

HORSE DOCTOR AT WAR 1899-1900

1 THE UTTER INEVITABILITY of war (daily headlined as 'The Situation') paradoxically co-existed with 'life as usual'. While Joseph Chamberlain was considering the petition signed by 20,000 Johannesburg Uitlanders for the redress of their disabilities and British troops massed in Natal, Pretoria appeared to pursue its even way. On the 8th May 1899, the Transvaal Agricultural Union, already a powerful body, held its first Annual Congress and recorded a high degree of coöperation on all hands. The Z.A.R. Government had asked it to report on the granting of a concession for the importation of steam-ploughs and other important matters. Its president, Johann Zulch de Villiers, Burgomaster of Johannesburg and its vice-president, Dr J. W. B. Gunning had been 'most hospitably' entertained in Cape Town at the Annual Congress of the South African Agricultural Union of which de Villiers had been made a vice-president. Gunning had even gone to Graham's Town to see the Bacteriological Institute where Edington had treated him 'with the greatest kindness and courtesy'. He had then made rapport in the Free State.

2 Under this gloss which obtained equally in other fields, there were energetic preparations for war. Apart from the accumulation of troops from England and India, mostly in Natal, the British Army's Principal Veterinary Officer, Colonel Matthews was already in the country, laying in medical and other stores and establishing Remount Stations. In Natal, he was assisted by Watkins-Pitchford, already on quasi-military service with his staff, and at the Cape by the partly-recovered Hutcheon and his men. The Cape, with many Afrikaners in its Government, was not 'British' in the sense of Natal and Hutcheon's department continued to serve only as civilians. As the weeks went by, there was feverish purchasing throughout Southern Africa of horses, mules and oxen. No war could be waged without mounted forces and draught animals. Officers on furlough on their way to England told Theiler travelling with them in the middle of May that it would quickly be over and that the British Army 'would walk into Pretoria'. 3 When he landed at Southampton on the 2nd June, the newspapers implied imminent hostilities. Reaching Switzerland the next day, the message was much the same.

4 The eyes of the world were on Bloemfontein where Kruger, accompanied by his young State Attorney J. C. Smuts, confronted Britain's representative Sir Alfred Milner across a conference table. For the first week in June, the old man, urged to temporise by Smuts, tried to find a via media with a cold austere satrap whose mind was increasingly revealed as closed to anything but total submission. At the week's end, Kruger threw in his hand and returned to Pretoria. The world at large echoed the sentiment of Southern Africa - 'the only solution of the situation is by force of arms'.

5 In the Z.A.R., tension was accentuated. The great exodus from Johannesburg which had begun earlier, now increased. In Pretoria, the Uitlander inhabitants began to sell up and there was continuous auction of furniture, riding horses and household effects. The emotional challenge of the failed conference was reflected on the 19th June by a huge meeting of burghers at Paardekraal near Krugersdorp where the Commandant-General Piet Joubert was enthusiastically welcomed at the site commemorating the outbreak of the first Anglo-Boer War in 1880 when the Republic had regained its independence. Military preparations were now as apparent in the Transvaal as in Natal and the Cape. European newspapers were full of news of the fast-developing crisis. To hearten his men at Daspoort, Theiler sent them a bawdy postcard.

He was fully aware of 'the situation' and, reading reports from the foreign Press reproduced

6 in Pretoria newspapers, Emma could gauge how well-informed he would be. Wherever he was, in almost continuous travelling, she could hear from him in little more than three weeks as long as the Cape route remained open. He had gone first to Frick for only a few days to be reunited with his family and to continue his quasi-paternal relationship with his brother Alfred, 15 years his junior; then via Neuchâtel (calling on Tel Sandoz at his home) to Paris to make arrangements at the Institut Pasteur for his study of new techniques. It had been good to be welcomed and to see Bordet again. He would begin his work there at the end of June; but in the meantime, there were similar enquiries at the Universities of Berne and Zurich (where Zschokke claimed him), friends to be seen, relatives visited, old connections re-established. He was seldom more than a day or two in any given place in the beloved homeland before returning to Paris on the 29th June.

7 In a manner becoming to an official representative of the Z.A.R. Government (for which the French had much sympathy) and bearing its letter of commendation, Theiler was warmly welcomed at the Institut Pasteur and wherever he went. He spent three weeks in Paris watching research procedures and techniques for manufacturing vaccines, and visiting the purveyors of the most advanced laboratory equipment, notably the firm of Cogit with which he subsequently dealt. His friendship with Bordet gave him easy entrée and many names in his scientific journals became vital personalities, such as Edouard Nocard of the Alfort Veterinary College outside Paris. His time, he said, was most valuably spent and his departure delayed by the interest of the work he was watching. Emma's letters were always forwarded to him and he wrote her constantly.

8 The four Swiss running the Daspoort Laboratory and maintaining his long-term experiments frequently consulted her. Schroeder, nominally in charge, foresaw difficulties. The Smallpox and other vaccines which they continued to produce in bulk, were all supplied without charge and the Laboratory had no income beyond Theiler's modest estimated budget. By August, there remained only £545 and Schroeder applied to Schutte for further finance to maintain their work until the end of the year. None was forthcoming. The Government's attention was elsewhere. It was issuing new Mauser rifles to the burghers in place of their old Martini-Henrys and buying horses and oxen galore in every quarter. Comically – if it had not also been tragic – the British were also buying horses in the Orange Free State and assembling huge reserves at Pietermaritzburg. The shops remained open in Pretoria and the Government packed its stores with goods of every kind against the time when supplies might be cut. The British agent Conynham Greene and his wife moved freely about the town as before; but Kruger preached in the Dopper Church and Days of Humiliation were held, pleading for intercession.

