneycroft had to make up his mind whether he should hold on for another such day as he had endured, or whether now, in the friendly darkness, he should remove his shattered force. Could he have seen the discouragement of the Boers and the preparations which they had made for retirement, he would have held his ground. But this was hidden from him, while the horror of his own losses was but too apparent. Forty percent of his men were down. Thirteen hundred dead and dying are a grim sight upon a wide-spread battle-field, but when this number is heaped upon a confined space, where from a single high rock the whole litter of broken and shattered bodies can be seen, and the groans of the stricken rise in one long droning chorus to the ear, then it is an iron mind indeed which can resist such evidence of disaster. In a harder age Wellington was able to survey four thousand bodies piled in the narrow compass of the breach of Badajos, but his resolution was sustained by the knowledge that the military end for which they fell had been accomplished. Had his task been unfinished it is doubtful whether even his steadfast soul would not have flinched from its completion. Thorneycroft saw the frightful havoc of one day, and he shrank from the thought of such another. 'Better six battalions safely down the hill than a mop up in the morning,' said he, and he gave the word to retire. One who had met the troops as they staggered down has told me how far they were from being routed. In mixed array, but steadily and in order, the long thin line trudged through the darkness. Their parched lips would not articulate, but they whispered 'Water! Where is water?' as they toiled upon their way. At the bottom of the hill they formed into regiments once more, and marched back to the camp. In the morning the blood-spattered hill-top, with its piles of dead and of wounded, were in the hands of Botha and his men, whose valour and perseverance deserved the victory which they had won. There is no doubt now that at 3 A.M. of that morning Botha, knowing that the Rifles had carried Burger's position, regarded the affair as hopeless, and that no one was more astonished than he when he found, on the report of two scouts, that it was a victory and not a defeat which had come to him.

How shall we sum up such an action save that it was a gallant attempt, gallantly carried out, and as gallantly met? On both sides the results of artillery fire during the war have been disappointing, but at Spion Kop beyond all question it was the Boer guns which won the action for them. So keen was the disappointment at home that there was a tendency to criticise the battle with some harshness, but it is difficult now, with the evidence at our command, to say what was left undone which could have altered the result. Had Thorneycroft known all that we know, he would have kept his grip upon the hill. On the face of it one finds it difficult to understand why so momentous a decision, upon which the whole operations depended, should have been left entirely to the judgment of one who in the morning had been a simple Lieutenant-Colonel. 'Where are the bosses?' cried a Fusilier, and the historian can only repeat the question. General Warren was at the bottom of the hill. Had he ascended and determined that the place should still be held, he might have sent down the wearied troops, brought up smaller numbers of fresh ones, ordered the Sappers to deepen the trenches, and tried to bring up water and guns. It was for the divisional commander to lay his hand upon the reins at so critical an instant, to relieve the weary man who had struggled so hard all day.

The subsequent publication of the official despatches has served little purpose, save to show that there was a want of harmony between Buller and Warren, and that the former lost all confidence in his subordinate during the course of the operations. In

these papers General Buller expresses the opinion that had Warren's operations been more dashing, he would have found his turning movement upon the left a comparatively easy matter. In this judgment he would probably have the concurrence of most military critics. He adds, however, 'On the 19th, I ought to have assumed command myself. I saw that things were not going well - indeed, everyone saw that. I blame myself now for not having done so. I did not, because, if I did, I should discredit General Warren in the estimation of the troops, and, if I were shot, and he had to withdraw across the Tugela, and they had lost confidence in him, the consequences might be very serious. I must leave it to higher authority whether this argument was a sound one.' It needs no higher authority than common-sense to say that the argument is an absolutely unsound one. No consequences could be more serious than that the operations should miscarry and Ladysmith remain unrelieved, and such want of success must in any case discredit Warren in the eyes of his troops. Besides, a subordinate is not discredited because his chief steps in to conduct a critical operation. However, these personal controversies may be suffered to remain in that pigeon-hole from which they should never have been drawn.

On account of the crowding of four thousand troops into a space which might have afforded tolerable cover for five hundred the losses in the action were very heavy, not fewer than fifteen hundred being killed, wounded, or missing, the proportion of killed being, on account of the shell fire, abnormally high. The Lancashire Fusiliers were the heaviest sufferers, and their Colonel Blomfield was wounded and fell into the hands of the enemy. The Royal Lancasters also lost heavily. Thorneycroft's had 80 men hit out of 180 engaged. The Imperial Light Infantry, a raw corps of Rand refugees who were enduring their baptism of fire, lost 130 men. In officers the losses were particularly heavy, 60 being killed or wounded. The Boer returns show some 50 killed and 150 wounded, which may not be far from the truth. Without the shell fire the British losses might not have been much more.

General Buller had lost nearly two thousand men since he had crossed the Tugela, and his purpose was still unfulfilled. Should he risk the loss of a large part of his force in storming the ridges in front of him, or should he recross the river and try for an easier route elsewhere? To the surprise and disappointment both of the public and of the army, he chose the latter course, and by January 27th he had fallen back, unmolested by the Boers, to the other side of the Tugela. It must be confessed that his retreat was admirably conducted, and that it was a military feat to bring his men, his guns, and his stores in safety over a broad river in the face of a victorious enemy. Stolid and unmoved, his impenetrable demeanour restored serenity and confidence to the angry and disappointed troops. There might well be heavy hearts among both them and the public. After a fortnight's campaign, and the endurance of great losses and hardships, both Ladysmith and her relievers found themselves no better off than when they started. Buller still held the commanding position of Mount Alice, and this was all that he had to show for such sacrifices and such exertions. Once more there came a weary pause while Ladysmith, sick with hope deferred, waited gloomily upon half-rations of horse-flesh for the next movement from the South.

4. Robert C. Daniels Analysis of the Battle

The Failures at Spion Kop

by Robert C. Daniels

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In many ways the Battle of Spion Kop was typical of the many battles fought between the British and the joint armies of the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State from 1899 to 1902 in what is known as the Boer War. It was one of many battles of the war in which the British army, a highly trained, disciplined, and professionally led army, lost to the untrained and undisciplined Boer army, made up of Boers (the Afrikaans word for farmers) and Burghers (storekeepers and town-dwellers), and led by, for the most part, leaders who were unlearned and inexperienced in the techniques of modern day warfare.

The difference, however, is that unlike the other battles the British had lost or were to lose in the war, the Battle of Spion Kop, fought on 23 and 24 January 1900, was in fact not a loss at all. Although unbeknownst by the British at the time, they had actually won the battle. The Boers had already left the hilltop, and many in their army were in the process of fleeing towards the town of Ladysmith when it was discovered that the British had actually 'given up' the field and evacuated the battleground. Once this became known, the Boers quickly re-established themselves on their lost battlefield.

The Battle of Spion Kop, like many battles throughout history, was a battle that did not need to be fought at all—there were easier ways around the kop (isolated hill)—but once it was fought and 'won' by the British, the path to the besieged town of Ladysmith, the goal of the British expedition, was open. As Deneys Reitz, the young son of the Transvaal State Secretary, wrote concerning his commando's thoughts while standing at the bottom of Spion Kop in the early morning hours after the fighting had ceased, "We fully believed that the morning would see them [the British] screaming through the breaches to the relief of Ladysmith, and the rolling up of all our Tugela [River] line." [1] Instead, the British left Spion Kop, collected themselves, and re-crossed the Tugela River, leaving the hilltop forever and giving up this latest chance of relieving Ladysmith. As author Byron Farwell states, "Spion Kop, which had seemed so important on that hot January day, was abandoned almost as soon as the fight for it ended, deserted by all except the vultures and the bodies of those who had died to possess it." [2] Why would the renowned British army, as proud, strong, and seemingly invincible as they were against such a ragtag army of farmers and shopkeepers, fight for and then abandon such a hard fought and dearly paid for battleground?

Since 2 November 1899, when British Lieutenant-General Sir George White conceded that his garrison occupying the Natal settlement of Ladysmith was effectively hemmed in and surrounded, the British forces under General Sir Redvers Buller had been pushing northwestwards towards its relief. Buller, as Commander-in-Chief of British forces in South Africa, had already failed once in his first attempt to cross the Tugela River on his march to relieve Ladysmith at the Battle of Colenso, fought on 15 December 1899. This failure, coupled with the failures of his

subordinate Lieutenant-Generals Lord Paul Methuen and Sir William Gatacre at the Battle of Magersfontein on 11 December and the Battle of Stormberg on 10 December, respectively, resulted in Buller being replaced as Commander-in-Chief by British Field-Marshal Lord Frederick Sleigh Roberts and "relegated to the command in Natal"[3] with orders to "relieve White, extricate the garrison, and then abandon Ladysmith itself to the Boers." [4]

After four weeks of resting, regrouping his forces, and receiving reinforcements, including Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Warren's 5th Division, newly arrived from England, Buller was ready to try another attempt of fording the Tugela River and moving towards Ladysmith. According to Ruari Chisholm in his writings about the siege of Ladysmith:

The recuperative effect of four weeks' contemplation and preparation since the traumatic experience at Colenso and the steady inflow of reinforcements had emboldened Buller to think positively once more, and the scene was set for another attempt to relieve Ladysmith. . . . [Buller] reverted to his original idea of a flanking movement westwards to Potgieter's Drift. On 10th January 1900 [sic] he was ready to start.[5]

Potgieter's Drift was sixteen miles west of Colenso, and therefore an even farther distance from Ladysmith than Colenso was.[6] However, Buller hoped to make a left flanking move around the Boers using the Potgieter's route. In addition, according to author Thomas Pakenham, once past the Tugela at the Potgieter's and Trikhardt's Drifts—the later drift (river ford) being another 5 miles west of Potgieter's Drift—and "astride a single chain of jagged hills" lay "twelve miles of grassy plain" vice "ten miles of tangled gorges that separated the Tugela at Colenso from Ladysmith." [7] Arthur Doyle, who wrote of the war as it was occurring, corroborates this statement concerning the topography of the Potgieter's Drift region when he states, "Once over the river there is one formidable line of hills to cross, but if this were passed there would be comparatively easy ground until the Ladysmith hills were reached." [8] Therefore, according to Doyle, it was Buller's "apparent plan . . . to seize this [Potgieter's Drift], together with the ferry which runs at this point, and so to throw himself upon the left flank of the Colenso Boers." [9] Pakenham elaborates on Buller's plan when he states that Buller also

decided to send to Trikhardts roughly two-thirds of his army. The job of this independent force was to form the second bridgehead there, and then break through the chain of hills three miles to the north, just to the west of Spion Kop. The moment they were on the plain, threatening to outflank Potgieters—that would be the moment for he himself [i.e., Buller] to attack Potgieters with the remainder of the army. Once both forces were across the hills, they could join hands again, and march together across the plain to Ladysmith.[10]

Buller's plan can be argued to have been a sound military plan, if carried out correctly.

What was needed for the success of the plan, more than anything else, was fast movement by the British to seize both of the drifts and as many hills on either side of the Tugela River near the drifts as possible before the Boers, by now famous for their

entrenching, could put up strong defensive positions. However, quickness was not Warren's fortitude. As author Eversley Belfield puts it:

A most methodical man whose motto might have been 'hurry slowly', Warren had very definite theories on warfare. One of these was to defer any fighting until every item of stores had been assembled nearby. He also intended that, before his unblooded troops started their real offensive, they should undertake a kind of three days' dress rehearsal to become acquainted with their adversaries.[11]

Doyle, however, defends Warren's slowness in stating:

an army of 20,000 men cannot be conveyed over a river twenty miles from any base without elaborate preparations being made to feed them. The roads were in such a state that the wagons could hardly move, heavy rain had just fallen, and every stream was swollen into a river; bullocks might strain, and traction engines pant, and horses die, but by no human means could the stores be kept up if the advance guard were to go at their own pace.[12]

Regardless of the reasons, the needed fast movement by Warren's troops did not happen. Although starting out from the towns of Chieveley and Frere south of Colenso on 10 January, the "ponderous British build-up" was not ready at the Potgieter's Drift region until 16 January.[13]

This did not stop Colonel Lord Dundonald and his mounted infantry, who, although nominally under Warren's command, had received orders separately from Buller to move rapidly around the Boer western flank.[14] On 12 January Dundonald rapidly seized the heights on Spearman's hill south of Potgieter's Drift on the Tugela River, which included Mount Alice where Buller was to plant his headquarters. The next day he seized the ferry at the drift itself.[15] Dundonald then rode to and took Trikhart's Drift, while Major-General Neville Lyttelton's Brigade crossed the Tugela at Potgieter's Drift and began a diversionary assault against the Boers.[16]

On 17 January Warren had finally advanced his forces across Trikhart's Drift. As Doyle writes, this last movement, carried out rapidly by Major-Generals Fitzroy Hart's, J. Talbot Coke's, and H. J. T. Hildyard's Brigades from Potgieter's Drift on the night of 16 January, including fording the river by an erected pontoon bridge, was "admirably planned and excellently carried out, certainly the most strategic movement, if there could be said to have been any strategic movement upon the British side, in the campaign up to that date." [17] However, now that Warren had gotten his forces across the Tugela and ready to move, he again decided to wait. But Dundonald, again, was unable to just stand idly by.

