

WAR WITH THE BOER IS NOW INEVITABLE

In late August I left Cuba with the departing US Military and returned to New York where I spent some time recovering from my fever and wounds, being nursed by Mary Judson Lamson, a wonderful Red Cross volunteer. Despite the pleasures of my recuperation, I knew that I had to leave my hospital bed and rally again to the cry else all that had been achieved in Cuban fields might be for nought.

1899 drew towards its turbulent conclusion during the first few days of October. My book "Under Three Flags in Cuba" was published on the 1st; and on the 3rd, I received a telegram from the editor of "Black and White Review," informing me that passage to South Africa was booked for me on the SS Assaye, leaving in two days time. Salisbury's force of 10,000 extra troops landed in Capetown on the 4th, and war with the Boer was now imminent. On top of all this, my head was in even more of a spin because I had fallen hopelessly in love with Mary, my "ministering angel." I could not imagine life without her so, as I was leaving to join my ship on the 5th, I plucked up the courage to propose, and left a much happier man when she accepted.

It is too early, at this date, to record the history of the South African war. We live in an age, however, when interest is ephemeral, and, unless one is content to write for reputation alone, a work must be published during the height of public interest to command relevance. Thanks to electricity and newspaper enterprise, the author who has gathered his material in the field, at the risk of life and health, and at personal expenditure of energy and money, is now able to erect very readable works around the slender fabric of cables and brief despatches - hence the inclusion, here, of my diary notes, thoughts and observations for October 1899 ...



5th October: War with the Boer is now inevitable. I am making my way there and should arrive with the British by mid-month

11th October: Travelling to join General White at Ladysmith when war is declared as the Boer mounts an offensive in Natal and Cape Colony

12th October: British garrison at Kraaipan attacked and captured - railway line and all communications with Mafeking cut .. the die is cast

13th October: Mafeking surrounded and under siege - Ladysmith and Kimberley are likely to fall soon - General Cronje's forces are rampant

14th October: Baden-Powell's locally recruited militia of 1200 defending Mafeking against General Kronje's 6000 strong Boer force while, at the same time, General White mounts disastrous sortie against Boer artillery besieging Ladysmith - 140 men killed and over 1000 taken prisoner.

14th October: The Boer is everywhere and I will not reach Ladysmith - now trekking to Dundee instead with small party of Dutch farmers. Colonel Kekewich sets up a 15 mile defensive perimeter around Kimberley and endorses Baden-Powell's order for women and children to leave.

15th October: Water supply to Kimberley is cut at Riverton - Cecil Rhodes declares "water in the De Beer mines is now more valuable than diamonds"

15th October: the Boer cuts all telegraph line from Kimberley to the Cape - Colonel Kekewich declares Kimberley under martial law. Newcastle now occupied - Jan Uys has challenged Boer commander Cornelis Spruyt to a single fight but he has been arrested and sent to Pretoria

15th October: Reached Dundee to find panic over news that Joubert's Boers are just a day away - General Penn-Symons is too late with defences. I meet Lester Ralph in Dundee - he gives me my brief from Black and White magazine stating that I am to join General Gatacre at Stormberg on 30th October

16th October: 8000 Boers now surround Mafeking and the first shells fall on the city after Baden-Powell ignores Kronje's 9.00 am surrender ultimatum. Scouts report that a Boer force of 1000 is moving towards Elandslaagte to take control of the road from Dundee to Ladysmith

18th October: News today that General Redvers-Buller is expected at Cape Town with around 10000 men on 29 October - the Boer has 70000 men under arms

18th October: Cyclist scouts report that Elandslaagte is now virtually surrounded but not yet attacked by at least 1000 men under General Kock

18th October: General Joubert's forces now gathered in strength to the north and south of Dundee - attack must be imminent but Penn-Symons waits .. and waits