9 By the 19th July, Theiler was back in Switzerland conferring with his scientific and personal friends – Zschokke in Zurich, Sandoz at Le Locle, Rubele in Berne, others in Basle, Glarus and elsewhere in the little country so easily traversed. He was all the time 'bringing himself up to date' and telling Emma of the wide field expanding before him. In the first week in August, he and the Swiss delegation crossed the Rhine to attend the Conference at Baden-Baden. x

10 The International Veterinary Conference was, unsurprisingly, the invention of a Scotsman – Professor John Gamgee of Edinburgh. He found no support among his own people but the idea attracted German scientists who in 1863, organised the first Congress at Hamburg attended by about 100 and only two Englishmen. At the second held in Vienna in 1865, the attendance rose to 160 with five English. 180 attended the third in Zurich in 1867 and 310 the fourth at Brussels, for the first time under Royal patronage. Attendance rose to 635 for the fifth in 1889 in Paris while Theiler was still a carousing student shortly to qualify, and the sixth was held again in Switzerland in Berne in 1895. Moderately successful in Johannesburg by then, he had had wild thoughts of attending it. The 670 delegates still included only a small number of English who

generally considered it a distinctly Continental innovation and were, as a profession, congenitally apathetic toward such excursions.

11 By 1899, there had been a change of heart (probably concomitant with great scientific developments, particularly in bacteriology) and no less than a thousand delegates foregathered at Baden-Baden (where, for the first time, English was one of the official languages), coming literally from all parts of the world including Canada, Australia and the United States. Professor John M'Fadyean, principal of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, led a distinguished delegation of his colleagues. Among Colonials, Orientals and Continentals, Theiler was a nonentity – at best, a curiosity. The Grand Duke Friedrich cast regal glamour on the scene; the usual concerts, balls, banquets and excursions were organised and the city of Baden-Baden devoted itself to cherishing its guests. The proceedings were almost entirely concerned with practical problems affecting 'the international cattle trade' and preventing the diseases that vitiated it. There were no reports on current research; but Theiler met the men engaged on it throughout the world.

12 At the official farewell banquet on the 12th August, he sat at the same long table as his new friend, the 50-year old Nocard, director of the Alfort Veterinary College who, a favourite and first veterinary pupil of Pasteur, was doing notable work on 'the microbial maladies of animals' including Glanders, Pleuro-pneumonia, Tuberculosis, diseases due to trypanosomes and other projects dear to Theiler's own heart. Others with him were Robert Ostertag of Berlin, Jenné of Holland, Tokishige of Japan, Fotheringham of Boston, U.S.A. and, on the practical side, Duncan McEachem, Chief Veterinary Officer of Canada, Alix Cope of London, Roumanian, German and Swiss delegates.

13 In the five days of the Congress, Theiler had met Kitt of München whose text-books on Bacteriology he had feverishly ordered with the utmost urgency through his father; Leclainche of Toulouse; Perroncito of Turin and other luminaries whose names he had noted many weeks before in Pretoria. Fluent in German, French, Dutch and English, talking to such men (himself unique among them) was as the breath of life to him. In the manner of such occasions, letters and reports were promised, invitations extended to visit institutions, coöperation offered on mutual problems. In five hectic days, Theiler took his measure against the current world of veterinary and bacteriological science and found himself not wanting but frustrated by no commission to speak. In the international field, Africa and its animal diseases had no existence, let alone a proponent. Then he went on to keep his numerous assignments in Germany – Heidelberg, Köln, Bremen, Berlin (with Koch absent on his long tour of research into Malaria in Italy, Java and the Pacific Islands), Dresden, München (to have further talks with Kitt), Jena for equipment from Zeiss, and all other institutions fulfilling his commissions from his Government.

14 As he travelled, the German newspapers hammered the certainty of war. At the height of his success, his career seemed ruined and he wrote depressingly to Emma; but his tour proved so heady an experience that he proposed delaying his return though his four months' leave was near its end. Early in September, he was back in Switzerland, finding time to buy a miniature hay-wain or go-cart for his children, toys, dolls, boxes for botanising, Swiss chocolate and – a gift from his father – jars of honey. His cases would also contain all the apparatus he had bought, the most modern microscopes, bacteriological specimens, various cultures, even the bee fungus which his father had found. He had long earnest talks with Alfred about his future. When he had finished at the Aarau High School, he must go to the University at Zurich. Having had a new one made in Berlin, Arnold confided into his father's care his old artificial left-hand to serve as a model should he need replacement. All ships to South Africa were packed to the gun-
whales but he must get back. He was unable to leave Switzerland until the 22nd September.

Emma in the seat of war worried about him. His time was up and he had not, as far as she knew, asked for an extension. He might lose his job. There was now a general exodus from Pretoria. The foreigners remaining organised themselves into units – a German Corps, a German Navy Society, a Swiss Security Corps and others. The Staatsartillerie practised marksmanship in the veld and two batteries left for Volksrust on the Natal border. With the wholesale flight of native and white labour, the gold mines and Johannesburg itself were coming to a stop. The cost of food rose steeply. Emma providently bought provisions and later took up the floorboards to conceal supplies for three months so that if thieves rifled the kitchen and pantry, the family could still subsist. She wrote her parents-in-law that she could no longer send a monthly financial contribution – salaries might not be paid and they would need money. Prudent and thrifty, she was saving all she could (it amounted to £200 when Arnold came back and they were able to dig a well). If the English won, Arnold would lose his job; but, she noted, ‘they have certainly chosen a bad time as summer is now coming with its terrible storms and flooded rivers, together with malaria and Horse Sickness’.