On 18 January, while Warren was marching his troops and securing stores in the shadows of Tabanyama Hill, Dundonald rode his mounted infantry towards the Boer's western flank in the direction of Acton Homes where he was able to ambush a Boer patrol and set up a "commanding position on a track running towards Ladysmith. His plea for guns and reinforcements to exploit his success were [sic] ignored. Instead, on 19 January, Warren recalled Dundonald." [18] Not only did Warren not send

reinforcements to Dundonald, instead recalling him, Warren also rebuked Dundonald, stating, "Our objective is not Ladysmith, . . . our objective is to affect a junction with General Sir Redvers Buller's force and then await orders from him." [19]

Although, as we have already seen, this had been Buller's plan—to join forces with Warren after Warren's and Buller's troops fought their way through the hills—Warren's negligence in aggressively acting against the Boers on these two days most probably resulted in the British giving up a great opportunity to turn the Boer right flank with little battle or loss of life. As Doyle states:

An immediate advance might have secured the position at once, but, for some reason which is inexplicable, an aimless march to the left was followed by a retirement to the original position of Warren's division, and so two invaluable days were wasted. We have the positive assurance of Commandant Edwards, who was Chief of Staff to [Boer] General [Louis] Botha, that a vigorous turning movement upon the left would at this time have completely outflanked the Boer position and opened the way to Ladysmith. [20]

As Pakenham contends, Warren's task of turning the Boer's flank was

not impossible, as Buller believed (and most historians have agreed), provided always that Warren attacked the enemy's line with speed and decisiveness. But it was precisely in these qualities that Warren now seemed to Buller—and seems to us in retrospect—most dismally lacking. [21]

Pakenham furthers this thought in writing:

Hence it was true that, as Buller believed, if Warren had carried out the plan to strike hard and swiftly, he might have cut his way through Tabanyama (Rangeworthy Hills) on 17 January. As it was, Botha and his staff had worn themselves out in repeated manoeuvring [sic]; galloping backwards and forwards to plug gaps in the line, dragging heavy guns onto hilltops and down again, exhorting the men, telegraphing to Pretoria, and again exhorting the men. [22]

Instead, the Boers were given precious time to bring up much needed reinforcements from around Ladysmith and dig in, and they were well prepared in their trenches on Tabanyama Hill for Warren's "dress-rehearsal style of attacks on 20 and 21 January." [23]

Going against Buller's plan to outflank the Boers, Warren's dress-rehearsal attacks were focused against the Tabanyama Ridge. As Chisholm states, "Only Dundonald achieved undisputed possession of his target, the summit of Bastion Hill." [24] Pakenham, however, is somewhat more generous with his assessment of Warren's assault on Tabanyama when he states, "The attack was successful, as far as it went. The eight infantry battalions—Hildyard's 'English' brigade (the 2nd) and Hart's Irish Brigade (the 5th)—forced their way on to the southern crest line of the western plateau." [25] However, as Pakenham continues, "after the 20th, Warren's advance petered out. He [Warren] said he needed heavier artillery than his thirty-six field-guns." [26]

By this time Buller had had enough of Warren's slowness; however, not enough to actually relieve him. Upon visiting Warren's HQ at Three Tree Hill on 22 January and after a heated encounter, Buller presented Warren with an ultimatum to "either attack on the western flank or retire across the Tugela." [27] "I told him," wrote Buller afterwards, "that unless he could attack, he must withdraw." [28] Buller's initial advice to Warren "was to swing round to the left of Spion Kop, and try to break through the Rangeworthy [Tabanyama] Hills. At which Warren explained that, despite his howitzers, he could still not establish an artillery position and so make progress on this western side." [29] It was then, "as an afterthought, Buller suggested he [Warren] should take Spion Kop, the highest point in the region, towering over Warren's eastern flank" [30] According to Belfield, "Equally casually, Warren agreed to take this peak." [31]

Farwell contends that even though Buller gave his approval for Warren to assault Spion Kop, Buller "still felt that an attack on the Boer right was better, and he sent Warren a letter in which he outlined a promising plan for such an operation. It was not an order, not a plan Warren was directed to follow, merely a suggestion. Warren ignored it." [32] Farwell also contends that

Buller's behavior was becoming increasingly vacillatory. *The Times History* summed it up: "He was determined not to let Warren work out his own plan in his own way; he could not bring himself to insist that Warren carry out the plan he [Buller] himself was convinced was the right one; he would not take over the command himself." [33]

Therefore, even though Buller was not 'keen' on the idea of attacking Spion Kop, he stood by "acting as a kind of umpire" [34] and allowed his subordinate, Warren, to do so.

But why assault Spion Kop? As Farwell states:

No one had any clear conception of the reasons for attacking Spion Kop. Buller, when asked by a staff officer what the force on Spion Kop was to do after it had secured the summit, thought about this for a few moments and then said, "It has got to stay there." [35]

Pakenham, however, somewhat defends Warren's attack on Spion Kop when he writes, "Warren's plan to try to crack the nut at the hardest point was perhaps perverse, but not stupid. Spion Kop was so precipitous that it was the last place the Boers would expect the British to attack." [36] A war correspondent wrote that

it was clear that we could get no further with the frontal attack. Sir Charles Warren had all the time had Spion Kop in his eye, as likely to be useful. If we could get on to the southern crest of it we could probably push on to the northern end, and once there we could open a flanking fire on the Boer lines which ran east and west. Spion Kop, properly used, was the key of the position, and the key that would open the door to Ladysmith. [37]

Pakenham furthers that "If it could be seized, if it could be held, if heavy guns could be installed—all three very big 'ifs'—it would send the Boers scurrying back to the plain." [38] This would prove to be a statement that nearly came true; a statement that

should have come true but for errors and blunders of none other than Warren himself. Buller also, however, would bear some of the blame, if for no other reasons than, as the expedition's senior commander, for not relieving Warren prior to the assault on Spion Kop, and for both suggesting and then allowing Warren to even attempt to take the hill.

Spion Kop, Dutch for 'Look-out Hill,' received its name from the Boer voortrekkers (pioneers) who first gazed from this hill in 1835 "down upon the promised land of Natal." [39] As Pakenham describes it, "at 1,470 feet above the river, its summit crowns the ridge, and its sheer, south-facing slopes are scarred with rocks and rock falls." [40] It was over these rocks and rock falls that Warren's men would have to climb to assault the summit.

From his vantage point below Spion Kop, neither Warren nor any of his officers were able to make out the topography of the hill's summit; nor its neighboring hills. One of the first blunders to be made during this battle was Warren's neglect in ordering up his observation balloon to reconnoiter the terrain on top of the hill. [41] Without proper maps and without the use of the balloon, the actual configuration of the hill was unknown to Warren or his officers, a matter that would prove to be tragic for those assaulting it. [42]

At 8:30 p.m. on the evening of 23 January 1900, Warren's assault troops began their movement from Three Tree Hill to the southern base of Spion Kop, six miles away. [43] It was to be a dawn assault. After Buller pointed out that Major-General Coke, nearly lame from a recently broken leg, "was not the best choice as a commander for so energetic an enterprise," Warren replaced him as the expedition's commander with Major-General E. R. P. Woodgate, who was not in much better health. [44] Included in Woodgate's force of 1,700 were

the Lancashire Fusiliers, six companies of the Royal Lancasters, and two companies of the South Lancashires. In addition to these regulars, 200 troopers from Lieutenant Colonel A. W. Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry (composed mostly of Johannesburg uitlanders) and a half company of Royal Engineers were selected. [45]

It was Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Thorneycroft who was assigned to lead the initial assault with his 180 Uitlanders (non-Boer Europeans living in the Boer states, especially, in this case, British subjects) and Natal refugees. Ironically, as the troops marched towards Spion Kop, they passed a pile of sandbags which an "intelligent officer had supplied with the intention that each man should carry one with him for use on the summit. However, as no one remembered to give the order to pick them up, they were left behind." [46] These sandbags would have very possibly saved the lives of many of these men who were soon to perish on top of Spion Kop.

Other than not knowing the layout of the summit or the not taking along of the sandbags, the first phase of the attack went well. During the daylight hours, Thorneycroft had memorized the face of Spion Kop that he and his troops would have to scale, and his memory served him well as he guided the British force in the dark from one landmark to the next. Starting out from the foot of Spion Kop at around 11:00 p.m., "it took four hours to reach the last of Thorneycroft's landmarks." [47] A few minutes later, after quietly creeping along a much less steep incline towards the

summit with guns unloaded and bayonets fixed, "*Wer da?* ' ('Who goes there?' in German)" was heard from a Boer sentry.[48] What happened next is well described by Pakenham:

Suddenly out of the mist the challenge. 'Waterloo,' shouted one of the officers. Then everyone flung themselves flat. A zig-zag line of rifles' flashes. Thorneycroft waited till the rattle of bolts showed that the Mauser magazines were empty, then gave the order: fix bayonets and charge. With a hoarse yell of 'Majuba!', Thorneycroft's men charged into the mist and vanished. When the staff officers came up, they found the remains of the small Boer picket: one man, some said an African, bayoneted by an officer of the Fusiliers, and the boots of the Boers and German volunteers who had fled. At a cost of ten men wounded, the hill was theirs.[49]

Farwell corroborates this when he states that "One burgher was killed: he died on a bayonet wielded by Lieutenant Vere Awdry, an athletic young man who swung him into the air like a bale of hay. The rest of them fled, some in their stocking feet." [50] Farwell also states that there were "about seventy men of the Vryheid Commando and some German volunteers" who made up the Boer picket.[51]

When Woodgate arrived at the summit, he sent Lieutenant-Colonel Charles à Court, who was a member of Buller's staff but temporarily assigned to Warren, back down the hill to brief Warren on the victory. Woodgate then made a grievous mistake. He did not send out officers or men to reconnoiter the rest of the hilltop. Instead, he had the engineers begin digging a line of trenches where the Boer picket line had stood. The ground the engineers began digging with their few shovels and pickaxes was hard and rocky. Therefore, the sappers were able to only dig little more than furrows that would prove to be of little protection. In addition, they were, unbeknownst to Woodgate and his force, being dug on a false crest. In the dark and mist that covered the summit, Woodgate and his officers could not see that more than 100 yards lay between them and the true crest line. He was also "ignorant of the existence of Aloe Knoll, the dominant height on the summit." [52]

As Deneys Reitz relates, the first short battle on top of Spion Kop was heard by those below the northern side of the hill.

