

The Battle for Spion Kop

It was in their concerted effort to relieve Ladysmith that Britain suffered one of its most extraordinary defeats of the second Boer War at Spion Kop. An army of 22,000 British soldiers attacked, won and camped up on this small rocky hill, where, in the early misty hours of the next morning, they were attacked by around 3,600 Boers. The ensuing battle was a shambles. Messages were not delivered. No one knew who was in charge - at one point, three different British officers thought they were in command. People surrendered, then changed their minds, and stopped firing because they thought they were firing on their own troops. The battle raged all day and in the end, both sides thought they'd lost and gave up the hill. It was only when four Boers crept back up to try and rescue wounded comrades that the truth came out and they took the day. Hundreds were dead, many more wounded and captured. The hill today is littered with graves of people buried where they fell.



On Tuesday, January 16th, General Sir Charles Warren was encamped below Springfield on the right flank of the Boer Lines when General Buller ordered the full advance. General Lyttleton's brigade was first across in the centre. The Rifles, crossing the flooded drift at Potgieter's by a continuous chain, formed along the bank in skirmishing order, sweeping the Boer outposts and advance guard back to the main position. They also laid down a vicious fire from the flanks until a pontoon ferry could be fixed and the howitzer and field batteries sent over.

Seven miles further west General Warren threw his division over the Tugela, at Trigaardt's Drift, the Engineers erecting a pontoon under a heavy fire. He bivouacked at night toward the flank of the main Boer line, which extended southeast to Potgieter's along a series of ridges dominated by a great bastion, Spion Kop, on which the Boer right rested, and rapidly extended west along ridges through Acton Homes into the spurs of the Drakensberg, beacons being lit for reinforcements.

Although in ideal position, an excessive caution seemed to have seized the British generals. Unwilling to repeat their failed tactics at Colenso, they clung to the outer flanks of the enemy while the artillery made a thorough preparation for assault, in which the kopjes suffered severely, the Boers resting securely in their bomb-proofs, or in rear of the ridges, awaiting developments. If the assault had been quickly pressed it would have stood greater chances of success.



Area of Operations - Natal (from "In South Africa with Buller")

General Buller's idea, though, was to engage the enemy along the front while Warren's division forced its way by a detour through Acton Homes, passing round the Boer right and striking across the more open country to the hills surrounding Ladysmith. For this purpose he delayed until he had sufficient rations in reserve to send to General Warren. But while the troops in the centre had established themselves in positions that would keep the line of communications clear to the westward, General Warren, who was allowed great initiative, decided that it would be impossible to extend a line of communications round the extreme flank. He sent the following despatch for the commander-in-chief:

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

WARREN

A council of officers confirmed the impossibility of getting round with, transport for only three days* rations, and it was decided to force back the Boer line until the division could break the cordon and press through to the rear, via Rosalie, to raise the siege, with haversacks and emergency rations in lieu of transport.

On January 20th, the first hard blow was struck. General Hildyard moved from Deel's Drift on the right to support General Warren, and the irregulars covered the left flanks. The Light Horse rushed recklessly into the fray on the left, carrying all before them, and storming a sugar-loaf kopje in face of a heavy fire. Several Americans serving with this force behaved with especial gallantry. Corporal Tobin, one of the coolest, and a trained athlete, outstripped his squadron in the ascent, and as the burghers clung close to cover, he reached the ridge unperceived. Disturbed by the shouts of the stormers below them, whom they could not assail, his hoarse voice rising suddenly from the crest itself, "Now, boys, in with the bayonet!" decided the burghers, and they swarmed down the reverse. Tobin seated himself nonchalantly on the summit, and announced to his breathless comrades that the hill was his. His fame spread from drummer-boy to general.

The regulars closed in swiftly, General Hart's Irish in the centre and General Woodgate's brigade on the right. Their charge was covered by the concentrated fire of the field batteries, which disconcerted the burghers, and the entire row of entrenched ridges were brilliantly carried with the bayonet. But the disheartening topography of Natal killed the triumph. A second row of kopjes, even stronger, lay beyond; successive positions dominated the captured ridges, which became the objective of every gun in the vicinity. But sunset brought relief. When the next day, Sunday, was very young, the Boers, preparing their morning coffee, were sent to shelter by a sudden bombardment, under cover of which the irrepressible British charged across the intervening valley and carried the next position, despite heavy stone breastworks and a cross fire. The burghers did not appreciate the breach of the fourth commandment, and left their breakfasts cooking. But some of their gunners were "foreign infidels," and thus their guns could be worked with immunity on the Sabbath.