She planned to have the house spick and span for Arnold’s return but before taking down the curtains, oiling the floors and cleaning every nook and cranny, she presciently sent a postcard to Southampton and a long letter to Madeira, confident that he would somehow be on the mailship *Norman* leaving three weeks thence on the 23rd September. She wanted him to know that all was not well in the Laboratory. The staff, lacking authority, were at daggers drawn. Scott who should have been paardenarts to the Staatsartillerie, was ‘lazy and negligent’ and no use at all, being dismissed at the end of September. Two of Theiler’s Swiss would have to take his place and the others might soon be impressed to fight with the commandos. The Republic had no army – only commandos drawn from specific areas whose members had no uniforms, rode their own horses, took their own food and knew no discipline. The sole organised uniformed disciplined forces were the Staatsartillerie with its heavy Creusot guns, howitzers and maxims, and the Mounted Police.

When Theiler crossed the Channel on the 23rd September, the British Cabinet had met. ‘I have the impression from the reports in English newspapers that the English have it in mind to start a war’, he told his parents in a valedictory letter. His troubles immediately began and even his Swiss London friend, C. Ecuyer could not help him. The British Customs, confronted by a swarthy foreigner carrying Z.A.R. papers and loaded with numerous heavy cases, suspected gun-running and broke them open. All was settled in time for him to board the *Norman* at Southampton. He shared a cabin with a German from South West Africa and found an old friend of Johannesburg days, the Mining Commissioner, J. L. van der Merwe as well as other acquaintances returning hurriedly to their businesses.

He regarded coldly the numerous swaggering English officers on board. They let it be known that the Transvaal artillery should not be under-estimated as young men who rode about on horses knew very well how to estimate distance and possessed good French quick-firing canons as well as Krupp batteries. They looked pityingly at Theiler; but before the voyage was over, he felt sorry for them, knowing that ‘either sickness or bullets will cause them to remain forever in Africa’. There were also correspondents of the big London illustrated papers including the disarmingly rotund, bald-headed and bespectacled Melton Prior of the *Illustrated London News* who had covered the first Anglo-Boer War and himself brought the peace terms from the English to the Boers in 1881. Theiler listened to the stocky middle-aged little man holding forth in the Saloon Bar, knowledgeably pronouncing that the English had decided on war. They never met again but came dangerously close.

At Madeira, Theiler wrote his parents in Frick and bought the famous wicker chairs for his family in Pretoria. After reading Emma’s letter, there was much on his mind. The dissension

and dispersal of his staff and the chaos in his laboratory were severe blows to a man re-inspired by new ideas, equipment and energy. He would soon restore order, he felt sure and, indomitably optimistic, spent all possible time at sea drafting a 'work plan' for the future. To Theiler, work was an end in itself, a holy obligation never to be foresworn. War or no war, he knew what he must do.

X In the confusion of docking at Cape Town, his compatriot Jean Dietschi, now a waiter at the Mount Nelson Hotel, emerged from the crowd and helped him disembark. Well in advance. Emma had arranged it. It was Tuesday the 10th October, the 75th birthday of President Kruger, the day on which his ultimatum to Britain to remove her massed forces from Natal would expire. Theiler caught the last train to the north while the bridges still stood. No freight was allowed and he carried only hand-luggage while his baggage and packing cases disappeared in the confusion and chaos at the Cape. He arrived in Pretoria on Friday the 12th October 1899 with hostilities already in progress and the bridge across the Orange River allegedly destroyed. X Communication with the outside world through Durban and Cape Town came suddenly to an end. British warships hovered outside Delagoa Bay, restrained for diplomatic reasons from imposing blockade but attentively watching the traffic from Europe that now would come through the Suez Canal and unload at Lourenço Marques the cargoes destined for the Z.A.R.

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Pretoria was eerily quiet. The English newspapers, *The Press* and its recent rival the *Pretoria News* (reporting County cricket matches to the last) had ceased publication; but the Dutch *De Volksstem* continued, with a special edition in English, as well as the *Deutsche Zeitung* which the Theilers sometimes sent to Switzerland. British subjects were put over the border but some were allowed to remain – ministers of religion, and the staffs of various businesses, stores and banks. Many houses and shops stood empty; but the main stores remained open and a number of smaller shops. Life went on as usual with few people in the streets.

24 Theiler's homecoming was marred by chagrin that he came empty-handed, carrying only his
25 valises. Everything had grown – the children, the trees, the grass in Spring. He went at once to
26 his laboratory where Favre alone remained in charge, longing to join his compatriots on the
27 Natal front and rendering occasional service to the horses of the residual Staatsartillerie.
Schroeder, von Bergen and Otto Meyer had been impressed into the Pretoria Commando and
Kollmann was with the Aapies River Commando – non-belligerently, he asserted, and only on
ambulance duty. All that Theiler had struggled to attain – his new knowledge, his plans, his
laboratory – had become pointless.

28 On the 17th October, he wrote two formal letters – one to the State Secretary advising his
return and the detention of his baggage with all his records and equipment, and graciously
29 thanking for the great honour done him. The second was to Landdrost Schutte, now riding
continually about his enormous district administering a thousand affairs and checking on spies
and disloyalty. Theiler confirmed his resumption of control of the Daspoort Laboratory and
asked that the Auditor-General be told of the inaccessibility of his cases containing the receipts
for £200 which he now claimed for general expenses on his mission. He was closing the labora-
tory owing to his assistants being commandeered and all experimentation becoming impossible.
30 He had 'offered his services to the Commandant-General'. He had in fact twice telegraphed
31 General Piet Joubert sitting among his commandos in the hot hills of Natal in the purlieu of
Ladysmith. Humiliatingly, no answer came. Joubert had never liked him. He was important
32 to no one. Emma rejoiced. It was the sixth anniversary of their marriage and he had spent at
least 2½ years of it away from his home.