It rained at intervals during the night, and towards three in the morning we were waked by an angry sputter of rifle-fire coming from Spion Kop. We sat up listening, but as there was nothing we could do in the rain and darkness, and as after a while the firing died down, we fell asleep again.[53]

Botha was also awakened by the sounds of the rifle shots and, upon learning that Spion Kop had been overrun, sent riders to the different laagers (Boer encampments) with calls for volunteers saying, "Spion Kop must be taken this day." [54] He knew that with Spion Kop in the hands of the British, the Boer line would fail. As Reitz states concerning his own reaction upon hearing the news, "This was most serious, for if the hill went the entire Tugela line would go with it, and we could hardly bring ourselves to believe the news." [55] However, many of the Boers had panicked and quickly packed their wagons and saddlebags and began heading towards Ladysmith. Upon seeing this, according to Chisholm, Botha

performed a massive feat of leadership in the small hours of the morning, rallying and re-forming the dispersing Boer commandos. Haranguing and, in some cases, physically striking, would-be deserters, he sent Commandant [Henrik] Prinsloo, perhaps his most resolute subordinate, to take Aloe Knoll.[56]

At 7:00 a.m. that morning, Prinsloo began leading eighty-eight men of his Carolina Commando up the mist covered northern slope of Spion Kop. By 8:30 a.m., Botha had managed to send others.[57] Reitz states that when he rode up to the bottom of the hill and tied his pony next to the many other ponies already there, "Eight or nine hundred [Boer] riflemen were climbing up the steep side of the hill in face of a close-range fire from the English troops." [58] Pakenham relates the number as "Three or four hundred—mainly from the Carolina and Pretoria Commandos." [59] By this time, however, Prinsloo's commando had already occupied Aloe Knoll and began enfilading the British trench line from the British right. As Farwell puts it, "Many [British] soldiers never knew where the fire was coming from. Some 70 of the dead were found to have been shot through the right side of the head." [60] Prinsloo also began sending coordinates to the Boer artillerymen using his heliograph, who were soon sending shell after shell into the unprotected British. [61] Meanwhile, as Reitz recalled watching the Boers mount the north-side of Spion Kop while he stood next to his pony:

Many of our men dropped, but already the foremost were within a few yards of the rocky edge which marked the crest, and soldiers were rising from behind their cover to meet the final rush. For a moment or two there was confused hand-to-hand fighting, then the combatants surged over the rim on to the plateau beyond, where we could no longer see them. [62]

At about 8:45 a.m., Major-General Woodgate was hit in the head by a Boer bullet and fell to the ground mortally wounded; shortly before he had been unaware of his dangerous predicament. It was not until the mist began to lift around 8:00 a.m. that Woodgate and his troops realized their mistake in placing their much too shallow trench on the south summit of the hill. By then it was too late. With Woodgate out of action, command went to the next senior officer on Spion Kop, Lieutenant-Colonel Malby Crofton of the Royal Lancasters. [63]

Although the Boer artillery had good fields of fire onto the summit, just the opposite was true for the British. The British gunners could not see the Boer guns, so they could not silence them. When British naval officers (throughout the war the British used large naval guns in addition to their army's field guns) spotted Boers shooting at the British from Aloe Knoll, the naval officers opened fire on the knoll with their 4.7-inch naval guns. Warren, unable to make out the Boers on Aloe Knoll from his vantage point at Three Tree Hill, sent the British gunners an "urgent message: 'We occupy the whole summit and I fear you are shelling us seriously. Cannot you turn your guns on the enemy's guns?'" [64] This action effectively deprived the British on Spion Kop the help of friendly artillery support.

As Reitz had stated, the British had indeed taken a toll on the Boers who were trying to gain the summit. During his own climb up he found the dead or dying bodies of many of his friends, tent-mates, and "corporalship" strewn along the slope. [65] When he reached the summit, he saw that the Boers had not made it much "farther than the fringe of loose rocks that runs like a girdle around the upper tableland [ridge]" with

the British laying in "a shallow trench behind a long low wall of stone about twenty yards away. From here came a vicious rifle-fire that made further progress impossible." [66] At about 9:00 a.m., however, as Reitz states, "the situation eased, for the Transvaal artillerists got their guns into action on a commanding spur a mile away, and they began to fire over our heads into the [British] troops . . . the English fire slackened, and from then onward our losses were less." [67]

The Boers had lost heavily during these first minutes of the battle—so had the British. The difference, though, is that with the British position so openly vulnerable, they were to continue to lose men at an alarming rate for the rest of the day. Soon after Woodgate was hit a message was sent to Warren from the hilltop stating, "Reinforce at once for all is lost. General is dead." [68] To Warren's credit, he took this message seriously replying, "I am sending two battalions and the Imperial Light Infantry are on their way up. You must hold on to the last. No surrender." [69] Unfortunately, with little shelter for the British on the summit, sending more troops only added to the carnage. As Doyle states, "Three thousand more rifles could do nothing to check the fire of the invisible cannon, and it was this which was the main source of the losses, while on the other hand the plateau had become so cumbered with troops that a shell could hardly fail to do damage." [70]

In addition to the artillery fire, the British were receiving enfilading rifle fire from Conical Hill, Green Hill, and Aloe Hill; basically from three sides at once. To the British the condition on the summit was a hell on earth. As Pakenham quotes an eyewitness as saying:

'We had no guns, and the enemy's Long Toms swept the Hill. Shells rained in among us. The most hideous sights were exhibited. Men blown to atoms, joints torn asunder. Headless bodies, trunks of bodies. Awful. Awful. You dared not lift your head above the Rock or you were shot dead at once. Everything was confusion, officers were killed or mixed up in other regiments, the men had no one to rally them and became demoralized. . . .' [71]

Writing about what he saw from his vantage point across the plain on Mount Alice, John Atkins, a *Manchester Guardian* correspondent, stated:

I saw three shells strike a certain trench within a minute; each struck it full in the face, and the brown dust rose and drifted away with the white smoke. The trench was toothed into a rampart. Another shell struck it, and then—heavens!—the trench rose up and moved forward. The trench was men; the teeth against the sky were men. They ran forward bending their bodies into a curve—they looked like a cornfield with a heavy wind sweeping over it from behind. [72]

Although Lieutenant-Colonel Crofton was in charge of the British on the summit, it was Lieutenant-Colonel Thorneycroft who was proving himself the better leader. Buller, watching the battle unfold from his headquarters on Mount Alice, realized this and signaled Warren: "Now Woodgate is dead I think you must put a strong commander on top; I recommend you put Thorneycroft in command." Warren took Buller's advice. However, he failed to tell Major-General Coke, who Warren had sent to the summit with the reinforcements and who was still en route to the top, that

Thorneycroft was now a general and in charge of the British forces on the summit.[74] The result was confusion by those on the summit about who was in charge on the battlefield. Although this confusion reigned from time to time, Thorneycroft continued to prove his worth, at one time even, in pain from twisting his ankle, hopping up and limping out towards some Boers who were in the process of taking prisoners of some of the Fusiliers who had had enough of the conditions and the fighting on the hilltop and decided to surrender. Once there, Thorneycroft shouted, "I'm in command here! Take your men back to hell, sir! I allow no surrender!"[75] Although some 167 of the men had already been led away as prisoners, Thorneycroft was able to keep the rest from surrendering.[76]

By this time the few heliograph mirrors brought up to the summit had been smashed by shell fire, and the only way to signal to Warren was through messengers.[77] At 3:30 p.m., Thorneycroft, literally the first time since dawn, had a respite from the fighting long enough to sit down and write a note to Warren.[78] The note read:

Hung on till last extremity with old force. Some of the Middlesex here now, and I hear Dorsets coming up, but force really inadequate to hold such a large perimeter. . . . What reinforcements can you send to hold the hill tonight? We are badly in need of water. There are many killed and wounded.

Alex Thorneycroft.

[PS] If you wish to make a certainty of hill for night, you must send more Infantry and attack enemy's guns.[79]

It was this later—attacking and silencing the enemy's guns—that was most desperately needed, and what both Warren and Buller failed to do. An assault along the Tabanyama Ridge by Warren's 10,000 remaining troops could have greatly relieved the pressure from that being savagely applied to the top of Spion Kop by the Boer gunners.[80] Botha had already sapped the strength from those defending Tabanyama Ridge and sent them to Spion Kop.[81] Other Boers had already left the battlefield for Ladysmith.[82] Any attack by Warren on Tabanyama would most probably have forced Botha to redirect much of his artillery fire from Spion Kop to defend Tabanyama, which would have given Thorneycroft and his troops at least some respite, maybe enough to dig better and deeper trenches. But for unexplained reasons, neither Warren nor Buller ever gave the order for this attack.[83]

Warren did, however, send a message to Lyttelton asking for help to relieve the pressure from Thorneycroft. To this, Lyttelton responded by making a "demonstration early in the morning, but Buller had ordered it stopped." [84] Later, however, Lyttelton launched another assault, this time against Twin Peaks. According to Farwell, Lyttelton "did not consult Buller, who he knew would disapprove" of the assault.[85] This assault, although with heavy British casualties, gained the summit of Twin Peaks. "Botha was alarmed, as well he might be, for if the British gained these heights and held them they could make Spion Kop untenable for his burghers." [86] Although Buller, angry at seeing the assault against Twin Peaks begin without his permission, sent orders for its cease, the Twin Peaks were nonetheless taken. The British commander of the assault turned a "Nelson eye" to the repeated messages.[87] With these peaks in British control, the Boers on Aloe Knoll, between the peaks and

Thorneycroft's men, could be enfiladed by British fire from behind and would be forced to give up their position. This was the turning point needed in the battle. But as Farwell aptly states, "Botha's greatest support came not from his burghers but from Buller, who, when he saw the attack developing, sent a furious message to Lyttelton demanding that he recall his men." [88] Major Robert Calverley Arlington Bewicke-Copley, the surviving senior British officer on Twin Peaks, would reluctantly withdraw his troops from the summits soon after dusk. However, according to Pakenham,

the fact that they had withdrawn from the Twin Peaks made little difference to events. The thought of them being there was enough to send [Boer Commandant] Schalk Burger scurrying back across the plain to Ladysmith, leaving that second great breach in the Boers' line wide open for Buller and Lyttelton to exploit next day. [89]

Meanwhile, the battle for Spion Kop had raged on all day with Thorneycroft and others leading fruitless advances to chase off the Boers; the British dead literally piled up. Although additional British soldiers had arrived on the hilltop, they only added to those already in the overcrowded shallow ditch and proved to be more fodder for the Boer rifles and artillery fire. [90]

It was not, however, only the British and Boer soldiers that perished on that hill. As E. S. Reddy states concerning Indian stretcher-bearers,

I saw the Indian mule-train moved [sic] up the slopes of the Kop carrying water to the distressed soldiers who had lain powerless on the plateau. The mules carried the water in immense bags, one on each side, led by Indians at their leads. The galling rifle-fire, which heralded their arrival on the top, did not deter the strangely-looking cavalcade which moved slowly forward, and as an Indian fell, another quietly stepped forward to fill the vacant place. [91]

Although Twin Peaks had been taken, Thorneycroft, in his isolated position, could not see it, nor was he aware that it had been taken by the British. [92] Coke, however, who had finally hobbled his way to the top of Spion Kop, according to Farwell, "saw that Twin Peaks had been captured, but it never occurred to him that he should now make a determined effort to clear the Boers from Aloe Knoll and link up with the [Kings Royal] Rifles" on Twin Peaks. [93] Instead, at 6:00 p.m., both Coke and Thorneycroft, about ten minutes apart and both with the impression that they were in charge of the troops on the summit of Spion Kop, sent messages to Warren stating that it was nearly impossible to hold the hill past the night unless the Boer artillery was silenced, regardless of the amount of reinforcements that may arrive. [94]

It wasn't until around 8:00 p.m. that these messages reached Warren, and then not until after young Winston Churchill, a war correspondent and acting 2nd lieutenant, gave Warren a "vivid word picture of the demoralized troops, the casualties, and the ineffectiveness of Coke," that Warren finally became alarmed. As Farwell states concerning Warren's actions during the day,

he [Warren], was serenely unworried. All day he busied himself with minor details, which he handled splendidly; Warren liked to gnaw on small bones. It

was not until late in the afternoon that he thought of the balloon and sent for it; although it was too late in the day to use it, it would be useful tomorrow, he thought. Not until even later did it occur to him that sandbags and entrenching tools ought to be sent up to Spion Kop. The signalling [sic] arrangements were deplorable, but he made no effort to better them; neither did he worry about pushing guns up onto the hill.[96]

It was not until after the two messages sent from Coke and Thorneycroft reached him and Churchill's vivid word picture description of the conditions of the top of Spion Kop that Warren, "Finally alarmed, . . . began thinking of useful things to do: he ordered the naval guns sent up, he sent off 200 men of the Somerset Light Infantry with entrenching tools and sandbags, and he sent Churchill back with a message to Thorneycroft."[97]

By the time Churchill had climbed back up to the top of Spion Kop it was well after dark, and by the time he found Thorneycroft, he, Thorneycroft had already made the decision to abandon the hill. Churchill found him sitting on the ground surrounded by what was left of his regiment "which had 'fought for him like lions and followed him like dogs.'"[98] Warren's promised reinforcements, gunners, and sappers were to have no impact on the dispirited Thorneycroft. He was completely worn out and demoralized, and was convinced that the battle was lost. "The retirement is in progress," he told Churchill. 'Better six good battalions safely off the hill tonight than a bloody mop-up in the morning.'"[99] With that statement, he ordered a withdrawal from the summit and led his troops down. Even passing the reinforcements and sappers coming up the hill as Thorneycroft made his way down, did not persuade him to turn back.[100]

Unbeknownst to the British, however, the Boers were also leaving the hill, thinking they too had lost the fight. As Reitz tells us:

