

Downfall of a Commander

Military Incompetence? Public Reaction? or Political Panic?

General Sir Redvers Henry Buller, known to all as “Reevers”, arrived at Frere during the early hours of December 6th 1899, the eager troops turning out in the darkness to give their leader a welcome that must have touched his soldier heart. A veteran of numerous campaigns, General Buller has earned no feather-bed honours; his V. C., G. C. B., and K. C. M. G. have been won with the sword in a literal sense and in the ranks he is respected as a stern disciplinarian. He combines the essential qualities for a commanding general; the strict discipline of the soldier, toned with tactful geniality as an administrator.

His first duty as commander-in-chief was to officiate at the service held over the graves of the first heroes to fall in the relief of Ladysmith, the victims of the armoured train disaster. Over two thousand troops attended, with General Hildyard, Colonel Cooper, Prince Christian Victor, and many other officers. Doctrinal differences are forgotten in war, and since Dublins and Colonials lay together, Father Mathews, the plucky chaplain of the Fusiliers, and Rev. Mr. Twemlow, of the Colonials, combined for a simple and touching service, a possible tribute to the reunion of Christendom. As the farewell volleys echoed over the kopjes, the bugles softly sounding the last post, distant guns boomed out at Ladysmith as if conscious of the ceremony, and a fierce salvo of heaven's artillery reverberated through the mountains, typifying the insignificance of man in all his martial power.

A few hours later, General Buller accompanied Lord Dundonald's cavalry brigade in a reconnaissance along the Tugela. The force halted on a ridge within range of Colenso, and the staff carefully studied the Boer position, apparently unnoticed by the enemy. The fords of the river were carefully noted, and the party returned safely, to formulate the plan of attack on Colenso and, subsequently, the relief of Ladysmith.

During the next few days, buoyed by news that the Boer is under heavy attack on all fronts - General Gatacre is closing on Stormberg; and Lord Methuen is moving against Magersfontein - morale in camp reaches a new high. On the 10th news was heliographed from Ladysmith of two successful sorties made by the garrison to destroy the enemy's artillery. The first assault took place on the night of the 7th when, to preclude espionage, orders were only issued after "Lights out!" had sounded and the garrison retired. Two squadrons each of the Light-

horse, Natal Carbineers, and Mounted Rifles, and sections of the diminished gunners of the 10th Mountain Battery and Royal Engineers were selected. Under General Hunter, with Major Henderson and twelve guides of the Intelligence Department, this force moved out at 11pm. against the Boer lines at Lombard's Kop, seven miles distant, which were breached without incident. Three explosions then announced to anxious Ladysmith that the enterprise was successful. The breech-fitting of the massive 40 pounder was torn out, the bore scored, the muzzle split, and the gun rendered useless. The Sappers completed the wreck with sledge hammers, smashing the sights, recoil buffer, and elevating gear, removing the breech-block as a trophy.

General White arranged a second sortie two nights later to destroy a 4.7 inch howitzer on Surprise Hill, only three miles from camp. Colonel Metcalf with five hundred men of the Rifle Brigade followed General Hunter's tactics from the previous sortie, and two companies of stormers reached the hilltop unobserved. The Boers, however, were bivouacked in force close behind the gunpit, and though they were surprised and retreated hurriedly, they sustained a heavy fire from a further position. Lieutenant Jones coolly placed charges round the howitzer under a spatter of bullets, and lit the fuse. It failed to explode, and other commandoes closed in, but the Rifles held their ground steadily while another charge was prepared and ignited, this time successfully demolishing the piece. These successes by the Ladysmith garrison, however, were soon overshadowed by a series of critical defeats, which forced General Buller's hand.

General Gatacre, known in the army as "Backacher" from the feats of endurance that he has accomplished with his forces, marched his column against the Boer position at Stormberg, intending to surprise the laagers in the darkness and re-conquer the annexed district of Cape Colony. General Gatacre had only two thousand available men in his command, but, with an experienced guide, the column moved out from Putter's Kraal at 4 am. on December 9th, swooping down on Molteno, which was hovering between British and rebel control. Rapidly mobilising in the town, the force pressed forward after sunset along the left road to Steynsburg, intending to turn off at right angles to take the Boer position in flank.