33 The Boer forces struck quickly. Even as Fitzpatrick, busybody 'expert' on South African affairs, confirmed in London his discussion with Milner on the post-war rehabilitation that would soon be necessary (Chamberlain, Selborne and Milner were all planning post-war reconstruction, confident of an early end), the might of the British Army suffered debasing blows in Natal and the Northern Cape. The effect was to stalemate its drive to the Transvaal and to shut up in Ladysmith an effective force together with essential officers including the Principal Veterinary Surgeon Colonel Matthews (with his henchman Watkins-Pitchford), Surgeon-Major Bruce and a host of war correspondents. Inept military action similarly resulted in the sieges of Kimberley and Mafeking in the Cape. One of the contributing factors was a disastrous action on the 10th November at Belmont outside Kimberley where, Theiler sadly noted, Lieutenant Wood who five months previously had talked on the ship of 'walking into Pretoria', was killed. Only three weeks after the outbreak of war, thousands of British prisoners were brought to a surprised and unprepared Pretoria and quartered on the race course. (They were shortly joined, Theiler observed by Lord Randolph Churchill's son, captured on the 15th November.) At the same time, Boer casualties arrived.

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35 Of security measures, there seemed none. Theiler's staff in the field in Natal wrote him expansively of the number and disposition of their guns, military movements, various actions with casualty figures, documents found on the dead and every detail that came to their notice. He himself, having no specific duties, wandered about the town talking to everybody, visiting the wounded (his friend Lieutenant Mike du Toit of the Staatsartillerie had had his leg smashed in two places by a shell), hearing all that was known – in a Capital untroubled by military censors – from civil servants, his colleagues at the Artillery Camp and the British prisoners themselves. He wrote long letters to his father, full of the accusations made by both sides regarding the use of dum-dum bullets, firing on truce flags and ambulances bearing the Red Cross, killing surrendering troops, and so forth, together with detailed descriptions of military actions and dispositions. They were published in the *Schweizer Freie Press* and completely changed in character when Theiler obtained information at first hand.

36 This was a new kind of war between a highly home-trained army under discipline and inept direction, and loose accumulations of indignant men ostensibly organised into commandos drawn from various areas and exhilarated by early success into a false sense of superiority. The British had hardly deployed their innovations in the way of observation balloons, powerful searchlights, heliographing over great distances, employing road steam-locomotives for traction, and other devices; but their officers now wore khaki with unpolished buttons and their swords were purposely tarnished. They also had official motion picture war correspondents.

37 'Science' too exhibited its progress. On the 16th November 1899, the shattered leg of Theiler's friend, Mike du Toit, was exposed to 'Röntgen Rays' in the Pretoria Hospital to assist the surgeon in re-setting the bones. On the same day, Marconi's installation at The Needles broadcast to him on the ship in which he was returning from America, the latest despatches on the South African War which the captain printed for the passengers. When 40 miles from Southampton, he received: 'Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking holding out well. No big battle. 15,000 men recently landed. At Ladysmith, no more killed. Boer bombardment at Kimberley effected the destruction of ONE TIN POT. It was auctioned for £200. It is felt that period of anxiety and strain is over and that our turn has come.' It was the first time that news had been radioed.

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39 Theiler himself had not neglected his scientific obligations and maintained certain cultures in the deserted laboratory, notably bacteria which had arrived from Berlin and Zurich before his return. Still expecting to be called up, he was practicing revolver-shooting on horseback – a difficult enterprise with one hand; but, in between talking to all and sundry, was planning the effective continuance of his researches. All the cultures which he had obtained from Bordet

and others had probably been destroyed by the British in confiscating his baggage. He had left a standing order with the Bacteriological Institutes at Lausanne and Lancy for breeding-lymph which he specially needed as cases of Smallpox continued to occur. Now they must be sent via
41 Naples and Lourenço Marques. His father too must send him more bee fungus via the Suez route. At some time he would use it; but now he roamed about the town, gathering every detail of news about the war and the Republic's part in it for long letters intended for publication in the *Schweizer Freie Press*. The activities of the local Swiss were of special interest and he sought out the oldest – Perrin, the Master of the State Mint.

42 Jules Alfred Perrin of Cortaillod, Neuchâtel was by training an assayer who served in the Swiss Army but joined the first wave of emigrants to South Africa when the Diamond Fields were opened in 1871. He left Kimberley for Pretoria in 1873 at the call of the impractical President Burgers who wanted to establish a Mint, but remained merely an assayer, later wandering off to the Eastern Transvaal goldfields as digger and farmer. In 1893, he returned to Pretoria as Government Assayer and inaugurator of the State Mint. A man deeply versed in Science, he told Theiler that the Government had no intention of 'killing the hen that laid the golden egg' (as the British feared) but continued to operate some of the gold mines near the defunct Johannesburg. All the gold mined was sent to him at the Mint where seven Swiss worked with him.
43 'We have had for a long time enough gold', Theiler reported, 'Herr Perrin showed me no less than 120 tons of it.'

Six weeks after his return, his orders came – he was to report to Major J. F. Wolmarans, senior officer of the Staatsartillerie headed by Commandant S. P. E. Trichardt, at some point
44 on the periphery of Ladysmith. All was tumult. 'My second homeland is threatened by mighty England', he wrote dramatically, 'Until now I have been released from taking active part but now my duty calls me to the battlefield. To withdraw from this duty would not be seemly after being treated well by the Government in good times. The oath of allegiance binds also for unhappy times. As a man of honour and a good Swiss, I want to discharge my duty.' Ladysmith would soon fall. Deserters told of 'unbearable conditions'. The water supply was polluted. Typhoid must be raging. He had no idea how long he would be in the field but he hoped his local responsibilities would bring him often to Pretoria. As 'Horse Doctor' to the Staatsartillerie, he would enjoy no immunity like the doctors working with the Red Cross, and he would go
45 armed and his men too – 'not that I have any murderous thoughts at all', he wrote his parents, hinting that had he had two hands, it might have been otherwise, 'being as I now am, I will try to serve Justice and Freedom to the best of my knowledge and conscience.'