We were hungry, thirsty and tired; around us were the dead men covered with swarms of flies attracted by the smell of blood. We did not know the cruel losses that the English were suffering, and we believed that they were easily holding their own, so discouragement spread as the shadows lengthened.[101]

As Reitz continues, "Batches of men left the line, openly defying [Commandant] Red Daniel [Opperman], who was impotent in the face of this wholesale defection, and when at last the sun set I do not think there were sixty men left on the ledge."[102] At about 10:00 p.m., Opperman decided to retreat. As Reitz states, "We descended the hill by the way which he [Opperman] had climbed up nearly sixteen hours before, our feet striking sickeningly at times against the dead bodies in our path."[103]

Later that night and early the next morning, Opperman's commando, thinking the British were on top of the hill in force, discussed their next move.[104] Reitz and the remainder of Opperman's commando then went back to their laager. Once there they saw that Prinsloo's Carolina Commando, although having fought bravely during the day, had lost hope and were in the process of hurriedly packing their wagons and beginning to ride out towards Ladysmith. At that moment, however, the sound of galloping hoofs was heard and a man rode into their midst. As Reitz writes:

I could not see his face in the dark, but word went round that it was Louis Botha, the new Commandant-General, appointed in place of Piet Joubert who was seriously ill. He addressed the men from the saddle, telling them of the shame that would be theirs if they deserted their posts in this hour of danger; and so eloquent was his appeal that in a few minutes the men were filing off into the dark to reoccupy their positions on either side of the Spion Kop gap. I believe that he spent the rest of the night riding from commando to commando exhorting and threatening, until he persuaded the men to return to the line, thus averting a great disaster.[105]

Unfortunately for the British, Warren was no Botha; neither was Buller. As Farwell states:

The time had now arrived for Sir Charles Warren to display what, if anything, lay behind his monocle; what, if anything he possessed of military ability, moral courage, and resolution; and what, if anything, supported the jaunty self-confidence he had always displayed. There were still some 1,600 troops . . . on the slopes below the summit; the mountain battery and the naval guns were at the foot of Spion Kop, ready and willing to climb and fight; he had machine guns, supplies, and a dozen fresh battalions in hand. . . . He had only to act with energy and resolution, to throw his men and guns back onto that hilltop, to rally his officers and men and infuse in them a sense of urgency, and the hill would have been his.[106]

However, as Farwell continues concerning Warren's reaction after looking into the despondent faces of Coke and Thorneycroft who had reached Warren's headquarters at Three Tree Hill, Warren "resigned himself to defeat. He sent a pleading message to Buller: 'Can you come at once and decide what to do?'"[107]

That morning, Buller finally took over from Warren and ordered a complete withdrawal of his troops back across the Tugela River. Not only was Spion Kop abandoned, but so too were Twin Peaks and the positions taken on Tabanyama Ridge, all taken at a cost of over 350 British killed and over 900 wounded. [108]

That same morning the Boers discovered to their surprise that the British had abandoned the hill. As Reitz writes:

Gradually the dawn came and still there was no movement. Then to our utter surprise we saw two men on the top [of Spion Kop] triumphantly waving their hats and holding their rifles aloft. They were Boers, and their presence there was proof that, almost unbelievably, defeat had turned to victory—the English were gone and the hill was still ours.[109]

Reitz and others scrambled back to the top of Spion Kop where they were "able to grasp the full significance of our unexpected success. . . . everywhere the British were in full retreat from the positions which they had captured on this side of the stream [the Tugela River]."[110]

For the next few hours Reitz and his fellow Boers assisted the British medical personnel attend to the wounded from both sides left on the summit.[111] The trough

that had been dug much too shallow for a proper defensive trench was then deepened to make a suitable grave for those British soldiers who had died in and around it.[112]

In the end, the British had not lost the Battle of Spion Kop, they gave it away. Nearly every serious student of military history can attest that most battles are not won by just proper planning and forethought, or even superior might. Most battles are won by leaders who either make the least amount of mistakes or have the insight, fortitude, and courage to capitalize on their opponent's mistakes and weaknesses. The Battle of Spion Kop was no exception. The battle was riddled with mistakes from the beginning. Most of the mistakes were made on the part of the British who were superior in numbers of soldiers, war supplies, and equipment to that of the ragtag Boer army they were fighting. One of the biggest mistakes was to even fight the battle at all.

Buller had made it clear that Warren was to conduct a flanking movement around the side of the Boers, way to the west of Spion Kop. Had Warren hustled his troops before the Boers could consolidate and construct their trenches on the Tabanyama Ridge, had Warren reinforced Dundonald when Dundonald had taken the position west of the Boers, had Buller relieved Warren when Warren refused to do these things, Spion Kop would not have been fought or needed to be fought.

Once, however, it was determined to assault Spion Kop, again Warren failed. He failed to reconnoiter his objective using the observation balloon at his disposal before the battle began. He also failed to use the observation balloon once the battle began. He failed to maintain adequate communication with his senior officers who were on top of Spion Kop battling for their lives. He also failed to use his 10,000 remaining troops, who were standing idly by during the time of the battle, to attack the Tabanyama Ridge, which would have, at the very least, helped draw off some of the artillery fire from Spion Kop. And in the end, Warren failed to "act with energy and resolution, to throw his men and guns back onto that hilltop, to rally his officers and men and infuse in them a sense of urgency" when the exhausted and demoralized Thorneycroft could do no more.[113]

Buller also failed. He should have relieved Warren days before Spion Kop was fought. As Pakenham states, "Buller also blamed himself" in not doing so.[114] Buller "should have obeyed his instincts and superseded Warren six days earlier." [115] In addition, once the battle did begin, Buller should not have called off Lyttelton's men from Twin Peaks. Instead of failing to urge his far-sighted subordinate general on, Buller should have ordered the assault himself and fully supported it with additional troops.

It was Louis Botha who proved to be one of the true heroes of the battle. He painstakingly continued to urge his Boers, demoralized as they were, to stay and fight. This untrained but energetic farmer-turned general truly demonstrated the insight, fortitude, and courage to capitalize on his opponent's mistakes and weaknesses and, simply put, out-generated

Footnotes

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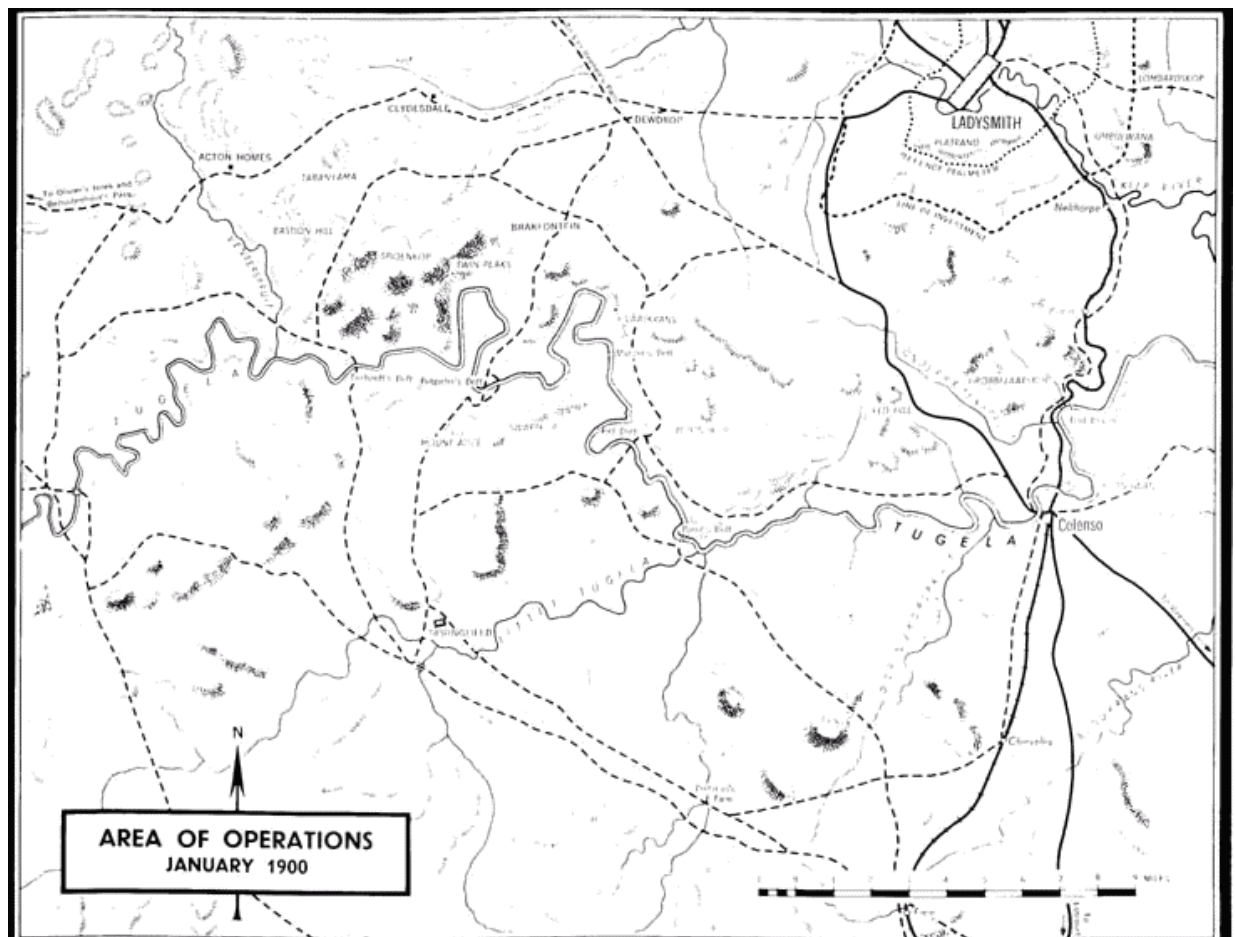
5. C.J. Barnard's Analysis of the Battle

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GENERAL BOTHA IN THE SPIOENKOP CAMPAIGN JANUARY 1900

by C.J. Barnard

*This article is a transcription of a talk by Professor Barnard of the University of South Africa to the S.A. Military History Society. For a detailed account, fully documented, on General Botha's role in this battle the reader is referred to Professor Barnard's book *Generaal Louis Botha op die Natalse Front, 1899-1900* (Cape Town 1970).*



Those of you who attended my talk on General Louis Botha's role at the battle of Colenso will recall the main features of his conduct of that fight. At the beginning of December 1899, about two months after the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War, General Botha, who was then, at 37, the youngest general in the Boer forces, was put in command of the Tugela front at Colenso. Here he was to face the British army under General Sir Redvers Buller, which was to attempt to relieve the encircled British troops at Ladysmith (see Map 1). Botha had at his disposal 4 500 burghers, four guns and a pom-pom. General Buller commanded a reinforced division of 20 000 officers

and men, with 44 guns. Yet so skilfully did Botha lay his ambush that on 15th December 1899 Buller stumbled blindly in to it - or, more correctly, marched into it with open eyes in broad daylight.



General Botha on Dopper, Glencoe, March 1900

The results for Buller and his army were, of course, disastrous. He withdrew from the battlefield having suffered more than 1 300 casualties (according to his own returns) and abandoning intact 10 field guns and 12 fully loaded ammunition wagons. Two days after the battle Buller was superseded as British Commander-in-Chief, South Africa, by Field Marshal Lord Roberts. He remained, however, commander of the British forces in Natal, and therefore Botha's adversary in the subsequent battles of the Tugela line.

Despite his remarkable victory at Colenso, Botha's force was not nearly strong enough to destroy Buller's army. Nor, with most of the Boer commandos in Natal tied up in the futile siege of Ladysmith, could he wrest the initiative from the enemy. Safely out of harm's way at Chieveley and Frere, Buller could recover his composure and rebuild his army, and there was nothing Botha could do in the circumstances but to prepare for the resumption of the British offensive.

