

The Battle of Modder Spruit¹ and Tchrengula²

The Fight for Ladysmith

30 October 1899

Steve Watt



Steve Watt has been researching the Anglo-Boer War for over 35 years. His work has resulted in a seminal publication of the deaths and graves of the Imperial forces engaged in the conflict. He has conducted numerous tours around the battle sites, published many articles and presented papers at conferences on his specific field of interest.

¹ Also known as Lombard's Kop or Farquhar's farm.

² Also known as Nicholson's Nek or Kainguba

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Preface

This Battle Book series has been written to make information, photographs and maps of the most significant Anglo-Boer War sites in KwaZulu-Natal more readily available.

The books are not exhaustive studies of the various sites but rather field guides, designed to assist the reader in interpreting the terrain and understanding the events.

Although the Battle Books form a series, each book has been fully contextualized and can be followed on its own.

Contributors to this series share a long-term interest in the Anglo-Boer War and have each made their own unique contribution to the historiography and understanding of the conflict. With the assistance of an editorial committee, every effort has been made to maintain balance and accuracy.

A slightly flexible approach has been adopted to the spelling of names. As a general rule, the most recent spelling utilized on the state's Survey and Mapping 1:50 000 maps has been adopted. Thus for instance Laing's Nek becomes Lang's Nek. Where the name used to describe a topographical feature differs significantly from that in the historical literature to that appearing on the map, then the one used in the books and documents is adopted. The spelling of the river Thukela (Tugela) presents a slight problem. On maps it is spelt as given in the brackets. However, in most current academic historical literature the former form has been adopted, which spelling has been followed in this series of books.

Prelude

On 11 October 1899 the Boers having assembled at Sand Spruit were addressed by Cmdt-Gen Piet Joubert on the forthcoming invasion into Natal via the Drakensberg passes.

For more than a week the Boers, assembled on the frontiers of the two republics, had been impatiently waiting for the signal to advance. The news of an ultimatum addressed to the British government on 9 October 1899, was received with great satisfaction by the Boers. At 17:00 on the afternoon of 11 October 1899 war began, but it was not until the early hours of the 12th that the Boers started to move.

The Transvaal Boers invaded on three fronts. The right flank under Gen J Kock and 1 200 men entered Natal via Botha's Pass, on the left Gen D Erasmus with 2 000 men crossed the Buffalo River at Wool's Drift while in the centre Lt-Col SPE Trichardt with 3 000 men with two 155 mm Long Tom guns and six 75 mm field guns came through Laing's Nek. Further east Gen Lukas Meyer with 2 130 men with four 75 mm guns and four Maxims advanced to Doingberg (Doornberg) near Vryheid. Later Meyer would be augmented with a detachment from Erasmus' force. The first clash occurred at De Jager's Drift on 14 October when an element of Meyer's men captured five members of the Natal Police.

Meanwhile the Free State Boers, totalling 2 200 men entered, Natal via the passes of Oliviershoek, Bezuidenhout, Van Reenen and De Beers. Their invasion went unopposed until a clash on 18 October with Natal Carbineers at Besters station resulting in one Boer fatality.

The main disposition of the British forces consisted of 4 150 men with 18 guns at Dundee under Maj-Gen Sir Penn Symons, while 9 560 men with 30 guns, under the overall command of Sir George White, occupied Ladysmith. Along the line of communications to the south were small garrisons of troops at strategic points stationed between Ladysmith and Pietermaritzburg.

On 17 October the Boers resolved to attack the British camp at Dundee. Although the British claimed the battle of Talana as a victory they evacuated Dundee leaving behind the wounded. With little rest and fearful of being caught by the Boers, they retired via Van Tonder's Pass towards Ladysmith. The Boers then proceeded to occupy the town.

Gen Kock with 800 men which included a German and Dutch corps passed through the Biggarsberg on 19 October 1899 and occupied Elandslaagte railway station. They captured a supply train steaming through the station to Dundee. In order to keep the railway open, the British commander in Ladysmith Lt-Gen Sir George White despatched

Maj JDP French with a mixed force of infantry, cavalry and artillery to Elandslaagte. The day after the battle of Talana another was fought at Elandslaagte (20 October 1899) which resulted in a victory for the British with the Boers having been driven off the battlefield.