With only two or three days to organise a most complicated mission, Theiler was hard put
46 to arrange his affairs. The Government provided six mules and a wagon (to be stocked with medicines, instruments and dressings for thousands of horses as well as food and other paraphernalia), an orderly D. T. Botha, two native servants, a tent, a riding horse and the services of Favre who at last achieved his ambition to go to the front. Concerned and considerate as
47 ever, Emma put in the wagon a small case of provisions so that Arnold should never suffer from hunger.

She had never feared being left alone in the house with Mathilda and the children though
48 thunderous rain on the tin roof and gale-force winds that sometimes nearly removed it had often made her anxious. There were voluntary police patrols in Pretoria which came as far as their property. Distant from shops and now that the laboratory was closed, from any kind of company, she was always fully occupied with maintaining the household and four effervescent toddlers. Now Arnold laid a further obligation on her. The precious imported bacteria could not be allowed to die. She must maintain them too and, skilled as she was in broths and cultures and general laboratory work, renew them when necessary. Before leaving Europe, Arnold had

written to Bordet asking him to send fresh supplies as soon as he read that war had been declared. They would be arriving soon to replace those now ruined in Arnold's lost baggage. 49 'A small laboratory' including an incubator was transported from Daspoort to the house and Emma entered into her occupation as surrogate Gouvernements Veearts, even receiving terse 50 messages later from the incumbent in the field, dispelling any hope of relief – 'You will therefore have to conduct those affairs of our Station transferred to you as at present'. They kept her very busy.

There was now a great va-et-vient along the Daspoort road through Wonderboom to Water-
val where Arnold had laboured with Danysz and Bordet. Faced with a growing mass of British
prisoners for whom the race course was inadequate for the rank-and-file and the Staats Model
51 School for the officers, the Government instructed Wierda to convert the partially-dismantled
Experiment Station into a fenced and fortified camp with watch-towers and searchlights. He
designed a large village of three 'streets' pointedly entitled Ladysmith, Dundee and Kimberley
and here, from the 1st December 1899 onward, all ranks were incarcerated. Later many distin-
52 guished Pretoria citizens, including Dr J. W. B. Gunning, served as guards at a special camp for
officers constructed on the side of a hill in full view of the Theiler house. Emma who had noted
53 the escape of Winston Churchill from the Staats Model School on the 13th December 1899,
was diverted at night by its powerful searchlights. Its inmates called it 'The Birdcage'.

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Arnold had trucked his cumbersome equipage of wagon, animals and servants at dawn on the
27th November. Two days later, the erratic train arrived at a siding before the general depôt
at Elandslaagte in Natal and the whole unit was unloaded into the veld. Theiler took to his
horse and, met by his whilom Swiss assistants now on active service, rode to the base of Bulwana
Hill where presently his camp was established. A bearded and sunburnt Major Wolmarans
visited him that night and Theiler told him of sympathy throughout Europe for the Republic's
cause.

54 The following day (30th November), he rode up the broad steep hill, taking four hours to
reach the top. To the noise of continuous bombardment by British artillery and naval guns
encircling Ladysmith to which Wolmarans' unit of the Staatsartillerie replied from the summit,
he surveyed a scene of fantasy. Below him lay the beleaguered town where every movement,
every building, even every particular individual (Bennett Burleigh of the *Daily Telegraph* had
55 to dye his white horse with boiled Condyl's Fluid to render it less conspicuous) was clearly
visible by telescope. A relationship of almost cordial intimacy had already arisen between the
56 besiegers and the besieged. Behind him and to the right and left between the hills were the laagers
of the Boer commandos, lying in beautifully green and verdant country where their horses and
cattle placidly grazed. But for an occasional British observation balloon, the rare crack of rifle
shots and the intermittent noise of bombardment, the scene of battle wore the air of a gigantic
picnic.

Theiler's postal address became 3rd Battery – Major J. F. Wolmarans, Hoofdlaager, Lady-
smith and there Emma's letters regularly reached him. His duties were occasionally to inspect
and maintain the health of the horses of the fighting forces which surrounded the town, with
artillery batteries on every hill. Horse Sickness was feared but never eventuated. There emerged
57 instead on the lower ground a plague of flies feeding on detritus and dead animals which pre-
sented an almost intolerable human health hazard. To a man trained at the Thun Military
Academy in Switzerland, the conduct of the war was unbelievable. No watches were set, no
sentries posted, no security measures enforced. Sitting on their hills, the burghers held that

advancing British could be seen long before they could attack. The night would take care of itself. In such circumstances, the British, using local troops, made a brilliant and costly night attack on the 11th December on Lombard's Kop to disable its guns and all but dispossessed the sleeping Pretoria commando while smashing a Howitzer and damaging a heavy Creusot gun. Theiler and Kollmann watched it from the adjacent Bulwana Hill and shook their heads.