The risks of night operations in South Africa are stupendous, not the least of which are caused by the falsity of compass bearings among the ferruginous rocks and, unfortunately, the guide missed the turning and led the troops sixteen miles instead of nine. More faulty bearings finally placed the force on a further turning from the main road, which ran

directly parallel to the reverse of the Boer position. Day was just breaking, the General was urging on his worn-out men, expecting every minute to find the target position looming up on his direct front, when a sudden and furious fire burst at close range along the entire length of his column. After a moment of confusion the leading companies took a sharp right turn, and dashed up the enfilading ridge. But perpendicular rock surmounted by loop-holed stone walls checked their onslaught, and the line was hurled back to the road as the British bugles sounded "Retire !"

Shot at every foot of the way and worn-out by twenty four hours of continuous exertion, the column slowly extricated itself, fighting as it retired to Molteno, harassed by bullet and shell into the very outskirts of the city. When roll was called six hundred men out of the small column failed to answer their names, either killed, wounded or prisoners. It is little credit to the Boers that General Gatacre was not overwhelmed. Far superior in number, they had the column in a trap which simple tactics could have closed. But the Boer's dislike of open fighting, even when great things might be accomplished thereby, enabled the British to execute their masterful retirement with three-fourths of their force intact.



General Gatacre's forces trapped and under fire at Stormberg

On the western border Lord Methuen, after fighting severe but successful actions at Belmont, Graspan, and Modder River, hurling the Boers back at each step, moved against their main position at Magersfontein on December 11th. The Boers had been located along a line of steep kopjes, strongly entrenched. But the advance, which had appeared clear on the previous day to the scouts was found to be intersected by a long, cunningly concealed trench running along the

base of the kopjes, and strongly defended by an impenetrable tangle of barbed wire.

For two days a terrific bombardment had been sustained against the Boer position, and the column advanced confidently at midnight, expecting to surprise and overcome a demoralized enemy entrenched as of yore along the ridges. The Highland brigade was in the van, the men marching in quarter-column to sustain touch and direction in the darkness, the order being to extend along the base of the positions at dawn, after crossing the open without loss, and then press the attack.

By 3.45 am. General Wauchope had led his men almost to the base of the kopjes, the Boer outpost guards, sleeping quietly, were captured, sleeping quietly and the men had even loaded without discovery. Then a rifle was discharged accidentally, there was a hoarse challenge from the long trench, awaking the Boers, who sprang to their arms and opened wild volleys into the darkness.

Individual soldiers fired back, their flashes revealing the brigade, caught in massed formation but one hundred and sixty yards from the rifles. Men fell in heaps, but Wauchope rallied and hastily extended his regiments, and then ordered a charge. In the face of terrific volleys, the Highlanders swept into the wire defences, and though officers and men strove to break down the obstruction, mesh succeeded mesh, and the attacking line melted away before the point-blank fire, the supports falling back. Wauchope fell riddled with bullets at the head of his men.

The supports rallied, reinforcements moved up, and, checked but undismayed, the British formed on the open veldt and lay pouring ineffectual volleys at the sheltered enemy from sunrise to sundown, exposed to a pitiless fire in return. At midday the Boer fire slackened, and again the Highlanders sprang up and dashed forward with the bayonet. Again the barbed wire checked them, the leading lines were swept away, and the remnant were driven back in dire confusion, their rout being covered magnificently by the guards. For the third time the survivors were rallied, the Gordons in the van, and pressed forward with short rushes. Backed by the Scots Guards the shattered brigade again drew close, ordered to hold on until sunset and then charge.

General Cronje sent in a contingent to attempt a flanking movement on the open veldt and brought several guns into action at the close of the day, sweeping the utterly exhausted companies with a murderous fire. Flesh and blood could endure no longer. Without food or water, under a terrible fire, their arms, legs, and backs covered with vesicles from the blazing sun, the troops were unable to make further effort, but lay where they had fought, far into the night, and then crawled back out of range.

Reluctantly Lord Methuen was forced to withdraw his command to the Modder River.



Lord Methuen's troops fall back to the Modder River

In spite of these defeats, however, the mobilisation of the Ladysmith relieving column was completed by General Clery on December 11th, when General Buller reviewed the command, numbering 22,000 fighting men. Barton's composite brigade made the first advance on December 12th, escorting six naval guns to a kopje east of the railroad, dominating at 7,000 yards the entrenched ridges that menaced the wagon bridge crossing the Tugela. A heavy bombardment of the Boer position was sustained from 7 am. to 1 pm. on the following day, the Lyddite shells blowing great gaps in the opposite entrenchments. The enemy made no reply, and current rumour had it that they had become demoralised by the fire and had withdrawn.