On Monday 22nd, the British rested in the trenches under a heavy shell fire from the eminences in rear. The naval guns and field batteries strove all day to silence the artillery, but those splendid Boer gunners sustained a fire that could neither be silenced nor excelled.

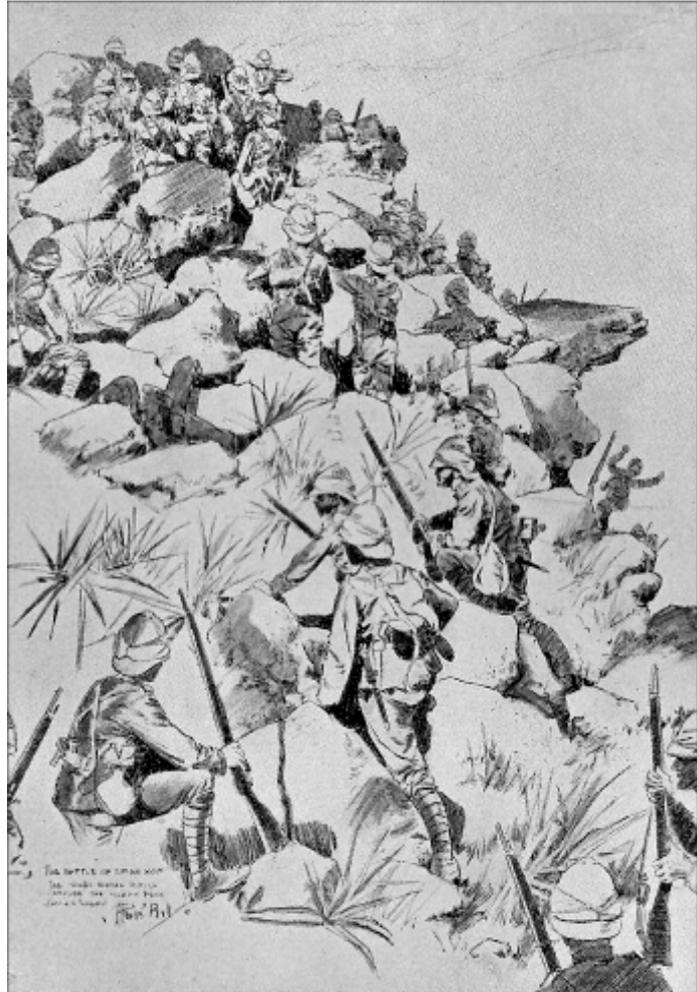
General Buller visited the position on the 23d, and was dismayed at the exposed condition of the division. He strongly advised General Warren to retire gradually and revert to the original plan of detouring on the left. He refused to sanction further delay; the assault must be pressed, he ordered, or abandoned for the former manoeuvre. It was pointed out that the massive eminences beyond must be taken by surprise, and that all preparations had been made for a night attack on Spion Kop. He then waived his supreme authority and left the operation to develop, so that the previous days' sacrifices might not be in vain.

From Spion Kop to the hills against Ladysmith were sixteen miles of tolerably level veldt. With a hostile force there, the holding of the Tugela would have been impossible, and the Boers fully realized their weakness by making the Kop their strongest point. On the heights, trenches had been blasted from solid rock, and gun emplacements constructed on approved plans. The Kop is about four miles long, very steep on the western side, and with two high peaks on the northeast, and innumerable cuts and depressions in its gnarled, irregular summit. It completely bisected the Boer line. Held with artillery, it would become a pivot on which the right wing could be forced back, opening thereby a clear route to Ladysmith. The strong ridges of Brakfontein would also be exposed to artillery fire on their left rear, and rendered untenable.

On the evening of January 23rd, at 6.30 pm. General Woodgate, with the Lancashire Fusiliers, Royal Lancashires, 17th Company Royal Engineers, and Lt. Colonel Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry, with two companies of the Connaught Rangers and the Imperial Light Infantry in support, advanced quietly to surprise the position. The stormers had a long and difficult advance in the darkness, but finally reached the Kop and commenced the ascent. After nine hours hard climbing, the treacherous summit, 1600 feet above the river, was gained. General Woodgate led the assault, guided by the fitful gleam of the Boer camp-fires. The camp was taken completely by surprise; the burghers, awakened from sleep, turned and fled in confusion, pursued by rapid volleys from the British, who gained the position with a loss of three men.