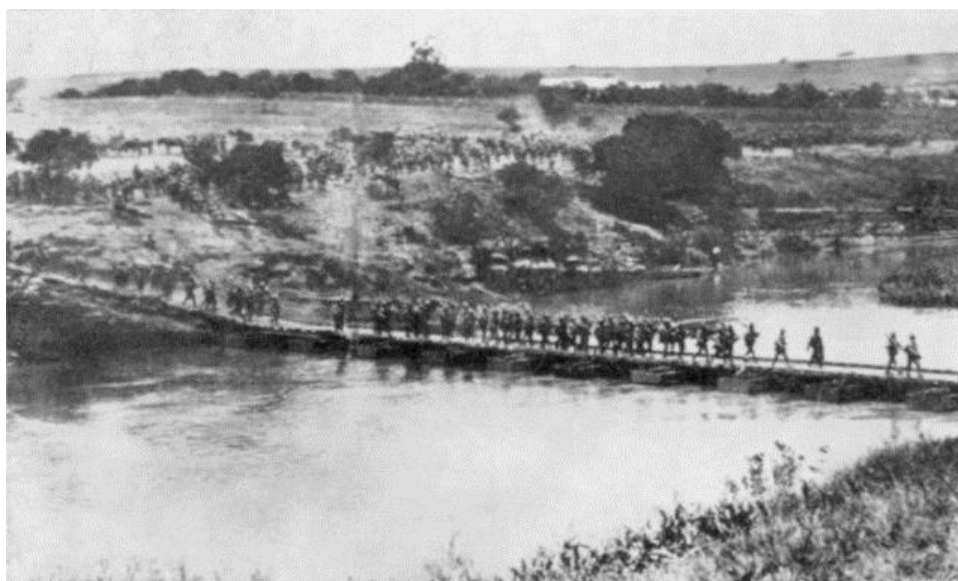
At the beginning of January 1900, President Kruger in fact made an attempt to break the stalemate. He ordered an all-out attack on the commanding feature of Platrand (i.e. Caesar's Camp and Wagon Hill), a vital sector in the British defences round Ladysmith (see Map 1). In this way the President hoped that the fortress might be reduced and the investing commandos released for offensive operations in Southern Natal and on the western front south of Kimberley. But the ailing Commandant-General Piet Joubert and his indifferent deputy, General Schalk Burger made an awful hash of the attack. They shamefully sacrificed the heroic vanguard of the assault column - a handful of Free Staters and Transvalers who in the early morning hours of 6th January 1900 reached the crest line of Platrand and came within a touch of occupying the ridge and tearing a gap in the defence perimeter.

By this time Buller's army had been reinforced by the arrival of the 5th Division under Lieut-General Sir Charles Warren to more than 30 000 officers and men, with 66

guns. General Warren, a self-assured and eccentric veteran of 59, did not exactly endear himself to his commander by his outspoken criticism of Buller's inaction since the battle of Colenso. When he suggested that the next attack should be directed towards Hlangwane Hill, which was indeed the weak link in the Colenso defences, Buller cut him short. "What do you know about it?" he asked. Buller had already decided to by-pass the Colenso position by moving the bulk of his army some 20 miles up-stream and breaking through to Ladysmith in a wide outflanking movement.

The move began on 10th January 1900 after two days of incessant rain. The downpour had turned the countryside into a quagmire and every spruit into a torrent. Leaving one brigade and four naval guns at Chieveley to mask the Colenso position, Buller ploughed and slithered westwards across the sodden plain with the rest of his army - 24 000 men with 58 guns, accompanied by huge ammunition and supply columns. It took him six days to concentrate at his forward base - Springfield, 16 miles to the west - and build up supplies for 16 days (see Map 1). The slow, clumsy procession precluded the possibility of surprise and confirmed the following opinion on Buller by one of his staff officers: "He took care that supplies were abundant, but often, and to his cost and ours, placed supply before strategy at critical moments."

Buller's plan for the break-through, very briefly, was as follows: Major-General Lyttelton was to cross the Tugela River at Potgieter's Drift with two infantry brigades, a howitzer battery and a field battery (altogether approximately 9 000 men and 12 guns) to carry out a holding operation against the Boers in the arc of hills facing the northward loops in the river. General Warren was to cross at Trichardt's Drift, five miles up-stream, with three infantry brigades, a mounted brigade and six batteries of field artillery (altogether 15 000 men and 36 guns). He was to work his way round the great barrier of hills to the west of Spioenkop - the Tabanyama range - in order to turn the Boer flank which Buller believed rested on Bastion Hill. Then, having reached the Acton Homes area, he was to advance along the road over the undulating plain towards Ladysmith in rear of the hills. Lyttelton began to cross the river in the early hours of 17th January and Warren later in the day (see Map 2).



Warren's troops crossing pontoon bridge at Trichardt's Drift, 17th January, 1900.

After the battle of Colenso General Botha, as I have said, prepared for the next British attack. He believed that this attack would again be launched in the Colenso sector - because of its proximity to the railway and its vulnerability to a turning movement on his left, towards Hlangwane Hill and the ridges further to the east. Towards the end of December 1899 he became indisposed - exhausted, as he put it, by the tension and anxiety of the previous weeks and by pressure of work, day and night (and, he might have added, under constant shell-fire). When his former chief, General Lucas Meyer, returned to Colenso at the beginning of January 1900 after two months' medical treatment in Pretoria, Botha hoped that he would now be able to take a short period of leave. This was the state of affairs when General Buller began his march towards the Upper Tugela.

The Boers in the area at that time numbered only 1 000 - 500 Free Staters with one gun under General Andries Cronje at Brakfontein, facing Potgieter's Drift, and 500 Johannesburgers at Porrit's Drift (see Map 1). Reporting the British move to General Joubert, Botha stressed the urgency of sending reinforcements to the Upper Tugela from Ladysmith. Reinforcements from his own front at Colenso left during the night. The next few days, from 11th January onwards, were a period of feverish activity for Botha. Early in the mornings, long before daybreak, he left his headquarters at Colenso for the threatened sector, a ride of three and a half hours on horseback. There he supervised the construction of defences in the Brakfontein area, since it was expected that the British would attack by way of Potgieter's Drift. In the evenings after sunset he returned again to Colenso to organize the dispatch of additional reinforcements, ammunition and supplies, and to dictate his reports to President Kruger and General Joubert.

He did not move his headquarters to the Upper Tugela because he still hoped to be able to get away on leave before the impending attack. When, however, he mentioned his indisposition in one of his reports, hinting that either General Schalk Burger or General Daniel Erasmus be put in command on the Upper Tugela, and later expressing a wish to take a few days of leave, President Kruger intervened. He indicated in no uncertain manner that he wanted Botha to take command on the new front at all costs. Here, the President said, every man would have to fight to the limit. In a telegram to Botha he requested him - "respectfully" - not to insist on leave until the battle had been fought. „Ik beschouw dat uwe tegenwoordigheid onder deze moeilijke omstandigheden ten uwent onmisbaar is", he said, "God zal u helpen en ondersteunen in uwe moeilijke taak." ("I regard your presence in the difficult circumstances on your front as indispensable. God will help and sustain you in your onerous task").

That, as far as Botha was concerned, was that. He left for the Upper Tugela on the morning of 16th January. The Boer forces in the area had by that time been reinforced to approximately 4 000 men with four 75 mm field guns and two pom-poms (to oppose, as you will remember, an army of 24 000 men with 58 guns). Moreover the commandos were deployed (from the Twin Peaks to Doringkop) in anticipation of an attack through Potgieter's Drift and possibly Munger's Drift and Skiet Drift (see Maps 1 and 2). The news that Botha had arrived to take command was received with great satisfaction by officers and men alike. As one burgher put it, "it was a relief - one felt as if a weight of doubt and care and anxiety had been taken from the mind."

Botha spent the night in General Tobias Smuts's camp behind Vaalkrans, still feeling ill. The next morning dawned wet and foggy after overnight rain, but from the lower slopes of the hills General Lyttelton's troops, who had crossed the river during the night, could be seen in the koppies north of Potgieter's Drift. At 5 a.m. Lyttelton's howitzers, supported by 10 long-range naval guns in the commanding hills south of the river, opened fire - a bombardment which was to continue for the next seven days. At 8 o'clock Botha rode over to General Schalk Burger's headquarters, concerned about his right flank which was hanging dangerously in the air. It was here that he learnt about the crossings at Trichardt's Drift, where General Warren was at that moment moving the greater part of Buller's army to the north bank of the Tugela. Apart from a picket of 500 Free Staters and Pretoria burghers in the so-called Wapadnek (Wagon Road Pass) west of Spioenkop, the Tabanyama range was completely defenceless. Five hundred men against an army of 15 000 supported by 36 guns.

Although deeply concerned about the ominous turn of events, Botha now staked everything on his hope that the British generals would lack the boldness for an immediate advance. During the afternoon he returned all the way to Colenso to prize out further reinforcements from the already tenuous lines on that front. That night he was so exhausted that he had to make his arrangements and dictate his dispatches lying down. But on his return to the Upper Tugela the next day (18th January) his hope had been fulfilled.

General Warren believed there were thousands of Boers in the hills ahead of him. He had no intention of advancing before having crossed the river with his entire force and all his guns and wagons - a procession of 15 miles with 15 000 oxen. The crossing was completed only after three days, and by that time he had concluded that the outflanking march by way of Acton Homes, which Buller had ordered, was unfeasible. The route, he considered, was too long for his huge baggage train, without which it was unthinkable for him to move. He chose instead the direct route through the Wapadnek and ordered a frontal attack on the Tabanyama range the next morning - 20th January - to clear the way. Lord Dundonald who had ranged ahead to the Acton Homes area with his mounted brigade and had ambushed there a Boer patrol, was recalled - to Dundonald's intense annoyance.

These plodding manoeuvres suited Botha admirably. They enabled him to extend his front for seven miles along the Tabanyama range and beyond the road near Acton Homes. On this front Botha had at his disposal only 1 800 men, three 75 mm field guns and a pom-pom. But the positions he selected in consultation with his officers showed once again what a skilful tactician he was. From the British vantage points in the Tugela valley only the forward crests of Tabanyama (from Piquet Hill to Bastion Hill) were visible. The real crest of the range, however, lay 600 to 2 000 yards further back. It was along this crest, out of sight of the enemy and with a good field of fire over the gentle slopes to the forward crests, that Botha ordered his burghers to dig in (see Map 3). The future General Jan Kemp, who was one of Botha's field-cornets on Tabanyama, later commented: „Al moet ek dit self sê, ons offisiere het darem goed geweet wat hulle doen toe hulle die stellings gekies het." ("Though I have to say it myself, our officers certainly knew what they were doing when they selected those positions.")

The attack on Tabanyama began at 3 a.m. on Saturday, 20th January 1900. Major-General Woodgate's 11th (or Lancashire) Brigade led the climb up the steep slopes to the forward crests, followed by Major-General Hart's 5th (or Irish) Brigade. Since these slopes were dead ground to the Boers, the troops reached the crests in three hours virtually without opposition. The real crest of the range was now revealed to General Warren, and he realized that the Boers were entrenched along it. After his field batteries had been brought forward to Three Tree Hill, Warren opened up against the hills ahead of him with his 36 fifteen-pounders. When the barrage had been kept up for four hours, General Hart began to advance beyond the southern crests with four and a half battalions - Lancashire Fusiliers, Royal Dublin Fusiliers, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the Border Regiment, and York and Lancaster Regiment.

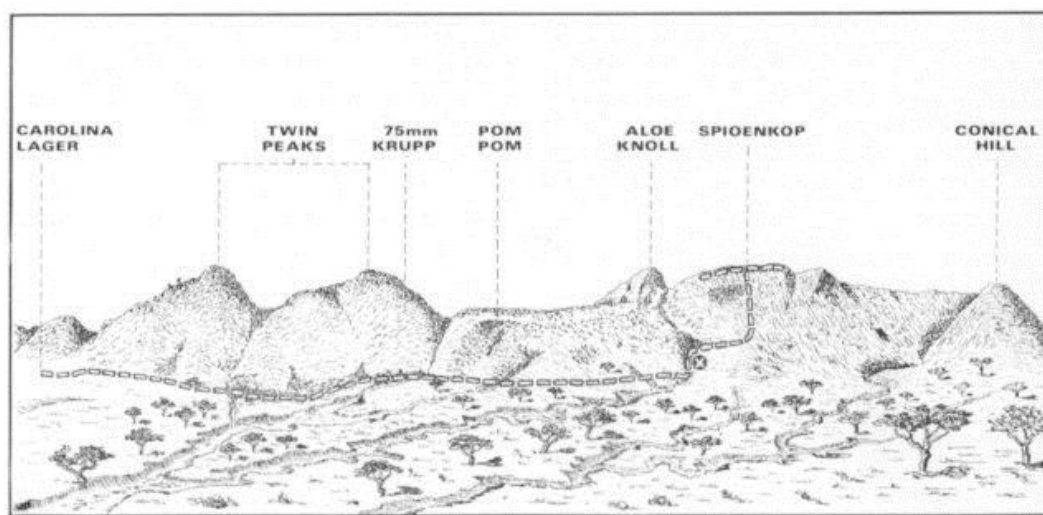
As the battalions advanced within rifle range Botha's burghers responded with their usual deadly Mauser fire. An officer of the Lancashire Fusiliers described the further course of the attack as follows: "Before long, owing to the roughness of the surface, to fatigue and faint heart, the line became disordered, and an uncontrollable tendency asserted itself to collect in pockets on the ground for shelter, for breathing space, and for the summoning of resolution for further advance. On the first few occasions the halt was momentary, but the impulse to linger ever grew until finally, as the sense of physical danger overpowered the mental resolve, and as the hills loomed more threateningly ahead, the laggard progress stopped for good and all, and the tired and dispirited attackers longed only for dark."