On December 14th a general advance was ordered; camp was struck and moved forward to a position beyond Chieveley, preparatory for an attack in force on the morrow. The naval guns advanced nearer the river and again pounded the enemy's position; but again the masked Boer guns were silent, and mounted patrols who ventured close to the river were not fired upon. When general orders were read that evening for the attack at daybreak, no one expected a severe fight, and most decided that the effective fire of the naval guns had taught the farmer foe a salutary lesson. The general supposition was that the enemy had removed his cannon out of range, and would make little opposition.

The railroad crosses the river by a massive bridge at Colenso, where the road runs north; and a wagon bridge and drift also cross at this point. The Boers had taken up a strong position on the north side of the crossing, where the advance of relief for Ladysmith, following the

railroad from the coast, must cross the river. Meyer's defeat at Talana had led to the selection of Louis Botha, as direct commander under General Joubert to oppose the British advance.

The Boers destroyed the massive railroad bridge at Colenso, but left the road bridge intact, occasionally sending patrols over as if they had retained it for their own use, and afterwards occupying the houses on the right bank to lure on the force. On their side of the river, Fort Wylie, evacuated by the British early in November, dominated the bridges. It was greatly strengthened by earthworks. The drifts or fords over the Tugela, marked on the field map, were cunningly altered by throwing dams across at night, rocks abounding for this purpose. Rows and rows of trenches were erected before these drifts, the defences being masked by brush and the natural rocks of the kopjes.



The railway bridge at Colenso tactically destroyed by the Boers

From the left or Boer bank of the river successive kopjes rise in tiers, extending along the entire front and ranging backward toward the north in irregular groups to lofty eminences, Grobler's Kloof and Red Hill, which formed the centre of the Boer position, commanding the entire sloping plain on the line of advance. On these heights they mounted their big guns.

General orders were issued that night and at 3 am. on Friday, December 15th, the British camp was struck and the entire force moved forward. Outposts and scouts advanced toward the river, but not a shot was fired. A few burghers galloped madly across the bridge and away as General Hildyard's brigade moved forward in open order beside the railroad. Skirmishers fired at the houses on the south side of the water, which had been occupied by the enemy on the previous day, but not a rifle replied, and there was not a sign of life on either side of the Tugela,

save on the far kopjes at the north centre of the position, where a group of mounted burghers were apparently riding away for dear life.

“Afraid of our naval guns! They have moved their own heavy pieces out of action!” was the general comment. The troops stepped forward with an eagerness of action after long restraint, and the proud smile of victory assured. No one supposed that the farmer foe would be mad enough to place their advance across the river which would cut off their retreat, to face advancing columns that must hurl them back into the water. Perhaps such tactics were the result of Boer over-confidence, but such over-confidence, if it invites disaster, sometimes achieves victory.



A 4.7 inch naval gun in action at Colenso

Down toward the Tugela moved the brigades, looking only at the positions across the water. On the right centre bombardiers rode right to the river bank crossing empty Boer trenches that led from a clump of woods. With Captain White-Thomson they found the range in the open without molestation, and reported the ground clear of the enemy. Colonel Long, leaving the slower oxen to bring forward the naval 12 pounders, then led the two field batteries of his division at a smart trot far ahead of the infantry to within 800 yards of the river to sweep the kopjes on the far side. Sectional commanders gave the objective, Fort Wylie, the range 1,200 yards, and the guns swept down in line at 6.20 am. with neither sight nor sound of the enemy.

Suddenly .. “Bang!” .. from a signal gun beyond the river. Then burst a sound like an anchor chain rattling through the hawse hole, a crash of thunder and a ripping, tearing, whistling and detonation as if all the fiends in hell were loosed.

Maxims and automatic 1-pounders had opened from the kopjes by the river, every gun on the hills behind had spoken. And from every ridge and

the fort beyond the Tugela, and worse yet, from the trenches on the south bank of the river, which had been quickly reoccupied by the Ermelo commando under cover of the thicket, a terrific rifle fire burst in the face of the British. The two batteries bore the brunt in the centre. Without direct support, they were assailed with a hail of bullets poured in at point-blank range, the terrible phut-phut gun across the river searched them out with its cruel little shells, and ere the guns were unlimbered half the teams were down, gunners and drivers were writhing on the ground, and it was impossible to retire from the trap. The discipline of the artillery responded to the test. The wagons were somewhat sheltered in a donga, but the detachment numbers, rushing forward, cut loose the tangled teams, dragged the limbers behind the guns, changed teams to replace casualties, and served ammunition as if on a field day, the gunners working the guns steadily until Fort Wylie and the surrounding kopjes erupted with bursting shrapnel.