The Engineers hastily constructed a trench, the rocky nature of the ground making it impossible to dig effectively. Rain had fallen the whole night and the troops were thoroughly exhausted by their long march and the ascent, but there was little time to rest. A crash of Boer artillery announced the early dawn. In the darkness the trench had been constructed across a gentle slope, so that guns from three sides could rake the position; and the defence was commanded by high spurs and irregular rocky eminences on the Kop itself, all of which could be

reached without risk from the plain below, the approaches being entirely covered. Despite a heavy fog, the guns quickly found the range and commenced to search out every inch of the sorry breastwork so hurriedly constructed. And ere means could be taken to strengthen it, a rifle fire was opened by daring marksmen, who had crept up unseen in the fog and completely enfiladed the position. A few of their own shells burst near, but they were safely ensconced among the rocks, and faced them with impunity. From Taba Myoma, less than a mile distant, the enemy was able to sustain an incessant shrapnel fire. In two hours the Boers had fired more than



REINFORCEMENTS SCALING SPION KOP
Drawn by René Bull

over a thousand projectiles. From Taba Myoma, less than a mile distant, the enemy was able to sustain an incessant shrapnel fire. In two hours the Boers had fired over a thousand projectiles against the exposed summit held by the thin line in khaki. The automatic 1-pounders then added to the horrors, searching out the trench repeatedly, and despite all efforts of support, it became choked with dead and wounded.

Attempts to strengthen the breastworks were repeatedly defeated by the resolute Boer riflemen, who pumped their Mausers incessantly all day and forced everyone to cover, though they were less than 500 strong. But they knew the position, and thus were not so troubled by the fog, which completely baffled the British and negated any strong artillery support from the batteries before Potgieter's. And when the fog lifted, an advanced party of infantry, moving down to clear a connecting nek, were exposed to a rain of projectiles from a British field battery firing under a misapprehension, to accomplish the same task.

When General Warren commenced his operations Botha was on his way to Pretoria, and the first British success led the President to order him to supreme command on the upper Tugela. The burghers were hard pressed and disorganized when he arrived, and the subsequent loss of Spion Kop on his right centre was a hard blow to his plans. But this brave young farmer-general, whose modesty deserves the world's respect and his compatriots' emulation, had rapidly directed operations to retrieve the loss. The mist favoured him, and though it lifted, it soon gathered again. Covered by this fog, he led small parties of burghers to the summit and placed them in various points of vantage, where they could sweep the British exposed on the flat and lower portion of the eminence. Despair, the last weapon that sometimes achieves victory, stimulated the Boers to heroic exertion.

They opened simultaneously. More than half the soldiers had been killed or injured by shell fire, and the survivors were soon forced to surrender. Shalk Burger sent a portion of his command to the spurs on the far side of the Kop, and they soon assailed the British rear, gaining splendid cover among the irregularities of the vast summit.

General Woodgate was shot through the head at this juncture, and most of the officers had fallen, but a company of troops in the main position fixed bayonets and attempted to expel the enemy from the ridge that they had gained on the crest. They were thrice forced back with loss, however, but then strong British reinforcements arrived, climbing the ascent enfiladed by the automatic gun. They drove the Boer riflemen from their lodgement, but found it impossible, from the formation of the ground, to get any cover from the shelling.

Major Lyttleton's brigade strove to relieve the pressure by a frontal attack, the 60th Rifles gaining a footing on the northern spurs and the Scottish Rifles obtaining a ledge on the other side. They were exposed to severe small arms fire from the surrounding kopjes, but hung on tenaciously until dark. The gallantry of the regulars was equalled by the stolid bravery of the burghers, who showed the courage only inspired by intense devotion.

When General Coke rode out to assume command of the Kop, darkness had stilled several of the Boer guns, though an intermittent shelling was sustained. The condition of the men on the summit was desperate, however. The ground was littered with dying and dead, the men had been without food or water, and were in no condition to sustain a further defence at daylight. Leaving Lt. Colonel Thorneycroft in charge, General Coke rode back to confer with General Warren as to the best means of strengthening the position, and Sir Charles at once arranged

for artillery and engineers to be sent to the summit. A proper system of defence was devised, and preparations were made to hold the Kop at all hazards until resistance could be swept away on the flanks.