At the request of President M.T. Steyn of the Free State, all the Free Staters, then under the command of General A.P. Cronje, were ordered to advance in the direction of Elandslaagte. The arrival of six Free State commandos on the heights to the north of Ladysmith increased General Sir George White's anxiety for the safety of the British column retreating from Dundee. White despatched a mixed force of infantry, artillery, cavalry totalling 5 300 men. The clash came on 24 October 1899 near Rietfontein farmstead. Under cover of British artillery fire, the infantry advanced onto open ground encountering concentrated Boer rifle fire. This stalled any further movement. A counter attack by the Boers from the west induced the British to despatch a mounted force to contain the threat. A heavy artillery and rifle fire then followed which set the grass ablaze forcing some Boers to evacuate their position. Before long the Boer fire ceased, and by mid-afternoon a withdrawal of the British force was ordered which arrived in Ladysmith at sunset.

The battle at Rietfontein permitted Yule from Dundee to withdraw his force unhindered arriving in Ladysmith on 26 October. That same day. Cmdt Gen Joubert, with the remainder of the Transvaal commandos, occupied Modder Spruit station and touched hands with the Free Staters.

By 29 October the Transvaal commandos occupied the heights north of Ladysmith extending west of Nicholson's Nek to the hills north east of Lombard's Kop, a front of 21 kilometres. Meanwhile the Free Staters took post on the hills to the west and south of the town. No attempt was made to sever the town with the south. A plan to destroy the rail bridge over the Thukela River at Colenso, was dismissed by Joubert. This allowed White in Ladysmith to receive additional ammunition, artillery and troop reinforcements.

“What is true of Nicholson's Nek is true in no small degree of the whole operation of that Mournful Monday”. *Times History*.

The Opening Moves

During the last week of October 1899, a reconnaissance from Ladysmith established that large numbers of Boers were to be seen to the north and east of the town. By the evening of 28 October the Boers began, without

opposition , to occupy positions on high ground to the north of Ladysmith. The commandos from the Transvaal constituted the Boer left flank, stretching from the west of Pepworth Hill eastwards to Modder Spruit near Lombard's Kop. The investing commandos of the Free State extended the Boer right flank to Flagstone Spruit. The total Boer strength amounted to 6 700 men supported by 21 artillery pieces. [See map: Modder Spruit & Tchengula: 30 October 1899]

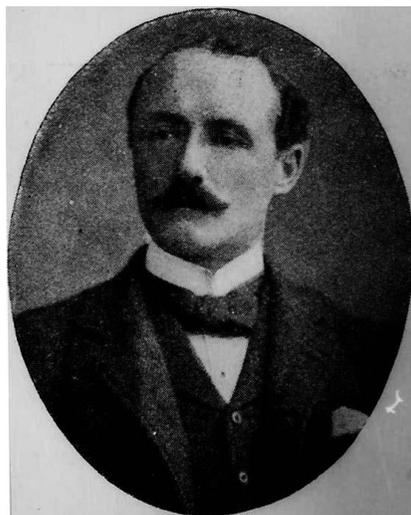
On 29 October, a British reconnaissance by cavalry, and with observations made from a captive balloon, identified the presence of Boer encampments near Lombard's Kop; that Pepworth Hill was fortified by men and artillery as was Long Hill was occupied by both men and guns. This information the British commander, Sir George White, the reasons he desired for assuming the offensive. The capture of Long Hill, followed by the occupation of Pepworth Hill, would throw back the investing line of the Transvalers towards their centre. In addition, the Free Staters, thinly strung out to the west, would be cut off from the rest by British cavalry. By late afternoon the plan had been formulated. To secure both Long and Pepworth Hills the whole army, divided into two sections, was to be deployed.

One section under the command of Lt-Col FRC Carleton, was to move from Ladysmith along the Bell Spruit. The task of this force was twofold, to cover the left flank of the main operation and to gain a position towards Nicholson's Nek to enable the cavalry to occupy the open ground beyond in order to intercept the Boers as they fell back. With the left flank secured, a cavalry brigade under Maj-Gen JPD French was to advance towards the high ground north-east of Gun Hill to cover the British right, to offer a demonstration in front of the Boers and, finally, to wheel northward.

Between these wings, the second section would form the main infantry attack, supported by artillery and would be carried out by the 8th brigade under Col CG Grimwood. From Limit Hill, half-way between Ladysmith and Long Hill, there would be a reserve force, the 7th brigade under the command of Col Ian Hamilton, made up of infantry, artillery and cavalry. Grimwood's force was to take Long Hill and then hold it while Hamilton directed his infantry against Pepworth Hill.

