

TOWARDS THE LIBRARY OF TRUTH

As with each of the wars that I have known, the inevitable press falsehoods, distortions and exaggerations are now masquerading as the truth. From their cosy armchairs and offices in London and New York, the architects of our history are already penning the works that will become the school-books for our children. The self-important politicians and entrepreneurs are already forming the versions of reality that will best suit their corporate interests. Now, more than ever before, in this time of increasingly rapid and ever more efficient communications, it falls upon the writers who have travelled to the field, witnessed the battles and felt the pain of those who are dying, to build their library of truth - hence the inclusion, here, of my diary notes, thoughts and experiences for November 1899 ...



1st November: Reports from Ladysmith that General White has lost 1200 men at Lombards Kop - he has fallen back and the city is now surrounded

2nd November: General White's troops are now all captured or have fallen back to Ladysmith which, like Mafeking and, Kimberley is now under siege. General Redvers Buller is expected at Cape Town in days with 1st Army Corps and support forces comprising a total of some 70 thousand men

2nd November: I am intrigued to learn from an article in the Cape Town Press that I was captured by the Boer at Dundee and am presumed dead

3rd November: It seems that Buller is to head for Bloemfontein to relieve Ladysmith but this leaves Joubert free to cross the Tugela

4th November: Cape Town is bursting and General Gatacre is now to land at East London instead - I must go there to fulfil my assignment for Black and White

5th November: General Buller arrives at Cape Town to scenes of great rejoicing - I decide to delay my trip to East London to attend his press briefing. He announces that he will split his force into 3 divisions - Lord Methuen to Kimberley and Mafeking, General Gatacre to Stormberg, Buller himself to relieve Ladysmith

6th November: Reports from Ladysmith that General White has lost 400 men killed and wounded, with 800 captured by the Boer and many hundreds missing

6th November: Cape Town's negroes cannot fight for the Queen so they are volunteering for all kinds of work to release white men for the front

7th November: Refugees and wounded continue to flood into Cape Town .. rumours of British atrocities are being spread everywhere by the Boer

8th November: Unconfirmed reports that General White is dead, his troops slaughtered and Ladysmith is in flames put General Buller's preparations on hold

9th November: Joubert leaves Ladysmith under siege and moves 4000 troops south of the Tugela threatening Colenso and on to Pietermaritzburg. General Hildyard is now in Durban ahead of General Gatacre - his first move is to send a force to assist Colonel Long at Eastcourt

10th November: General Gatacre, to whom I am assigned, has now disembarked at East London to deal with the Boer threat in the Stormberg district

10th November: A runner from Colonel Long at Eastcourt reports to General Hildyard that the township will fall within hours unless relief forces arrive

11th November: Awaiting General Gatacre's arrival, I travel by overnight train to Eastcourt in the company of correspondent Winston Churchill

12th November: Churchill and I join the armoured train from Eastcourt used daily for reconnaissance trips north towards Frere and Chieveley. The Boer has pickets and snipers all over the hills, with field guns arriving daily - 9000 Boer troops are within a day's march of Eastcourt

13th November: Eastcourt is now being shelled by the Boer from the surrounding hills - to surrender or to hold out for relief is now a stark choice

14th November: Slender hopes are raised again in Eastcourt at the news that Hildyard with the West Yorks regiment is less than a day's march away

14th November: Our Natal field scouts report that Colenso is now under control of the Boer, but there are no details of battles or casualties

15th November: Our armoured train from Eastcourt has been attacked and wrecked on the gradient between Frere and Chieveley - we are now under heavy fire. The engineer managed to raise steam and haul the stricken train out of the Maxims range - Churchill has returned to the fight

16th November: General Hildyard reaches Eastcourt with 1400 men from the Dublin Fusiliers and West Yorks regiment but will this be enough to defeat the Boer?

16th November: No news of Churchill or the men from the fight at Frere - I fear that they are killed but pray that they are captured and safe

17th November: Scouts report that 47 have been killed in the 'Death Train' ambush at Frere. Churchill and 93 survivors are being taken to a POW camp at Pretoria

18th November: From his HQ at Eastcourt General Hildyard decides to attack and clear the Boer from all areas south of the Mooi River

19th November: Reports received today confirm that Churchill is being held in a POW camp at Pretoria - thankfully, a brave man still alive

20th November: The British push is on - Methuen en route to Kimberley, Buller to Ladysmith and Gatacre to Cape Midlands, where I must now go

21st November: General Hildyard advances towards Willow Grange without opposition and mounts a 4.7 inch naval gun on Beacon Hill, threatening the Boer positions

22nd November: a fearsome storm traps General Hildyard atop Beacon Hill - two soldiers are knocked unconscious and six horses killed by lightning. I learned today that my friend Bennet Burleigh is with Hildyard - he has reported that the Boer is closing in on Eastcourt

23rd November: Lord Methuen successfully assaults a 2000 strong Boer force at Belmont but loses almost 400 men in the battle and the aftermath

24th November: I am just hours from Stormberg to meet General Gatacre when I learn that his forces have been split and diverted to action in Natal

25th November: Continuing defeats force Joubert to retreat from the Eastcourt hills back to Colenso - General Hildyard follows, moving his HQ to Frere

26th November: General Gatacre is struggling to co-ordinate his forces which are now split into three groups so small that they are practically ineffective

27th November: General Gatacre's plan to invest Stormberg is now in disarray and, realising this, the Boer advances and takes the railway junction with no resistance

28th November: Unable to link up with General Gatacre, I return northwards and join Lord Methuen's forces just as they attack the Boer at Modder River but General Koos de la Rey has ensured that the Boer is heavily entrenched and the battle for Modder River becomes a day-long stalemate

29th November: In what has been the fiercest battle yet fought in this war, Lord Methuen eventually routs the Boer but at the cost of 480 killed and wounded

30th November: Amongst the casualties of Modder River, Lord Methuen is wounded but safe, while De la Rey's eldest son, Adriaan, is killed by a shell



Troops aboard the armoured train at Eastcourt



The armoured train - derailed