The infantry had been checked and pinned, and after dark they withdrew below the southern crests. That night the Boers, tired as they were, continued to work on their defences. They watched the lanterns of the British ambulances and medical personnel collecting the dead and wounded. To guard against a possible night attack the burghers occasionally fired short bursts with their Mausers and shot up flares to light the slopes. The next morning - Sunday, 21st January - General Warren, who had by this time lined the southern crests with all three of his infantry brigades and his mounted brigade, now dismounted, resumed the attack with heavy artillery support. The troops were again repulsed. But Botha's burghers were beginning to show signs of wavering as more shells hit the entrenchments, blasting them away, killing and maiming. The well-known Free State chaplain, the Rev. J. D. Kestell, gave an account of Botha's conduct on this day in his memoirs.

"I visited the battlefield ... on Sunday, January 21, when the bombardment was at its fiercest", wrote Kestell. "I found that it had often been so intolerable that the burghers were driven out of the earthworks and compelled to seek shelter behind the hill slopes. But they had always returned and kept up a continuous fire on the advancing soldiers. I found, too, that the English had as yet always been driven back, but that their repeated attacks had not had quite a satisfactory moral effect on the burghers. The direction of affairs was, however, in the hands of ... General Louis Botha, than whom there was no man better qualified to encourage the burghers. Just as at Colenso, so here he rode from position to position, and whenever burghers - as I have related - were losing heart and on the point of giving way under the awful bombardment, he would appear as if from nowhere and contrive to get them back into the positions by 'gentle persuasion', as he expressed it, or by other means."

General Warren did not attempt another assault the following day - Monday, 22nd January - but the artillery fire continued and clouds of dust and lyddite fumes rose over the hills. Botha reported that burghers were leaving the front in larger numbers than reinforcements were arriving. He himself had a narrow shave when his horse was shot under him. Warren's troops were reinforced in the morning by another infantry brigade and four howitzers to more than 18 000 men and 40 guns. His force now outnumbered Botha's by ten to one in men and artillery, yet it was the British generals who were forced by the strain of battle to take an ill-considered step.

All this time General Buller had been watching Warren's operations from his headquarters on Mount Alice, as the Times History put it, like an impartial umpire at manoeuvres. He had allowed Warren to convert his original plan to turn the Boer flank into a frontal attack. When he visited Warren and learnt that he now proposed to demoralize the Boers by three or four days' continuous shelling, Buller would not hear of it. During the past six days Warren had achieved nothing and Buller now, understandably, insisted on results, otherwise, he said, he would withdraw Warren's force back across the Tugela. Warren replied that he could only push through the Wapadnek after having taken Spioenkop first, whereupon Buller was said to have commented irritably: "Of course you must take Spioenkop."



Sketch of Spioenkop and the range of hills to the east of it as seen from the Boer side (i.e. from the north). Note the positions of the Krupp gun and Pom-Pom which were hauled up the slope on the morning of 24th January, 1900 to support the counter-attack on Spioenkop by Cmdt. Prinsloo and his burghers. The dotted lines show Prinsloo's route and the position his men took up along the crest line. They left their horses in the gully marked "X" and then climbed the hill. (Drawn in 1939 by I.J. de Villiers, a grandson of Cmdt. Prinsloo)

And so it was decided to occupy this commanding hill, its flat, rocky summit rising 1 470 feet above the Tugela. To Warren the operation was to be merely the first step in the resumption of his attack on Tabanyama, and simultaneously a safeguard against a humiliating withdrawal. To Buller it was a means of getting Warren to take some action. When Buller told one of his staff officers to accompany the assault force to Spioenkop, the latter asked him what the force was to do when it had taken the hill. Buller thought for a moment and replied: "It has got to stay there." The attackers

therefore were simply to establish themselves on the hill. There was to be no attack elsewhere along the front to support them. The rest of Buller's army was to look on and do nothing. That Botha with 1 800 men and a few guns was able to force Buller and Warren into such a haphazard operation was certainly no small achievement.

The force to capture Spioenkop was commanded by General Woodgate and consisted of the Lancashire Fusiliers, six companies of the Royal Lancasters and two of the South Lancashires, Thorneycroft's mounted infantry and half a company of Royal Engineers, altogether approximately 1 700 officers and men. The column marched off from its rendezvous, a gully south of Three Tree Hill, at 8.30 on the night of 23rd January. At 11 o'clock the ascent began, in single file up the south-western spur of the hill with Colonel Thorneycroft leading. Towards 3 o'clock in the morning - Wednesday, 24th January 1900 - as the spur widened towards the summit, the troops deployed in the damp grass in pitch darkness (see Map 3).

Spioenkop was held that night by a detachment of some 50 Vryheid burghers and German volunteers. They had apparently gone to sleep after having completed an emplacement for a 75 mm field gun which Botha had intended positioning on the hill the next morning. A few pickets near the top of the spur woke up from the shuffling ahead of them. There was a loud "Werda!" followed by a burst of rifle fire. Then the troops came in at the point of the bayonet, amid shouts of "Majuba!", "Bronkhorstspuit!". The pickets turned and fled, shouting "Hardloop burgers, die Engelse is op die kop!" One man was bayoneted. The rest, instinctively grabbing their rifles and bandoliers, made good their escape. Having captured the summit, the troops gave three cheers. The waiting gunners on Three Tree Hill responded by shooting a star shell into the air. Then the batteries opened up against the approaches to Spioenkop in an effort to prevent the Boers from recapturing the hill.

It was now approximately 4 o'clock. The crests of Spioenkop and the other hills in the area were shrouded in dense fog. The engineers taped out a position for a trench along what appeared to them to be the northern crest line of the (roughly) 400 square yard summit of Spioenkop. In fact the position was 50 to 200 yards short of the crest line. Moreover it was virtually impossible to entrench on the rocky hilltop and the trenches together with their stone parapets were nowhere deeper than two and a half to three feet.

Meanwhile the Vryheid burghers had arrived breathless and confused at Botha's tent on the koppie to the north of Spioenkop with the tidings of what had happened. It is not recorded what he told them. In circumstances such as these Botha was a cool, calm and unshakeable commander. Spioenkop simply had to be recaptured. By this time the alarm had also been given in the Carolina and Lydenburg laager, where General Schalk Burger had spent the night. Burger ordered the Carolina commandant Hendrik Prinsloo, one of the finest officers in the Boer forces, to storm the hill with a detachment of his men. Botha was informed of this instruction. There is evidence that Prinsloo galloped to Botha's headquarters to discuss the situation and receive his final orders. Botha agreed to reinforce Prinsloo's attack from Tabanyama and to support it with rifle and artillery fire.

Before starting his climb Prinsloo, in accordance with Botha's orders, arranged for covering fire from his rear. A 75 mm Krupp field gun and a pom-pom were hauled on

to the ridges east of Spioenkop and a detachment of 50 burghers was placed on Aloe Knoll, a prominent feature at the apex of the eastern spur of the hill. Shortly after 7 o'clock Prinsloo and approximately 65 Carolina men (later reinforced to 84) reached a point some distance below the north-eastern summit of Spioenkop (see sketch). Here Prinsloo addressed them in the mist as follows: "Burgers, ons gaan onder die vyand in en ons sal nie almal terugkom nie. Doen julle plig en vertrou op die Here." ("Burghers, we are going in amongst the enemy and all of us will not return. Do your duty and trust in the Lord.") Then he dispersed them and led them to the summit, the men moving warily from rock to rock like hunters stalking their prey.

Along the crest line they bumped detachments of Woodgate's troops who had pushed forward when it was discovered (as the mist thinned out slightly) that the main trench had been incorrectly sited. Fierce fighting ensued and the battle of Spioenkop was under way. Here and there the exchanges were hand-to-hand, with burghers wrenching rifles from the hands of the soldiers. There were grievous casualties on both sides in the point-blank shooting and the Mauser and Lee-Metford fire formed a cloud in the mist. When the fog lifted suddenly between 8 o'clock and 8.30, a storm of bullets lashed the summit of Spioenkop from the hills on all sides of it - from the western Twin Peak, Aloe Knoll, Conical Hill and Green Hill, where the burghers had been waiting with finger on the trigger.

Now that the sun had broken through, Prinsloo, who had stationed a heliographer - a young fellow named Louis Bothma - on the slope below the summit, was able to give Bothma his first situation report. Bothma signalled back that more men were on their way and that Spioenkop must be held at all costs. The Boer artillery was thereupon informed of the position of Prinsloo's men along the crest line and soon the shells were raking the overcrowded summit with deadly accuracy. Botha's artillery consisted of two 75 mm Creusot field guns, one 75 mm Krupp field gun and a pom-pom on Tabanyama, a 75 mm Krupp field gun on the koppie from where Botha commanded the operation, and the Krupp 75 and pom-pom on the ridges to the east of Spioenkop - altogether only five guns and two pom-poms (see Map 3). These pieces were as skilfully sited as they were served. The British artillery - 58 guns on the whole Upper Tugela front, as you will remember - tried in vain to locate and silence them. In no other action in the Anglo-Boer War did the Boer artillery wreak greater havoc than Botha's handful of guns on this day.

By about 9.30, when Prinsloo's burghers had borne the brunt of the fighting on Spioenkop for two hours, the first reinforcements arrived, mainly Pretoria men under Commandant "Red" Daniel Opperman. Gradually the surviving British troops on the crest line were driven back to the trenches, having suffered heavy casualties. Two desperate charges from the main trench were beaten off. But the Boer losses were also severe and their dead lay hideously where they had fallen. According to Deneys Reitz, it was only "Red" Daniel Opperman's forceful personality and vigorous language to anyone who seemed to be wavering that kept the burghers in check in his sector. At about 1 o'clock in the afternoon a detachment of Lancashire Fusiliers on the eastern side of the summit waved their handkerchiefs in the air in token of surrender. The Boer fire stopped and a few Pretoria burghers jumped over the British parapets, shouting to the troops in the vicinity to give themselves up. Colonel Thorneycroft then appeared on the scene, saying there was no surrender, and as the British rifle fire

resumed the Pretoria men darted back for shelter accompanied by approximately 170 prisoners.

After this sign of wavering in the enemy's ranks, Botha ordered the artillery and rifle fire on the summit to be increased. Thanks to the efforts of Prinsloo and Bothma, and of Botha's scouts and dispatch riders, he was well aware of what was happening on Spioenkop and Thabanyama. The Carolina and Pretoria burghers on Spioenkop were reinforced during the day by detachments from several commandos - Krugersdorpers under Oosthuizen and Kemp and German volunteers from Thabanyama; Ermelo and Standerton men under Tobias Smuts and Johannesburgers from the Vaalkrans area. Botha, however, was careful not to put all available reinforcements on Spioenkop. He said later that his men on the hill never exceeded 350. He knew how to deploy his burghers to obtain the best tactical results. In particular, he reinforced Green Hill, whence the south-western spur of Spioenkop, the British line of approach to the summit, could also be kept under fire.

On the other hand there was great confusion on the British side. Woodgate, the commander of the assault column, was mortally wounded early in the fight. Colonel Crofton of the South Lancashires informed Warren of this development in a message which reached him as follows: "Reinforce at once or all is lost. General dead." Warren, who had earlier been told that Woodgate's force could hold on "till Doomsday", never recovered from this shock. His only idea was to send more and more reinforcements to Spioenkop. It does not seem to have occurred to him that he could be of greater assistance to the troops on the summit by launching a diversionary attack across Tabanyama, where on a three-mile front he had over 10 000 men facing barely 1 500 Boers. Altogether four additional battalions and two squadrons of mounted infantry were ordered to the summit, bringing the total number of troops sent there to 4 500. The entrenchments on the hill were choked, not only with fighting soldiers but with hundreds of dead, dying, maimed and cowering non-fighters. In these conditions Botha's artillery and marksmen exacted an appalling toll. Throughout the day there was a serious breakdown in communications with the summit. The only British heliograph on Spioenkop was shot to pieces early in the morning, and by nightfall Buller and Warren were still unaware of the great debacle that was threatening on the hill.