58 For reasons of which he was not advised, Theiler was ordered to transfer his unwieldy camp from the base to the top of the hill. 16 mules were needed to drag his wagon over rocks and gullies in constant danger of capsizing to a site slightly below the summit where the 15.5 Creusot

59 siege gun called 'Long Tom' by the victims below (others were known as 'Puffing Billy' and 'Weary Willy' from the noise of their shells in flight) was mounted with supporting artillery. 60 It had taken 48 oxen and hundreds of helping hands to get it there in defiance of the advice of Dutch and German engineers. With Theiler were his Swiss assistants, now joined by the ad-

61 venturous Deschler from home who acted as cook. They lived hardly with little water and sleeping in their clothes. The futility of his position deeply irked Theiler but he consoled himself with the thought that he was being used as a congenial companion to Wolmarans rather than horse doctor and the rôle, so far from doing him harm, might in the end prosper his career.

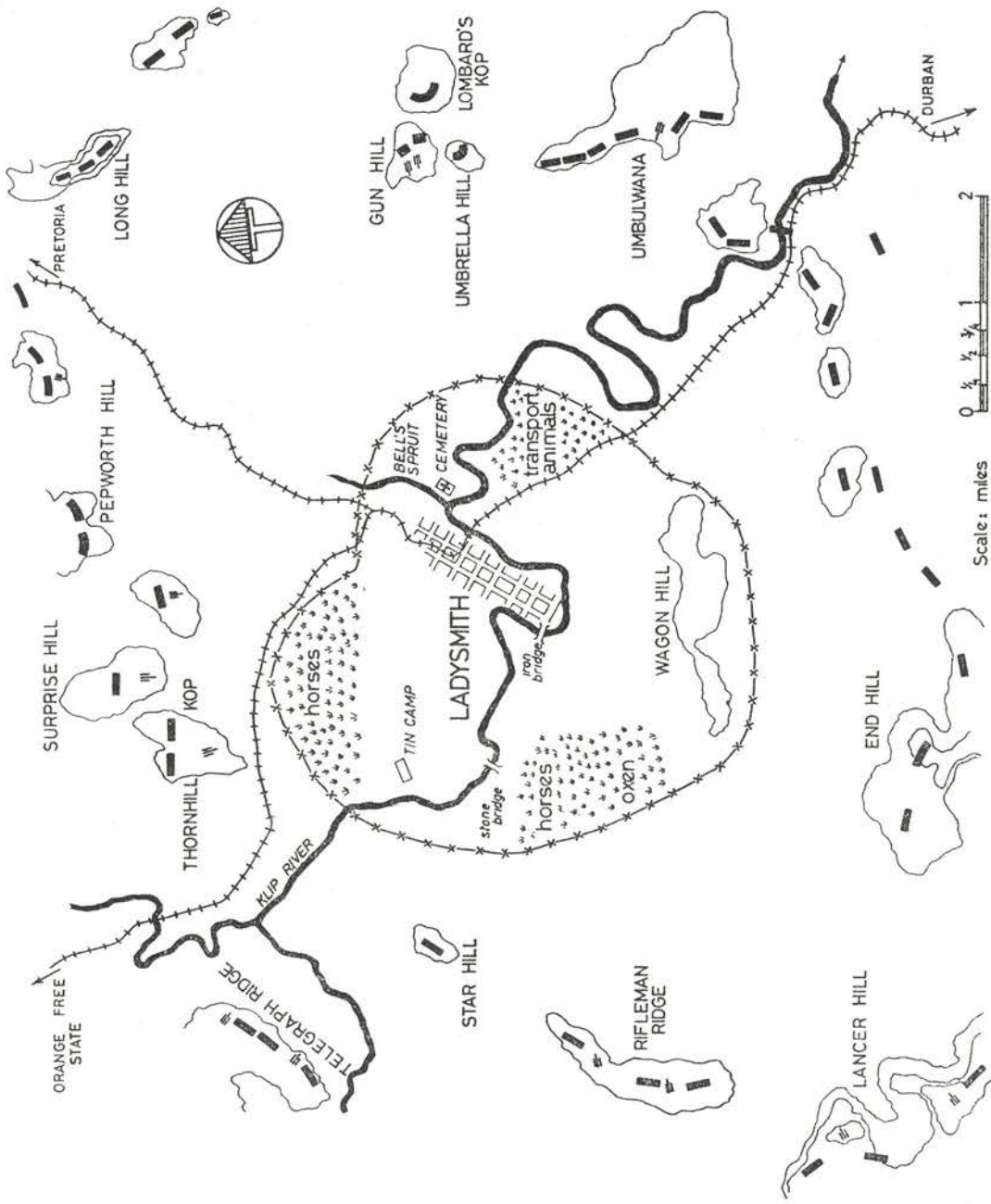
Within three weeks of arriving in Natal, disillusion had completely dissipated the glorious sentiments he had at first expressed. An exceptionally meticulous and observant recorder, Theiler now saw the moral and physical deterioration of the burghers through years of ruination by Rinderpest, drought, locusts and pestilences which had abased the economy and broken their fighting spirit. The war had come as a Godsend to the impoverished denizens of the many 'Burghersdorps'. They had flocked to enlist and, palpably not fighting material, were the least

62 suitable 'to go on commando'. With the war not two months old, Theiler wrote of 'those who mutilate themselves to be able to go home' and who fled from conflict and otherwise showed no sign of patriotism. The white-bearded Joubert, confused and dilatory, provided no leadership and, while there were excellent candidates (such as Louis Botha), none could usurp him. The professional army represented by the Staatsartillerie (of which J. F. Wolmarans was a brave and brilliant commander) and the Mounted Police had no solid support from the shifty system of commando service with its total lack of discipline and enforcement of orders.

Theiler was confounded by the random martial expression of his 'new homeland' and yearned 63 to get back to his laboratory. Emma wrote that Kruger had told his Mint Master, Jules Perrin that England was in a position to wage war for two years. At that moment, the British Army received an order consonant with the ineptness of its command which prolonged it even further and set Theiler on his true path.