Unfortunately, General Warren had remained on the extreme left to guide the turning movement. General Coke took long to reach him, and ere fresh orders arrived, the surviving officers on the Kop held a council of war, at which a large majority favoured evacuation to save extermination at daylight. A desultory cannonade started later, giving the worn men no chance to eat or rest. There is also a story of a despatch, intended for Colonel Riddell, ordering him to withdraw his force, the 60th Rifles, from the exposed position where they would mask the fire of the British artillery. The colonel had been killed prior to its delivery, and Lt. Colonel Thorneycroft, receiving the despatch, as next senior officer, applied it to the entire force. This incident is not mentioned in the reports of either Buller or Warren. The former says that Colonel Thorneycroft used a wise discretion, but Lord Roberts severely censures him for taking the initiative when he could have sent to consult Warren. The Divisional Commander is also blamed for remaining on the extreme flank and not visiting Spion Kop in person when the entire success of the movement rested on its retention.

Much may be said in Lt. Colonel Thorneycroft's favour. His worn men could not face the emergency. They had been battered and shot at until few had escaped injury, and the nocturnal shelling started a panic which only an order to retire averted. Carrying all the wounded, leaving the dead on the field, the shattered commands quietly, evacuated in the darkness, and were returning to the main British line when they met Colonel Sim with the Mountain Battery, two naval guns, a strong force of Engineers, and 600 men for a working party, going up to thoroughly entrench the position. Explanations followed. Officers on the spot had decided that the position was untenable in any case, and not as useful as supposed, being in turn dominated by other hills. With the time that elapsed to get a galloper to General Warren and receive his reply, dawn drew near, and it was too late to retrieve the blunder. Certainly no one could accuse Colonel Thorneycroft of cowardice or lack of resolve. He had far more dead, and wounded men who could not fire a rifle, than men able to fight; few had escaped splinter wounds. The exposed portion of the Kop was solid rock and could not well be entrenched, and he was not apprised of the reinforcements destined for him. To save his wounded, it was necessary that the retreat should not be delayed. The only surviving staff officer, General Coke's Brigade Major, the

Colonel of the Middlesex, and other officers strongly protested, however, against the decision.

In the event, however, the withdrawal was accomplished without the loss of a man, but the ambulances could not get in close, and many wounded were not moved from the vicinity until the next day. A prejudiced writer could fill a chapter of incidents which would either prove the Boer a barbarian or a saint. Evidently the burghers vary greatly. Many of the dead were found with fingers hacked off for rings, a few abandoned wounded were robbed, and some murdered in cold blood. Yet Boers with tear-streaming faces gazed on the shattered bodies rent and mutilated by bursting shell, and many showed kindness to the wounded.

The retirement was a heart-breaking experience for the British. It seemed that the precious lives had been uselessly expended. For once Tommy was depressed, and his curious mixture of gaiety and serious determination became blended with a surly moroseness. Truly the companies on the Kop were heroes, and had fought to a clean knock-out. Yet there were hundreds of fresh soldiers ready to take their place, and in the end, they might have licked the Boers. The "squaddy " is a clear reasoner, and if he expressed his disgust at the whole operation in unparliamentary language, who shall blame him? He knew that to make the same mistake twice was unforgivable, and here twice was the British army checked by an army of farmers. The famished garrison in Ladysmith, so eagerly waiting for relief, were naturally despondent at this second failure, and the men who had long combated disease, wishing to keep off sick report to the end, could control themselves no longer, and the hospitals received a great influx of patients who had buoyed themselves up with a hope which long deferred made heart and body sick.

General Buller now withdrew his forces across the Tugela, and the army had a spell of rest and recuperation. Spirits and resolution were alike restored in the interval. Three thousand reinforcements arrived opportunely to replace casualties. With them came a horse battery and more cavalry, and no one doubted the success that a third attempt to cut a passage would bring.

On Saturday, February 3rd, the heavy guns were hoisted to the highest point of Swartz Kop, from which the guns the Boers had rapidly mounted on Spion Kop and Doom Kloof were outranged. The artillery also had clear play on the frontal ridges of Brakfontein, and for once the British gunners answered the Boers on equal terms and showed the Boer that under such conditions their fine shooting could be matched if not

surpassed. But the effect of lyddite on the massive defences was trivial, and unless a shell exploded right in a trench the splinter-proofs sheltered the Boers from harm.

