

TURNING THE TIDE OF WAR

In every war there comes a critical period when the tide turns. This is triggered sometimes by the outcome of a particular battle; sometimes by the unknowing and often uncaring intervention of ignorant politicians; sometimes by the life and death decisions of generals. In our conflict with the Boer, this period came early, just two months from the outset, and was primarily characterised by the arrival of General Sir Redvers Buller as supreme commander. His early successes in the field were soon followed by three crushing defeats, with many hundreds of men lost, killed and captured. This led to Buller's ultimate subordination and demotion but it was his leadership, battle-skills and bravery in the face of these adversities and the way in which he was able to lift the minds of his men that put us back on the path to victory. This is December 1899 and in my diary notes for the month I have attempted to chronicle the events of these trigger days and the ways in which they brought about the turning of the tide ...



1st December: General Hildyard moves camp to Frere and oversees superb effort to rebuild bridges destroyed by the Boer so that General Clery can advance

2nd December: General Buller arrives in Natal to personally lead major operations in the area and establishes his HQ at Pietermaritzburg; General Clery arrives at Frere and assumes command south of the Tugela in preparation for the immediate relief of Ladysmith; General Hildyard joins forces with Lord Dundonald and chases the fleeing Boer to within two miles of Colenso before withdrawing

3rd December: The railway line is now fully restored to Frere and trains are arriving rapidly at the front with troops, ammunition and stores

4th December: No General or correspondent can understand why the Boer retreats so readily in the face of our forces as they are still building

4th December: Scouts from Ladysmith report that despite constant shelling through November, losses have thankfully been relatively small. Reinforcements arriving daily by train at Frere are mobilised to forward positions to prepare for the advance in force to Ladysmith

5th December: Today, I ride out with Major Elliot (RE) to sketch the Boer positions beyond the Tugela - he risks his life daily gathering this reconnaissance

6th December: Sir Redvers Buller arrives at Frere in the early hours - hundreds of eager troops turn out in the dark to welcome their Commander-in-Chief. His first duty is to officiate at the funeral of the 47 heroes who died in the armoured train disaster - 2000 officers and comrades are in attendance. Just hours after the funeral, General Buller joins Lord Dundonald's cavalry to reconnoitre the Boer positions on the Tugela - our attack is being formulated.

7th December: After many failed attempts Captain Cayzer of the Dragoons has established heliograph communication with General White at Ladysmith

7th December: Signals from Ladysmith confirm that casualties are light but lack of food and water poisoned by the Boer are the real killers ... and yet a strange air of mirth and jollity pervades our preparations for battle at the news that today is General Buller's 60th birthday

8th December: High morale today at the news that a sortie from Ladysmith last night under General Hunter spiked the Long Tom at Lombard's Kop

9th December: A second Long Tom atop Surprise Hill destroyed by a 250 strong sortie under Lieutenant Jones but at a cost of 60 killed and 28 captured

9th December: General French outflanks the Boer with his horse artillery to attack and hold the vital railway at Naarport Junction

10th December: The Boer is under heavy attack on all fronts: General Gatacre is closing on Stormberg and Lord Methuen is moving against Magersfontein. My brief is still to be with General Gatacre so I am leaving today with a supply column to join him outside Stormberg

11th December: General Gatacre is crushed by the Boer at Stormberg with 135 battle casualties and more than 600 captured in the field after retreat. Lord Methuen attacks the Boer at Magersfontein but after a day long battle is forced to withdraw, losing 800 killed and wounded. Relief for Kimberley and Mafeking is now delayed because of the repulses today of Lord Methuen and General Gatacre - a critical time

12th December: On hearing of the losses at Stormberg and Magersfontein, General Buller changes his plan and decides to attack Colenso directly. General Clery has readied 22000 men and 44 guns for Buller's attack on Botha's forces at Colenso, opening the road to Ladysmith

12th December: General Barton's Fusiliers set a battery of 6 naval guns to dominate the Boer entrenchments menacing the bridges over the Tugela and, despite the defeats of Gatacre and Methuen, the Ladysmith relief force of 22000 men under General Clery is now fully prepared

13th December: After the devastating losses at Stormberg, General Gatacre has withdrawn to Molteno. I can not reach him so I stay with General Buller. Failing to reach General Gatacre, I have been re-assigned to General Hildyard's brigade for the forthcoming attack and the onward press with the relief force

13th December: General Barton opens the assault on Colenso with a massive bombardment but there is no reply from the Boer - have they withdrawn? General Barton's guns are re-sited at Chieveley and again pound the entrenched enemy positions but, again, the Boer remains silent.