19th October: Elandslaagte occupied - station overrun, mail train captured, communications cut and everyone in the vicinity taken prisoner and Dundee now cut off from Ladysmith. General Penn-Symons forces are isolated and vulnerable to imminent attack from Joubert's Commandos

19th October: At less than 2000 yards distant, we watch the Boer mounting their field guns on Talana Hill overlooking Dundee

19th October: General Erasmus holds Impati mountain to the north with a force of 1500 Boer - Dundee is surrounded and will be shelled within hours

20th October: from Talana Hill, the Boer guns open fire at first light but they are firing harmless dud shells, causing nothing but minor damage but then, with 2000 infantry, General Penn-Symons mounts a direct uphill attack against the 4000 Boer atop Talana - he is mortally wounded. The Boer is routed at Talana Hill but at a cost of 45 killed, almost 200 wounded and 220 men of the 18th Cavalry captured

21st October: Major General French arrives at Elandslaagte from Ladysmith and opens bombardment of General Kock's troops under thunderous skies. Kock counter-attacks and temporarily drives back the British but falls and dies in the mud before Major General French takes victory

22nd October: After the fall of General Penn-Symons, Brigadier General Yule is in command and, with no sign of the expected reinforcements from Elandsлагте, is now on foot to Ladysmith

22nd October: Fearing imminent attack, Sir George White orders Major General French to abandon Elandsлагте and Dundee and return to Ladysmith

23rd October: General Joubert attacks Dundee again with 12000 men, only to find that General Yule had already breached the Boer line in retreat to Ladysmith. He enters Dundee to find Penn-Symons among the wounded and dying, with campfires blazing and lighted candles in empty tents. That night, Penn-Symons dies from wounds as a POW insisting that his epitaph reads "tell everybody that I died facing the enemy"

23rd October: After a 12 hour forced march, General Yule's force reaches the Waschbank Pass, but the Boer is in the area and they have to continue

24th October: Joubert despatches a large force to attack General Yule and cut off our retreat at Biggarsberg but the British column beats them through. Exhausted from our 4 day field march but we must now join General White's attack .. shells explode in our midst from the Boer above

24th October: General White moves to Modder Spruit with 4500 men to cover General Yule's retreat and engages the Boer at Rietfontein and Tinta Inyoni

26th October: Six days of fight and flight .. and now we arrive at Ladysmith. Penn-Symons called General Yule a coward at Dundee but now he is a hero. Nevinson and my friend Bennett Burleigh arrive in Ladysmith with General Kock's body and the wounded from Elandsлагте

27th October: We fought off the Boer at Dundee and Elandsлагте - three days later both are lost again - hundreds of brave men are dead for nought. Joubert is re-building his forces with Transvaal commandos and preparing for a direct assault on General White at Ladysmith

28th October: General Joubert now occupies all the hills around Ladysmith with 12000 men and a huge artillery force - his attack must be imminent but General White launches an attack on a commando at Lombard's Kop. On Joubert's orders to not fight until ready, though. the Boer withdraws

29th October: The Boer begins shelling Ladysmith with their fearsome "Long Tom" atop Pepworth Hill .. scouts report that they have two more. General White plans a surprise counter-attack on the Boer but, by numbers alone, it is doomed to failure .. Ladysmith will fall

29th October: I have a choice; stay to follow White's defence and witness the fall of Ladysmith - or leave today and try to make Cape Town

30th October: General White orders that all those wounded should leave but civilians and non-combatants must stay, so a blood-stained leg bandage becomes my ticket out.

30th October: De Botha's forces join Joubert's and there are now more than 20000 Boer investing Ladysmith - General White still believes he can win.

30th October: The Boer closes in and the Long Toms are pounding the city as we leave Ladysmith on what must be one of the last trains for Cape Town

31st October: Cape Town is chaos .. in just a few short weeks it has become the de facto HQ for the largest army ever sent across the sea



After the Battle of Elandsлагте



Long Tom en route to Ladysmith