Late in the afternoon one of Lyttelton's battalions, the King's Royal Rifles, captured the Twin Peaks, to the east of Spioenkop, after a gallant climb up the steep slopes (see Map 3). The Boer Krupp gun and pom-pom had to be hastily withdrawn and the Lydenburg and Carolina burghers who had held the peaks, galloped away across the plain. Botha's line had now been breached, at a loss to the Rifles of approximately 100 casualties including their commander (Buchanan-Riddle), who had been killed. But Buller did not realize that the battalion had presented him with an opportunity to win the day. On the contrary, he was disturbed because he considered that Lyttelton's troops were too widely dispersed. Consequently he ordered the battalion to withdraw after dark. The troops began to leave the peaks at about the time the Utrecht burghers, whom Botha had called over post-haste from Green Hill, arrived at the foot of the hills to begin another counter-attack.

The fighting on Spioenkop gradually died down after nightfall. The din of battle gave way to an eerie silence. Behind the British breastworks the burghers could hear men

talking and stumbling about in the darkness, and above all the moans and cries of the wounded. Most of the burghers - some of whom, like the survivors of Prinsloo's original assault force, had been on the summit for more than 12 hours - now began to descend the hill. All of them were exhausted, and many were uncertain about what they were to do and apprehensive of the morrow's prospects. (Commandant Prinsloo was absent at this stage. He had had the painful task after dark of carrying the body of his fallen brother, Willie, off the hill).

Botha knew that the burghers were descending the hill in considerable numbers, but he was not concerned about it. They needed rest, water and food after the day's experiences. In any case he was convinced that the battle had already been won. The British inaction on Tabanyama, their strange hesitation after capturing the Twin Peaks, and the resignation with which they endured their punishment on Spioenkop led him to only one conclusion: that they would withdraw during the night. This he explained in his official dispatch to President Kruger, adding that he would nevertheless take no risk. He would make the necessary preparations in case the battle would have to be resumed the next morning.



British dead in main trench, Spioenkop, 25th January, 1900.

Botha's military secretary, Sandberg, says in his memoirs that he and Botha were so tired that they dozed off more than once while working on this dispatch. But there was to be little rest for Botha during that night. From General Schalk Burger he received the advice that further resistance was futile because the attenuated Boer forces could no longer hold the front. Botha thereupon drafted a written reply in which he seriously urged Burger on no account to lose heart or abandon his positions. "Let us fight and die together", he pleaded, "but, brother, please do not let us yield an inch to the English." Botha went on to express the opinion that the enemy was now so timorous ("kopsku") that if the Boers remained faithful and steadfast he would submit. "I am confident and convinced", he said, "that if only we stand firm our Lord will give us victory." (1)

Towards midnight the dispatch rider who had to deliver this message returned, accompanied by Commandant Prinsloo, with the news that Schalk Burger had indeed pulled out and was in full retreat towards Ladysmith with his Lydenburgers and a number of Carolina burghers. Botha and Prinsloo hurried over to the Carolina laager,

which they found in great confusion. Wagons had been packed and horsemen were getting ready to move off in the wake of Burger's flight. Botha addressed the men from the saddle, telling them (as Deneys Reitz puts it) of the shame that would be theirs if they deserted their posts in this hour of danger. He succeeded in rallying them and the men filed back in the dark towards Spioenkop. Later Botha also ordered a detachment of Heidelbergers from Tabanyama to Spioenkop and assembled a fresh assault force at the foot of the hill.

Meanwhile the British evacuation of Spioenkop, which Botha had expected and prophesied, had occurred. By 10 o'clock that night Colonel Thorneycroft, whom Buller had put in command on the hill during the day, had received no communication from his commanding generals except the news of his appointment. He did not know what, if anything, was contemplated to assist him. His men, he knew only too well, could not stand another day's pounding by the Boer artillery, nor would he allow them to remain merely a defenceless target for the Boer gunners. He therefore ordered a withdrawal. "Better six battalions safely off the hill than a mop-up in the morning," he explained to Winston Churchill, whom he met on his way down the hill. The dead and scores of wounded were left behind on the summit, many of the latter to die from exposure.



British medical orderlies and Boers amongst the fallen, Spioenkop, 25th January, 1900.

Jan Kemp was the first Boer officer to discover at daybreak the next morning - Thursday, 25th January 1900 - that the British had abandoned Spioenkop. Throughout the night he had remained high up on the slopes with a detachment of Krugersdorpers. Despite the gruesome sights of the summit, Kemp could not resist (as he said later) thinking of the "ribbons and medals" a British officer would have received in similar circumstances. On the crest line the burghers held aloft their rifles and waved with their hats to indicate to their comrades below that the enemy had retired. Hundreds of burghers then began to scale the slopes. Botha soon arrived on the summit with members of his staff. He spoke briefly to the British chaplain and medical officers who had come up to attend to the wounded who had survived the night. He ordered his burghers to give them every assistance and gave instructions that coffee should be brought to them from his camp. On his return to his headquarters he sent the following telegram to President Kruger and General Joubert:

"Battle over and by the grace of God a magnificent victory for us. The enemy driven out of their positions and their losses are great. At least 600 dead and a large number of wounded are still lying on the battlefield. The enemy have asked me to remove their wounded and bury their dead, to which I have agreed. The battlefield therefore is ours. Last night the enemy withdrew some distance with their guns and soldiers. Furthermore 187 prisoners were taken ... It breaks my heart to say that so many of our gallant heroes have also been killed and wounded. The names will be telegraphed to you later. It is incredible that such a small handful of men, with the help of the Most High, could fight and withstand the mighty Britain for six consecutive days and drive them back on the last day with heavy loss. We have taken approximately 40 cases of Lee-Metford cartridges and a good number of rifles."(2)

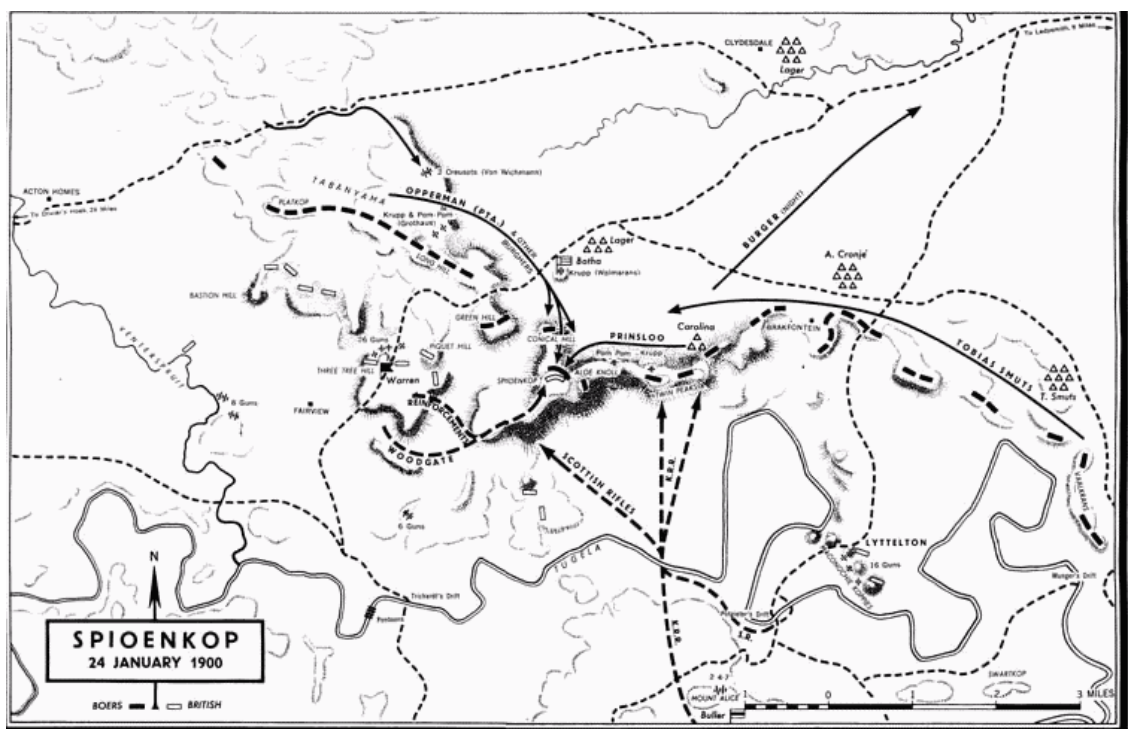
Commandant Willem Pretorius of Heidelberg whom Botha had ordered to count the British dead on the summit, reported that there were 650. In addition there remained on the hill 350 seriously wounded soldiers, most of them beyond hope of recovery. In the light of these figures, the official British casualty list for Spioenkop - 68 officers and 976 men - does not appear to be complete. The Boer casualties for the whole Upper Tugela front on 24th January were 59 killed in action, nine died of wounds and 134 wounded. Of Prinsloo's detachment of 84 Carolina burghers, more than 50 were killed or wounded.

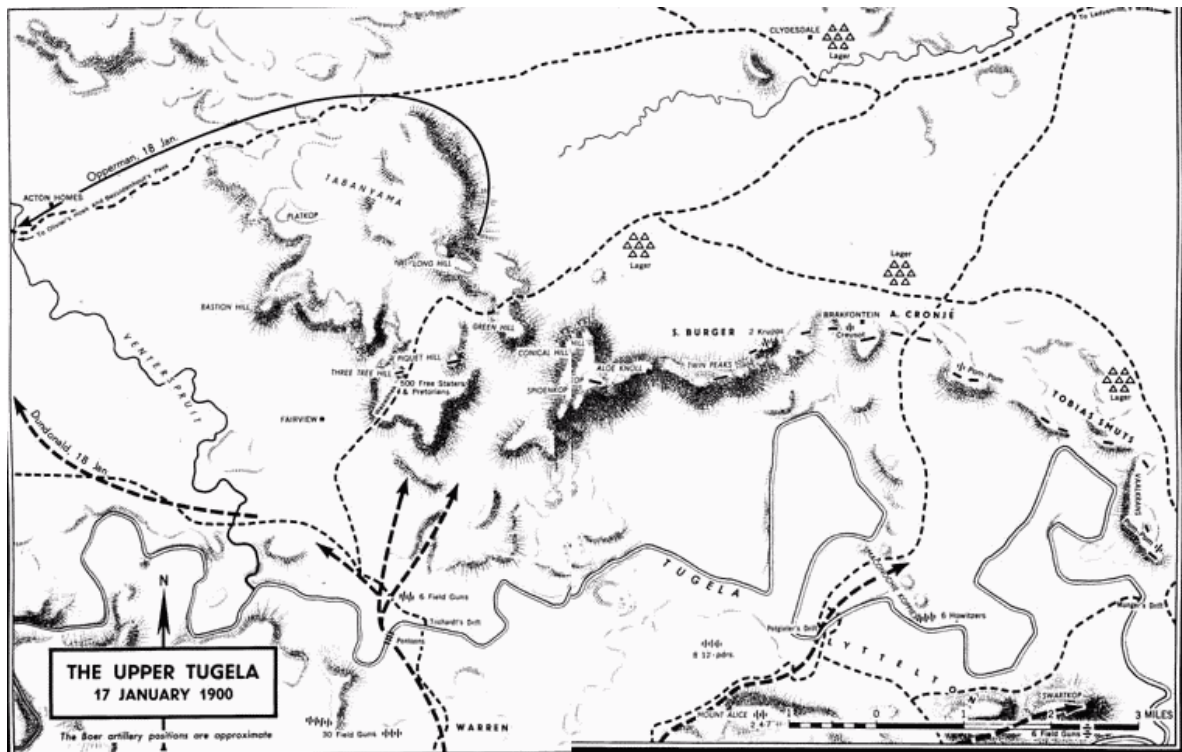
After nightfall on 25th January, Warren's force began to withdraw from the north bank of the Tugela. The withdrawal continued throughout the next day and night, often in pouring rain - the extraordinary sight of an army of 20 000 officers and men with 36 field guns and four howitzers retreating before approximately 1 800 Boers. Botha did not harass the withdrawal because he considered his men had had enough. By Saturday, 27th January 1900, Warren's troops were back in their camps near Springfield, which they had left 10 days before. "The net result is that we have once more to chronicle a complete defeat", wrote General Hart of the 5th (or Irish Brigade) in a private letter; and the future Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff towards the end of the First World War, noted in his diary: "We stand where we did 10 days ago, with a licking thrown in." The total British casualties during these days were officially given as 1 750. The Boer casualties were 335.