14th December: General Buller orders a full advance to a position beyond Chieveley in preparation for an attack in force on Colenso tomorrow

14th December: There is much celebration in General Hildyard's camp tonight at the news that Churchill has escaped from the prison camp at Pretoria

15th December: Camp at Chieveley was struck at 8 am and General Buller's entire force of 22000 men moved forward towards the Tugela and Colenso. We passed over empty trenches and thought the Boer had fled, but then burst a thunder as if all the fiends of hell were loosed. As the clock ticked to 9.15 am, from every ridge and trench in front of us, a terrible small arms fire burst in our faces, an assault soon joined by batteries of Maxims from across the river and the surrounding hills

15th December: Within four hours of launching our attack, we were pinned down by the Boer on all sides and trapped in a cauldron of slaughter. As his men and officers fall around him, General Buller orders a retreat - but hundreds are still trapped and can not escape

16th December: An early morning armistice reveals 145 of General Buller's men killed and 1200 missing or wounded, with only 40 Boer casualties. We carry our 300 wounded back to Chieveley but leave more than 800 of our comrades in the hands of Botha and his Boers.

17th December: How quickly disaffection spreads - the men who loved their leader yesterday now speak of him, not as Redvers but as Reverse

18th December: After our recent defeats, the drive for victory has faltered and this war is reduced to a hotch-potch of minor skirmishes. It is now beyond all doubt. General Buller's reputation is in tatters, he has lost the respect of his men and he must be replaced

19th December: Our scouts report that General Joubert, now recovered, has returned to the front ... will he attack us as we regroup at Frere?

20th December: Morale is once again lifted at the news that Lord Roberts is just days from Durban to take overall command from General Buller

21st December: The news of Lord Roberts' imminent arrival has whetted the men's appetite for fighting and stiffened their resolve for victory

22nd December: It seems from our field scout reports that the Boer is expecting us to desist and retreat after the defeat at Colenso - fools!

23rd December: Confirmation received that Lord Roberts has left Southampton today on board the Dunottar Castle and is expected by mid January

24th December: We remain locked at Chieveley with the Boer still barring any progress to Colenso or onwards - stagnation of men and minds. The Boer has us trapped - so why are they now setting their limber and removing their guns, leaving the road to Colenso open?

25th December: A truce on the Tugela fields today, but a fearful bombardment from the Boer robbed Ladysmith of any goodwill or peace on earth

25th December: Our stores from home are delayed but a handful of Hussars march in with a dozen oxen stolen from the Boer .. dinner is served!

26th December: The distant thunder of an artillery storm over Ladysmith tells us now why the Boer removed their heavy guns from Colenso

26th December: We are joined at Chieveley by seven units of Australians - ill-trained as regular soldiers, but highly effective against the Boer

27th December: We hear today of a society event for the ladies of Cape Town - a day trip by train to see and touch the Long Toms at Ladysmith. Then Bennett Burleigh arrives with four cartloads of cake, cigarettes and beer - men die while our war becomes stranger by the day

28th December: Churchill returns and is greeted as a hero - he tells us of the excitement in Durban about Lord Robert's imminent arrival

29th December: General Buller orders reconnaissance sorties to assess the strength of the Boer at Colenso, Fort Wylie and along the Tugela

29th December: The incessant thunder of the shelling at Ladysmith increases by the hour. We must move there soon or slaughter will surely follow

30th December: The Tugela is in flood after massive overnight storms - hundreds of Boer on the Chieveley side are stranded and captured

30th December: General Hildyard requests an attack on the Boer stronghold at Hlangwane after floods sweep away the bridge that they have built. General Buller accepts General Hildyard's plan but orders that the attack must be meticulously planned in order to ensure success

31st December: The Boer celebrates the century's end with a murderous shelling of the garrison and hospital at Ladysmith ... Happy New Year!

Generals and Commanders - December and January 1900



Lord Roberts



Lord Kitchener



General Buller



General White



General Gatacre



Lord Methuen