For the third attempt to pierce the line of rock, steel, and brawn that barred the Ladysmith Road, General Buller decided to make Vaal Krantz his objective. This position runs almost at right angles to and east of Brakfontein, and its capture, it was thought, would enable a wedge to be driven from ridge to ridge until the reverse of the frontal position was assailed. A frontal attack pressed home at that juncture would crumble the defence of the line and open a wide gap to relieve White.

On Monday, February 5th, the advance began, the augmented cavalry division being divided, Colonel Burn Murdoch taking the 1st Brigade and Lord Dundonald retaining his Colonials. Covered by a terrific bombardment, Colonel Wynne led forward General Woodgate's old brigade against the centre to cover the assault on the Krantz. For a time the Boers held their fire, but the infantry finally unmasked their guns, allowing a steady artillery duel, when their splendid gun pits alone kept their pieces in action. Shell after shell fell right against the epaulments, but failed to silence the guns.

The long grass on the hillside was speedily lit by shrapnel, but the war balloon, ascending high above the smoke, carefully located the Boer trenches, and, by telegraph, the positions were so dusted out with shrapnel from the field batteries that the rifle fire in the main position was practically silenced. A shell from the Vickers Maxim managed to reach the balloon, however, and temporarily ended its usefulness.



Under cover of this assault, the Engineers bridged the Tugela lower down, at the dangerous 'Hunger's Drift' in direct line for Vaal Krantz, and half of Major Lyttleton's Light Brigade was over the river ere the flanking movement was discovered. But the ubiquitous burghers were soon in force, their guns were slewed round to meet the new attack, and the final movement was anticipated. But the regiments deployed along the river bank, and after a brief delay, during which the infantry and batteries covering the feint against the front were skilfully withdrawn under a

heavy fire and the artillery diverted to the flank, the word was passed to fix bayonets and charge.

Covered by a shower of shrapnel, the Light Infantry sprang forward from their shelter at a note of the bugle, and went straight against Vaal Krantz. In vain the burghers strove to stem the rush, and leaned over the brim of the leading trench to fire at their assailants crawling up the steep ascent. The British drew closer and closer, and ere they saw the glitter of the dreaded bayonets, the defenders fled panic stricken, though the leading company of the Durhams caught a number as they ran and cut through them, capturing many who surrendered.

The capture of Vaal Krantz accomplished, a general concentration of guns was made, that the wedge of troops might be pressed further in. But again the configuration of Natal foiled a most able plan. Like most eminences in South Africa, the Krantz had a difficult face to assail, and it was found impossible to place artillery on the summit, but it sloped down gently on the reverse, and could be swept by Boers with gun and rifle. It did not extend far enough to cut into Brakfontein, as desired. A deep donga also enabled the Boer riflemen to advance within effective range, covered by their guns on the surrounding heights; and though ten thousand men might have carried out the movement, the risk of failure and the heavy loss that must be entailed without artillery support did not justify a further movement.

As Major Lyttleton's brigade held to the captured position, a Boer ambulance drove quietly over the plain, a Red Cross flag flapping proudly. It reached a ridge a mile beyond, and coolly and in clear view unshipped a Vickers Maxim, just out of rifle range. Rocks were piled up before it, and soon the demoralising shells came buzzing over the British trenches. Rifle fire from a handful of snipers in the donga also tried the troops severely, and they were unable to leave the trenches for food or water. Until the second evening they held out, suffering terrible privations. After sunset the position was quietly evacuated, and General Hildyard replaced Major Lyttleton's troops with the West and East Surrey and the West Yorks regiments.

Counting on the fatigue and demoralisation of the British after long exposure, the Boers gathered in force to surprise and recapture the position. Crawling up the donga, they were able to form an extended line, and almost gain the crest before the outposts discovered them. But they found fresh troops awaiting them in the trenches, and were driven back with heavy loss. General Hildyard then maintained his position with ease, while the cavalry scouted in every direction with the hope of finding a weak spot assailable from the Krantz.

General Hart's Irish Brigade demanded that they should be allowed to retrieve the disaster of Spion Kop, by attempting its recapture on February 7th, pointing out that with the occupancy of the Krantz the Boer forces could not be concentrated. But after a council of war all attempts to force the line on the west were discarded as impracticable, and by midday on the 8th the entire army was again south of the Tugela, wending its way back to the railhead at Chieveley.

On Sunday, February 11th, the old camping-ground before Colenso was reoccupied, and hapless Ladysmith settled down once again in despair to further fight starvation and disease.

