

## A FORCE TO FINALLY DEFEAT THE BOER

*It is too simple and too quick a judgement to cast blame and recrimination for the crushing losses of an entire army on to the shoulders of one man; particularly when that man is the very one that can lift his men from defeat to victory. The British government, though, took the defeats at Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso badly and, with Kimberley, Mafeking and Ladysmith still under siege, saw this as the nadir of General Buller's career, sending in Lord Roberts as his replacement, together with yet more troops amounting to some 180000 men with further reinforcements being sought. It is widely reputed that this will be the largest force Britain has ever sent overseas and, in my diary notes forth January, a number of observations suggest that, regardless of who is Commander-in Chief, this must be the force that finally defeats the Boer ...*



**1st January:** No New Year celebrations but morale is high at the news that Lord Kitchener has joined Lord Roberts - arriving in a few days. Churchill confides to me and Burleigh that he will stand for Parliament in the next election - but first there is a war to win

**2nd January:** General Buller must know that his time as commander is limited but he orders General Hildyard to prepare for another attack on Colenso

**3rd January:** The floods on the Tugela are receding and the opportunity to exploit General Hildyard's plan to attack Hlangwane is now lost. Reports are filtering in that the Boer is building a dam on the Klip so that the river will overflow and flood Ladysmith

**4th January:** The recent Boer victories have led them to prepare a ludicrous plan for peace including the surrender of Mafeking and Ladysmith

**5th January:** Our scouts report that the Boer is withdrawing from Colenso in preparation for an all-out assault on the garrison at Ladysmith. General Buller decides that we can not follow the Boer because, although the flood is receding, the Tugela still blocks our route

**6th January:** At 2.00 am the Boer crept up against the Ladysmith defences, climbed Wagon Hill and attacked 'Caesar's Camp' south of the town. A day of skirmishes followed this dawn attack but never did the Boer make a greater mistake than to attack in the open

**7th January:** Seldom will history record a more prolonged or desperate duel between two bodies of resolute men than at Caesars Camp yesterday

**8th January:** Over 360 of General White's officers and men died in the battle for Caesar's Camp - but the Boer suffered even more heavily. Disheartened and angry, the Boer returns to Colenso and Joubert immediately redeploys his forces along the banks of the Tugela

**9th January:** Unable to engage in battle, this has become a war of the mind - of feint and subterfuge - neither side can gain any advantage. On the chess-board of Natal the skilled players, General Buller and General Joubert, are now able to anticipate each move of the other

**9th January:** Still blocked by the Tugela floods, officers with tiny escorts risked death by day and by night to sketch the Boer positions. General Buller issues orders that we are to forge a crossing of the Tugela at Potgeiter's Drift, which lies twenty-two miles west of Frere

**10th January:** High spirits and a mood of excitement sweeps camp at the news that Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener have landed at Cape Town

**11th January:** After what seems like an eternity of inaction, we are on the move, making rapid progress with General Buller's traction engines. Lord Dundonald signals that he has seized the bridge over the little Tugela and is proceeding under forced march to Swartz Kop

**12th January:** An entire army moved more than twenty miles across difficult country in less than 24 hours - an incredible achievement

**13th January:** Before nightfall General Clery has cleared the Boer from an area of two miles around Springfield and bivouacked outside the town. General Warren has pressed into the township of Springfield and taken up a strong position overlooking the Little Tugela Bridge

**14th January:** General Hildyard is now camped at Pretorius Farm within easy reach of Deel's Drift and the fords at Tugela junction. General Warren moves his division westward against the Boer's extreme right flank, to cover Hildyard's crossing of the Tugela

**14th January:** With the first gleam of the morning sun a heliograph on Swartz Kop blinked the welcome news that Dundonald has held the ferry

**15th January:** General Buller establishes camp at Spearman's Farm, awaiting the final positioning of his divisions before launching his attack. General Barton gains more time with a feint at Colenso, keeping the Boer occupied and allowing General Warren to advance further west

**16th January:** General Warren is ready to cross the Tugela at Trigaard's Drift, while Major Lyttleton's Rifles await orders at Potgeiter's Drift

**16th January:** General Buller orders the advance but excessive caution seems to have gripped our band of Generals - is Colenso to be repeated?