Enormous numbers of horses and mules were being imported to South Africa by the Army from England, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Hungary and other European countries (and later Canada, Australia, the Argentine etc.). Apart from those which immediately introduced Strangles, Mange, Equine Influenza and Glanders, they were given little opportunity to acclimatise themselves and were rushed to the various fronts. There they joined manger-fed cavalry horses (many with docked tails and martyred by flies) which in speed and endurance were expected to excel the tough Boer ponies bred and trained to fend for themselves.

In the interests of economy, the Army ordered a reduction in feeding rations which was to be compensated by grazing. The effect on horses was disastrous. 'English horses used to manger-feeding', wrote their careful chronicler F. Smith, then an Army Veterinary Major with the 13th Hussars at Colenso; 'were as helpless on the veldt as the townbred soldier. They did not know what was expected of them. When they had purchased a little experience, the grazing had been eaten up by mules and herds of oxen.' With Colonel Matthews incommunicado in Ladysmith with troubles of his own, the Acting Principal Veterinary Officer formally protested on the 15th



SIEGE OF LADYSMITH 1899/1900

Boer Forces

Perimeter of British Defences

December 1899 that the reduced rations of grain and hay represented a starvation diet. He was independently supported by a commanding officer in the field, Lord Methuen who had seen the result and demanded that the Commander-in-Chief be told that with such feeding, horses could not give efficient service. No heed was paid to either and the result was calamitous to both campaign and country.

65 Idle and frustrated, Theiler sat with his Swiss below the far brow of Bulwana Hill overlooking the town of Colenso in the intermittent din of Long Tom's firing and the bursting of shells from the British naval guns. They had the range but the horses grazing behind the hill no longer even raised their heads when a shell exploded among them. At night the British searchlight at Chieveley behind Colenso about 20 kilometres distant, was so strong that 'when it throws its light upon us, we can very well read a newspaper and its light so to speak puts our's out'. Before them from the front lay Ladysmith where, they knew, typhoid and dysentery were rife and food and fodder rapidly running out.

66 Unbeknown to Theiler, there laboured heroically among the suffering besieged Surgeon-Major David Bruce (who later was himself incapacitated by typhoid) in charge of increasingly large hospitals where his lady worked alongside, serving as theatre sister when he and others operated on the wounded (she was later awarded the Royal Red Cross and Service Medals); 67 the British P.V.O. Colonel Matthews with Captains Raymond and Newson and four Army veterinarians; Major H. Watkins-Pitchford and Lieutenants W. M. Power, J. R. Byrne, C. H. Cordy and S. T. Amos of his veterinary staff; and, in the Imperial Light Horse raised in Johannesburg (its men had stormed Lombards Kop) Theiler's colleagues E. A. Hollingham M.R.C.V.S. and W. Pye. There were also his shipboard acquaintances among the 18 immured war correspondents including Melton Prior. In the supposed relieving force unsuccessfully driving toward Ladysmith was his Marico colleague C. F. Verney. Securely entrenched at Colenso (where 68 Theiler rode to watch the operations), the Boers beat off attacks and elsewhere had spectacular success, resulting in thousands of prisoners being delivered to an overburdened Pretoria.

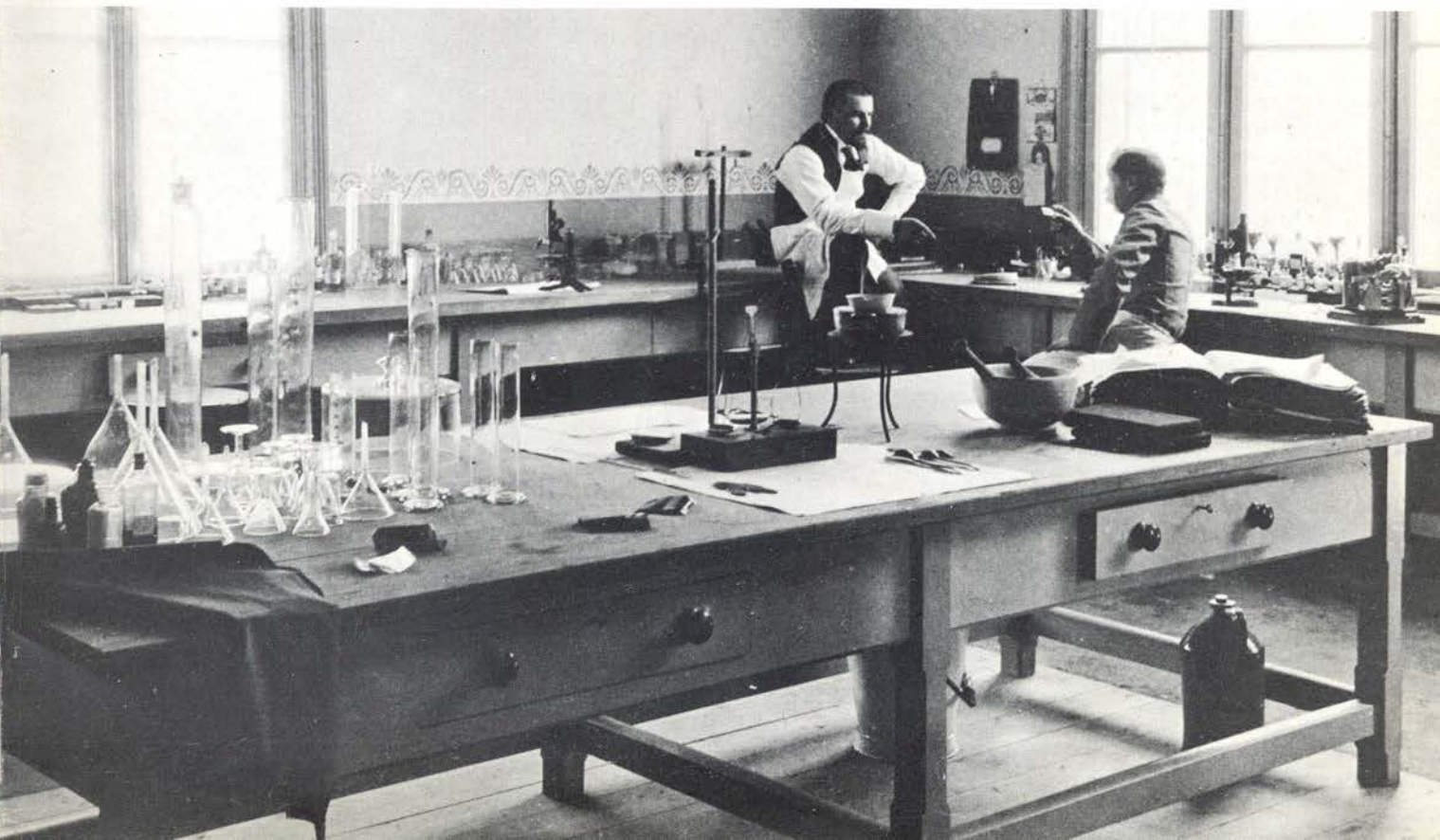
69 Theiler tried to be busy by riding from time to time to the various positions to inspect horses without any need of his care. It was not yet the season for the Sickness though he had noted cases among captured English horses. He had hoped for interesting war wounds on which he could practise surgery; but cases were few and most were despatched with a coup de grace. Glanders, being a stable disease, was hardly present; but there were infestations of 'Brandziekte' (a form of eczema) and - massively - of ticks. Horses suffered occasionally from heat-stroke (the burghers poured cold water over them), saddle sores, laryngitis and because of the appalling plague of flies, conjunctivitis or inflamed eyes. A few had shot wounds and Theiler began a study of the effect of soft-nosed bullets. Apart from the interest of his intense observation now increasingly condemnatory, he and his staff were plainly bored and extremely uncomfortable in their exposed bivouac on top of the hill.