The Creusots on Grobler's had the exact range, however, and their 40-pound missives of steel and balls ploughed their way through the devoted batteries. One shell wiped a sub-division practically out of existence, but the survivors, finding their gun useless, ran to augment the detachments on either side of them.

Colonel Long fell dangerously wounded fifteen minutes after the fight opened, and was carried to a donga in rear, shot through the stomach, arm, and back. Delirious from the sun and loss of blood, he continually muttered, "My brave gunners! my brave gunners!" The two battery captains, Goldie and Schrieber, were shot dead. Colonel Hunt fell next. Then Lieutenants Gethin and Elton were wounded, but they clung to their guns until a second bullet brought down Elton, and Gethin fainted from loss of blood. Lieutenant Gryles was shot trying to aid Schrieber; the sub-division sergeants had suffered as severely, but the surviving subalterns, Holford, with his face gashed by a splinter, and Birch, distributed the depleted detachment through the batteries and slaved at the guns with their men to the last. Splendid fellows were these stalwart British gunners who grimly stood by their guns in the face of certain death. Hellas could not have produced greater heroes; Leonidas would have been proud of such.

"You must abandon the battery," shouted a sergeant as he sank wounded and the fire increased. "No use being torn up like field dummies," screamed a Dublin officer, as he scrambled down the bank and felt his way into the drift. He fell, but a few men were following. Then a little bugler of the Dublins named Dunn, who had been ordered to the rear but had trudged on with his company, ran in the lead, sounding the

advance. Several companies immediately fixed bayonets and dashed down to the water. They were met with a heavy fire, but the shrill notes of the boy rang above the volleys, until a shrapnel burst over him, mangling the brave young body which was swept down stream.

General Buller, together with General Clery, who was in operational command, had followed the advance closely. They had ridden along the line to try to avert disaster, fearlessly exposing themselves. Both were slightly wounded, Buller by a shrapnel ball, Clery grazed by a bullet, and several officers of their staff were killed around them. The enemy pressed their advantage, closing in force on the right of the British line. Along the whole British line, the checked regiments held their ground. The midsummer sun blazed down furiously on the unprotected men, but continued exposure was futile, and after eight hours' heavy fighting a general retirement was ordered.

At 1.30 pm. the worn troops were at last out of rifle range, and plodded their way into camp, pursued by heavy but fortunately inferior shelling from the hills. The Boers then crossed the bridge, reoccupying their position along the south bank, which had taught a costly lesson that day.

The withdrawal completed, the burghers swarmed over the bridge or swam the river at all points, and commenced to strip the wounded and dead. The veldt was strewn with helpless forms, and near Bridle Drift the dead lay in heaps. Their need of clothes and outfits may excuse the Boers, but brutes alone would strip wounded men and leave them naked under a blistering sun. Ghouls also hacked fingers off to secure rings, and some mocked and maltreated the stricken men. The Roman Catholic chaplain of the Irish, who remained on the field, reported that one Boer deliberately smashed in the face of a wounded private of the Rangers with his heel, shouting that he would "end all damn rooineks".

The looting was stayed only by the approach of the ambulances, which were greeted by two field guns and several volleys fired at close range. The bearer companies were recruited from the Uitlanders, and several Americans were enrolled therein. They advanced steadily with a large Red Cross flag at their head, until the emblem itself was torn by bullets. In vain the surgeons, galloped to the Boer lines waving their handkerchiefs and pointing to the flag. Eighteen of the ambulance men were killed or wounded ere a Boer officer, more humane than his fellows, rode down the line and checked the firing.

By sunset over 800 wounded had been collected on the field, passed through the Field Hospital, and been sent by train to the permanent hospitals at Estcourt, Pietermaritzburg, and Durban. During

the evening an informal truce was arranged to bury the dead. The naval guns in rear had been trained to cover the abandoned batteries, and volunteers were ready to extricate them at night. Operations were suspended by the truce, under cover of which General Buller could have brought in his guns. He forbade the attempt, however, as a violation of the armistice; but the Boers, having no such scruples, and covered by the truce, hooked up teams and took the pieces over the river.

In these disastrous days from December 6th to 17th then, we have suffered three crushing defeats with 2,776 men killed, wounded and captured. General Buller has suffered the commander's ultimate failure; he has lost the respect of his men. And how quickly disaffection spreads; in a clever but cruel twist of word, the men who loved their leader yesterday speak of him, today, not as "Reevers" but as "Reverse". It is now beyond doubt that he must be replaced and, just three days later, Tommy's fragile morale is once again restored at the news that Lord Roberts is to leave Southampton imminently to take post as our new Commander-in-Chief.