**17th January:** We are in position to attack but our Generals insist that we await a thorough build-up of logistics, supplies and reserves. The Boer sits exposed on the ridges before us, awaiting developments but we are doing nothing, offering them no challenge

**18th January:** General Buller's plan is for General Weller to force a way through the Boer lines and strike across the open country towards Ladysmith. If General Weller's assault is quickly pressed, it will almost certainly be assured of success

**19th January:** Lord Dundonald reaches the extreme flank of the Boer lines with a clear run to Ladysmith but is recalled to guard supplies. General Clery has made no progress at Tabanyama in three days, and Major Lyttleton is still awaiting orders at Potgeiter's Drift

**19th January:** Cable from General Warren to HQ is received explaining the reason for delaying his attack on the Boer lines ... it makes little sense

**20th January:** The first hard blow is struck - with General Hildyard we leave Deel's Drift in a swift advance to support General Warren's right flank. Churchill is with Lt Colonel Byng's South African Light Horse as they storm a high Kopje under fire to reinforce General Warren's left

**21st January:** Under a massive bombardment from the rear, we charge across the intervening valley and take the line of kopjes below Spion Kop. Corporal Tobin, an American with the Light Horse, climbs alone to the summit - and announces to all that the hill is his

**22nd January:** Signal from Lord Roberts HQ relieves General Buller as Commander in Chief but he temporarily retains control of current operations

**22nd January:** Our guns blast the Boer positions from dawn to dusk but fail to make any impact and we remain entrenched for the entire day.

**23rd January:** After nine hours hard climbing, General Woodgate and Lt Colonel Thorneycroft's Infantry advanced in the dusk to gain the treacherous summit of Spion Kop in complete surprise, the Boer fleeing in confusion. We held the Kop summit but despair, the final weapon that sometimes achieves victory, stimulated the Boers to heroic exertion

**23rd January:** General Buller arrives to survey our positions and, dismayed at the men's exposed conditions, he advises General Warren to retire

**24th January:** By dawn a vicious rifle fire was opened on our position by a handful of Boer marksmen, who had crept up unseen in the fog. In two hours the Boer fired over a thousand shells from Tabanyama against the exposed summit held by our thin line of khaki. Behind the cover of rocks and outcrops, the Boer crept to within yards of our position and opened a fire of slaughter upon us. Major Lyttleton's brigade mounts a frontal attack, obtaining a ledge on the north spur, which they hold tenaciously under fire. General Woodgate is shot through the head and dies before us - most of the officers are fallen and at least half of the men dead. General Coke arrives with reinforcements but finds the ground littered with dying and dead and turns back to General Warren's HQ

**24th January:** With the men battered and shot at until few had escaped injury, Colonel Thorneycroft is now in command and orders a withdrawal. Carrying all our wounded but leaving our dead on the field, Colonel Thorneycroft leads us down quietly, evacuating in the darkness

**25th January:** Last night's withdrawal was accomplished without the loss of a man, but many wounded were not able to be moved and died today. Our retirement was a heart-breaking experience and it now seems that each of those precious lives has been uselessly expended. General Buller orders our forces to fall back across the Tugela for rest and recuperation - has all of this then been for nought? With hopes dashed once more, the hapless Ladysmith must settle again in despair to further fight their starvation and disease

**26th January:** Only this morning did we discover that after our retreat the Boer had also withdrawn and, had we stayed, the battle was won

**26th January:** We re-unite with Churchill who tells us that, as a courier for HQ, he carried the signal promoting Colonel Thorneycroft to General

**27th January:** Three thousand reinforcements from Chieveley, together with a horse battery and more cavalry, arrived opportunely today

**27th January:** The reports and analysis after Spion Kop identified a catalogue of poor decisions, command errors and communication failures. General Buller blames General Warren: General Warren blames General Coke: General Coke blames General Warren: it seems that all are at fault. Lord Roberts is now only days away and, despite his orders, General Buller decides to launch another attack to re-take Spion Kop