There is no doubt that in tactical skill Botha proved more than a match for the wavering and slow-witted Generals Buller and Warren in the Spioenkop campaign. But it was particularly his resolution and iron will which enabled him to outclass them as a military commander and, with a small handful of burghers, to inflict upon the British army another heavy defeat.

1. Laat ons strijden en samen sterven, maar Broeder laat ons toch geen duim breed wijken voor de Engelschen ... Maar bovendien is de Vijand zoo kopschuw dat als wij maar vast geloven en vertrouwen en niet terugstaan dan zal de vijand ingeven. Ik ben vol moed en overtuigd dat onze God ons de overwinning zal geven als wij slechts vaststaan. Preller Collection 3/3/b, p. 96, Transvaal Archives.
2. Slagveld [slag] nu voorbij en door de genade der Allerhoogste een prachtige overwinning voor ons. De vijand uit zijne posities gedreven en zijn verlies is groot. Op slagveld ligt nu nog minstens 600 man dood en een groote menigte

gewond. De vijand heeft mij gevraagd hun gewonden te nemen en dooden te begraven hetwelk ik heb toegestaan. De slagveld is dus de onze. De vijand heeft laatste nacht een eind met hun kanonnen en soldaten terug getrokken. Dan zijn er als krijgsgevangenen genomen van den vijand 187... Mijn hart breekt om te zeggen dat zulke brave helden van ons ook dood of gewond zijn. De namen zal U later [geseind] worden. Het is ongelooflijk dat zoo een klein handje vol menschen de machtig Britanje met behulp der Allerhoogste voor 6 dagen achter een strijden en tegen houden en ze op het laatste dag met groote verlies terug drijven. Wij hebben ongeveer 40 kisten Lee Metford patronen genomen en een mooi klomp geweren. Leyds Archive 715(f), Tel. 7 of 26/1/1900, Transvaal Archives.





6. Ghandi and the Battle of Spioenkop

India And The Anglo-Boer War

By E. S. Reddy (29 July 1999)

http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/boer_war.htm

Many books have been written about the soldiers and volunteers from various countries who took part in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. But there has been none on the role of India and Indians in South Africa though India contributed more soldiers and ambulance workers than any of the other British colonies and was a major source of supplies for the British army, while the largest number of Boer prisoners of war were held in camps in India. The graves of Indian "auxiliaries" who died in South Africa are not known, and the only memorial to them was erected by the Indian community.

What is best known of the Indian contribution was militarily the least significant, namely, the work of the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps, a unit of a little over a thousand volunteers who served for less than two months, because it was led by M. K. Gandhi who became prominent as the leader of the struggle of the Indians in South Africa against discrimination and later of India for independence.

The standard histories of the war - such as the official history by Major General Sir Frederick Maurice and Captain M. H. Grant, and The Times History of the War in South Africa (1899-1902) - have very little information on the role of India. But extensive files on India's involvement in the war are available in the National Archives of India and the India Office Library in London. Mr. T. G. Ramamurthi, an Indian scholar, has recently referred to these files and produced a monograph which deserves the attention of historians.

It is not with any pride in Indian participation in this war that I suggest a study of the role of India and the Indians. Gandhi's own sympathies were on the side of the Boers and he expressed great admiration for their leaders and for the heroism of the Boer women. He justified his action in organising the ambulance corps on the grounds that Indians who claimed rights as members of the British Empire had an obligation to contribute to the war effort. At the end of the war, however, Indians suffered greater oppression in the Transvaal than under Boer rule.

I believe that it is essential to be aware the participation and suffering of non-white nations and the non-white people of South Africa in the war - which was not merely a duel between two white armies -in order to derive lessons from it and attain true reconciliation. A study of the role of India is a contribution towards that end.

Arrival of British troops from India

In 1899, when the British government decided to impose its suzerainty over the South African Republic (Transvaal), it had only about ten thousand troops in the Cape and Natal. It decided to augment the force by another ten thousand before

delivering an ultimatum to President Paul Kruger, and asked the government of India to provide more than six thousand.

The military authorities in India were very prompt. The troops arrived in Natal between October 3 and 8, 1899, and were moved to the Transvaal border. That triggered the war on October 11 when the Boers attacked the British forces and inflicted severe defeats. By the end of the month they besieged Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith. Britain was obliged to expand its forces many-fold in order to relieve the garrisons and then to deal with the guerilla warfare waged by the Boers.

The British Force in South Africa was eventually reinforced by no less than 448,495 officers and men. Of these, 584 officers and 17,950 men - or a total of 18,534 - came from the British garrisons in India. They numbered more than the contingents sent by the other colonies - Canada, Australia and New Zealand - though far less than the 337,219 troops sent from Britain.

Indian "Auxiliaries"

There was a tacit agreement between the two sides that only whites should take part in military operations. Neither side wanted to arm the Africans for fear that they might turn their arms against all whites to fight racist oppression. Non-white people from South Africa and India were employed in non-combat operations though working under fire.

The British Government initially indicated to India that the Force should be composed exclusively of British troops or volunteers in India. But the Indian government sent many Indians - some from Indian Army units - as non-combatant "auxiliaries."

The initial force sent from India - according to a telegram of August 30, 1899, from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India, was composed of 5,635 British officers and men, 1,078 "natives" (Indians), 2,334 horses, and 611 mules and ponies. A majority of Indians were assigned to field hospitals or used as stretcher-bearers; the remainder were transport drivers, grooms to break in and train horses and private servants.

The force brought with it three complete field hospitals for the British troops from India, and one hospital for the Indians. The personnel of the hospitals were mostly Indian. They included ward orderlies, water carriers, cooks and sweepers, as well as doctors, including perhaps some from the Indian Medical Service.

By the end of the war, nearly ten thousand Indians were sent to South Africa as "auxiliaries". They included syces or grooms for the horses, water carriers, washermen, smiths, carpenters, cooks, butchers, bakers, sweepers, and servants of officers, as well as doctors, ambulance workers and stretcher bearers. Indians manned field hospitals and two veterinary establishments.

India sent nearly 7,000 horses, as well as ponies and mules. It promptly provided various supplies - helmets, blankets, coats, tents etc., - as needed. Some Indian

princes, merchants and others, seeking to show loyalty to the British, offered horses, grooms and money.

More than a thousand Indian auxiliaries were in Ladysmith during the siege. The role of the Indian Ordnance Field Park during that siege was particularly noteworthy.

The Indian auxiliaries worked under fire during many battles. A large number were apparently killed or wounded in action, but no official figures were published.

At the end of the war, the Indian community in South Africa contributed funds to erect a memorial for the troops from India. The inscription on the memorial at Steyn Street, Observatory, Johannesburg, reads:

To the memory of British Officers
Native NCO's and men
Veterinary assistants
Nalbands
and
followers of the Indian Army
who died in South Africa
1899-1902

Inscribed on the four sides are the words: "Christian Zoroastrian Hindu Sikh Musalman".

Natal Indian Ambulance Corps

At the beginning of the war, Colonel T.Gallwey, Principal Medical Officer of Natal, organised a paid Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps, with a strength of over one thousand, to carry the wounded from the battlefield. The Indian community in Natal offered to raise an Indian ambulance corps and pay its expenses. The offer was not accepted until the British faced severe reverses and casualties mounted.

The Natal Indian Ambulance Corps, led by M. K.Gandhi, was composed of 300 "free" Indians and 800 indentured labourers sent by their employers. Its task was to take the wounded brought by the Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps from the battlefield and carry them to the railhead. It was not expected to work under fire and was given no combat training.

It left for the front on December 14, 1899. It reached the field hospital at Chieveley the next day and was immediately employed in carrying the wounded from the battle of Colenso. It was moved to Estcourt on December 17, and temporarily disbanded two days later.

The Corps was reformed on January 7, 1900, and was again stationed at Estcourt. It was summoned on the eve of the battle of Spion Kop. During the big battle there on January 24, when British suffered heavy casualties, members of the Corps agreed to receive the wounded under fire and carry them from Spion Kop to the base hospital at Frere, more than twenty miles away.

Battle of Spion Kop

The auxiliaries from India, as well as the Indian Ambulance Corps, served during that fateful battle. Vera Stent, who served in the British forces there, described the work of the Indians in the *Illustrated Star of Johannesburg*, July 1911, as follows:

"My first meeting with Mr. M. Gandhi was under strange circumstances. It was on the road from Spion Kop, after the fateful retirement of the British troops in January 1900. The previous afternoon I saw the Indian mule-train moved up the slopes of the Kop carrying water to the distressed soldiers who had lain powerless on the plateau. The mules carried the water in immense bags, one on each side, led by Indians at their heads. The galling rifle-fire, which heralded their arrival on the top, did not deter the strangely-looking cavalcade which moved slowly forward, and as an Indian fell, another quietly stepped forward to fill the vacant place. Afterwards the grim duty of bearer corps, which Mr. Gandhi organised in Natal, began. It was on such occasions the Indians proved their fortitude, and the one with the greatest fortitude was the subject of this sketch [Mr. Gandhi]. After a night's work, which had shattered men with much bigger frames I came across Gandhi in the early morning sitting by the roadside - eating a regulation Army biscuit. Everyman in Buller's force was dull and depressed, and damnation was heartily invoked on everything. But Gandhi was stoical in his bearing, cheerful, and confident in his conversation, and had a kindly eye. He did one good... I saw the man and his small undisciplined corps on many a field during the Natal campaign. When succour was to be rendered they were there."

The Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps and the Indian Ambulance Corps were disbanded at the end of February 1900 when the British, with large reinforcements, were able to take the offensive and relieve Ladysmith.

Other Indians in South Africa also volunteered. Gandhi in *Satyagraha* in South Africa, refers in particular to Parbhusingh (Prabhu Singh), a hero of Ladysmith:

"The officer in command at Ladysmith [during the siege] assigned various duties to every resident of the place. The most dangerous and most responsible work was assigned to Parbhusingh who was a 'coolie.' On a hill near Ladysmith the Boers had stationed a pom-pom, whose operations destroyed many buildings and even occasioned some loss of life. An interval of a minute or two must pass before a shell which had been fired from the gun reached a distant objective. If the besieged got even such a short notice, they could take cover before the shell dropped in the town and thus save themselves. Parbhusingh was to sit perched up in a tree, all the time that the gun was working, with his eyes fixed on the hill and to ring a bell the moment he observed a flash. On hearing the bell, the residents of Ladysmith instantly took cover and saved themselves from the deadly cannon ball whose approach was thus announced.

"The officer in charge of Ladysmith, in eulogising the invaluable services rendered by Parbhusingh, stated that he worked so zealously that not once had he failed to ring the bell. It need hardly be said that his own life was constantly in peril. The story of his bravery came to be known in Natal and at last reached the ears of Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India, who sent a Kashmir robe for presentation to Parbhusingh and wrote to the Natal Government, asking them to carry out the

presentation ceremony with all possible publicity. This duty was assigned to the Mayor of Durban who held a public meeting in the Town Hall for the purpose."

Boer Prisoners of War In India

The British took over 25,000 Boer prisoners of war and shipped them to other colonies, while confining civilians, including women and children, in concentration camps in South Africa. The prisoners were sent to India from April 1901 when the facilities in St. Helena, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Bermuda became inadequate.

At the end of the war in 1902, 9,125 of the Boer prisoners of war, including some foreign volunteers) were in about twenty cantonments all over India. This was the largest number in any colony: there were nearly 6,000 in St. Helena, 5,126 in Ceylon, over 3,000 in Bermuda and 1,733 in South Africa.

Among the prisoners of war in India was Commandant T. F. J. Dreyer, commandant of the Potchefstroom Commando, who served under General Smuts and was captured during the daring raid of 300 miles through British lines in 1901.

One prisoner - J. L. de Villiers - managed to escape from the camp at Trichinopoly. Dressed as an Indian, he went to the French colony of Pondicherry and returned to South Africa via France and the Netherlands.

Another prisoner, Commandant Erasmus, a Johannesburg solicitor, took an interest in Indian history, philosophy and literature. He gave a series of lectures on the subject to the Transvaal Philosophical Society: they were published by Gandhi in Indian Opinion.

The Kimberley Public Library has some material in their archives from a Mostert, concerning his experiences as a POW at Ahmednagar.

Over 140 Boer prisoners are buried in cemeteries in the Indian subcontinent.