Shortly after midnight on 30 October 1899, five battalions of infantry and three batteries of field artillery, all under Grimwood, set out eastward. An additional three batteries RFA joined the line of march soon after it started. In accordance with orders, this latter force of artillery drew away from the main column and passed to the shelter of Flag Hill. But two infantry battalions, two mounted companies and three batteries RFA, not

told of the special instructions, followed it whilst those in front pursued the proper route. An hour before dawn, unaware of his reduced force, Grimwood gained some low hills south-east of Long Hill and extended his troops along them. Prior to that the artillery bombarded Long Hill.



Lt-Col FRC Carleton, in command of a force of infantry and gunners of a mountain battery, 1 Maxim gun constituted the left flank of the British attack. The total strength of the column was about 1 140 men and 250 animals. The column left late and occupied Tchengula. (It was thought there would be insufficient time whilst dark to occupy the destination Nicholson's Nek). The stampede of 190 pack mules left Carleton's force without the mountain guns and ammunition. At daybreak the Boers began to attack Carleton's force, increased in intensity during the day, eventually leading its defeat in the early afternoon.

The Battle – Modder Spruit

Shells were bursting over our heads, on the ground, among us and great chunks of iron were whizzing about from stone to stone,” Colonel Blake recorded. “At times the uproar was so great that we could scarcely hear each other speak. It is about this time, seven o’clock, that the Ermelo Commando could not stand it any longer and nearly all of them fell back about a mile, and there awaited further developments.

Meanwhile, French had ridden out of Ladysmith with two battalions of cavalry and occupied a hollow basin between Gun Hill and Lombard’s Kop, while the summits of Mbulwana and Lombard’s Kop were occupied by the Natal Volunteers who had arrived the day before.

From the beginning, the whole operation was beset by problems which would lead to its ultimate failure.

At dawn the Boer guns opened fire on French's cavalry as it was advancing to Lombard's kop. The British artillery responded by directing fire at Limit Hill, which was silent (the three visible gun emplacements were seen to be empty). Boer shelling was then directed to the British guns and infantry which was marching to Limit Hill. Within a few moments, additional guns on Pepworth joined the Boer bombardment but the British artillery, together with those guns from Flag Hill, which were moved into the open temporarily silenced the Boer ordnance. Shortly before dawn the trend of the battle seemed to the artillery to be in favour of the British.

However soon afterwards the Boer guns resumed fire and the rattle of rifles rose in ever-increasing volume with the support of the artillery, the Boer fire coming from the koppies along the Modder Spruit and to the rear of Lombard's Kop. The infantry under Grimwood found it impossible to advance to Long Hill without artillery support, which was engaged with the Boer guns. In addition, Grimwood's force was weakened as a result of the deviation the rearguard had made to Flag Hill. Moreover, support by the cavalry was not forthcoming and the raking Boer rifle fire made Grimwood's position untenable as Boer reinforcements came into the Modder Spruit. Grimwood was forced to change position, and by a pivotal movement, his infantry retired southward to the hills overlooking the Modder Spruit [See map: Modder Spruit & Tchengula: 30 October 1899].

Having waited until the artillery duel seemed to be going in favour of the British, French advanced eastwards, but was met by heavy musketry fire from the Boers lining the Modder Spruit, now commanded by Louis Botha. (General Meyer, suffering from poor health, had relinquished his command to Botha, who was given the rank of Acting General.) The cavalry, after having engaged the Boer fire, realised the impossibility of breaking through and French withdrew his force to his original point under the lee of Lombard's Kop. Reinforced by some Natal Volunteers and infantry from Hamilton's force, French again attacked, supported by artillery, one battery having arrived in the nek between Lombard's Kop and Mbulwana. Their shooting enfiladed the Boer position, resulting in the Boer fire decreasing under the increased bombardment. However, the British guns became the focus of increasing Boer reinforcements and were forced to retire.

For two hours from mid-morning, the engagement continued with little movement by either side. The Boers, directed a heavy fusillade against the ridges, pinning down the cavalry to Lombard's Kop and the infantry to the line of hillocks along the Modder Spruit. Only two batteries remained at

the first site . The Boer gunners, encouraged by the slowing of the British fire, returned to their field pieces on Pepworth and placed additional guns on Long Hill. Meanwhile the British reserve on Limit hill had been reduced considerably by the continuous demands of the battle.



Louis Botha (1862–1919), who saw action as an ordinary burgher at the battle of Talana Hill (20 October 1899), was given the command of the Boer line during the battle along the Modder Spruit replacing Lukas Meyer owing to his poor health. He infused a new fighting spirit into the burghers and harassed the British right flank and followed its withdrawal by occupying, Gun Hill and Lombard's Kop thwarting the British attack on Pepworth Hill.