**28th January:** Our final casualty count reveals 243 men killed and 1250 wounded or captured: the Boer has 335 casualties of which 68 are dead

**29th January:** General Buller orders our heavy guns to be positioned atop Swartz Kop from where the Boer on Spion Kop will be within our range. He is ignoring the recriminations of the Spion Kop disaster and orders preparations for a further assault on Vaal Krantz

**30th January:** Signal received from HQ to inform General Buller that Lord Roberts' forces are now positioned at Orange River and will advance to Kimberley

**31st January:** Lord Roberts and Lord Methuen have now combined their forces of more than 40000 under the overall command of Major-General French

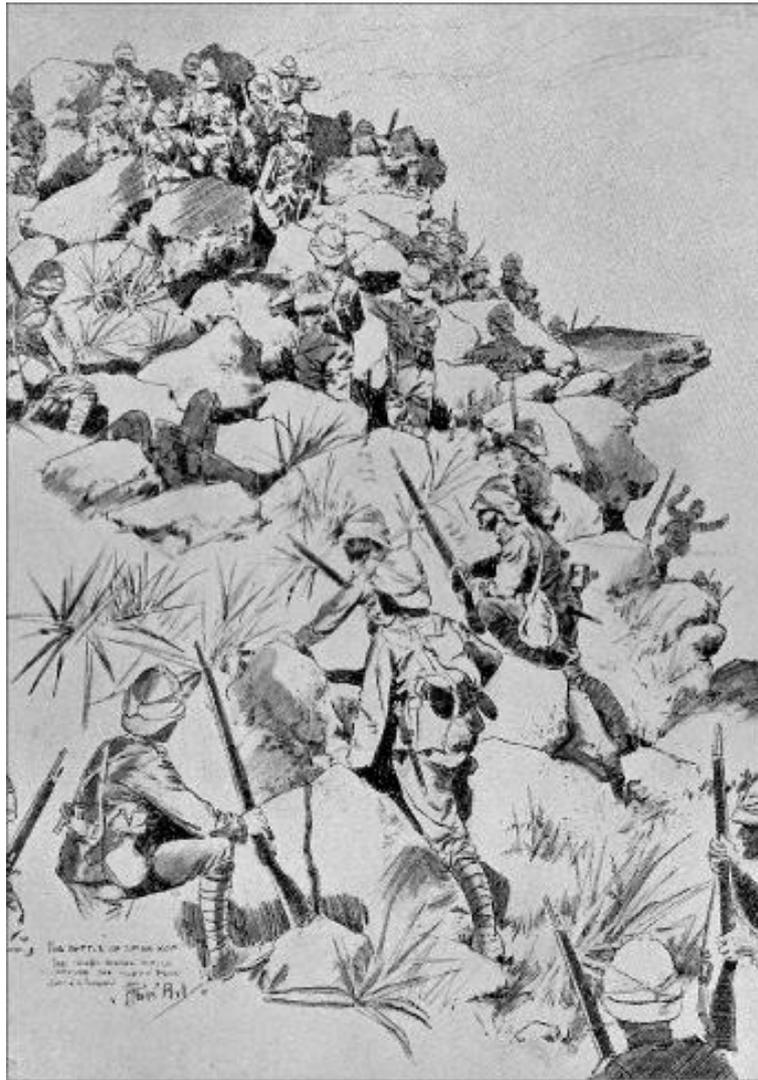
**31st January:** Despite our recent losses and defeats there is a confidence beginning to spread from man to man like a bush fire on the veldt

"LEFT FLANK 19th January."

TO THE CHIEF OF THE STAFF - I find there are only two roads by which we could possibly get from Trichard's Drift to Potgeister'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; and 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 staying at Venter's Laager for two or three days. I will send for further supplies and report progress.

"WARREN"

*General Warren's Message to HQ Staff*



REINFORCEMENTS SCALING SPION KOP  
*Drawn by René Bull*