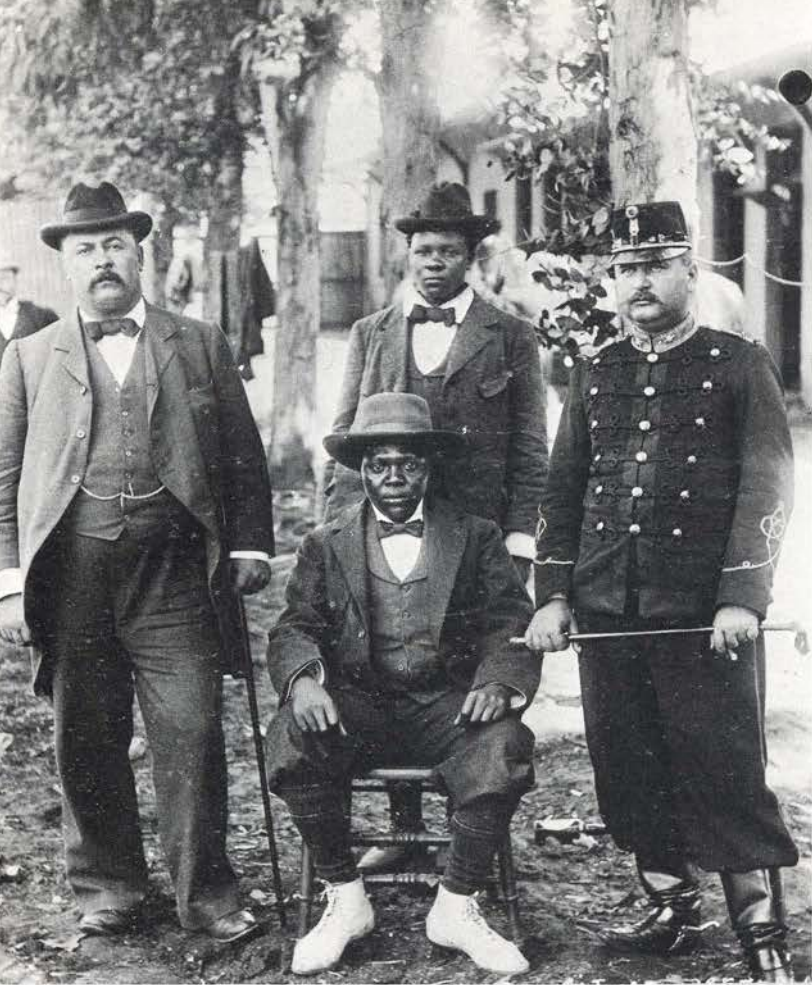
70 With Christmas, the opera bouffe complexion of the whole scene was emphasised. The Swiss celebrated with 'Christmas dinner', what passed for a 'tree' and the antics of the joker Deschler, the party being attended by Major Wolmarans and Lieutenant Wiehmann, all duly photographed for their families at home. The Boers (or their foreign friends) fired into Ladysmith 71 shell-casings inscribed 'With the Compliments of the Season' containing plum puddings which were received with mystification and amusement. By then, all the cattle had been eaten and horses were being slaughtered. Conditions in the town were appalling but, convinced though they were that 'Tommy Atkins would come as a prisoner to Pretoria', the Boers had no reason to expect its fall. Atkins had shown extraordinary bravery and stubbornness in storming Platrand and other aggressive sorties. There was always evidence that his spirits were high. Theiler 72 himself told how, with both sides extensively using the heliograph, exchanges were sometimes



Daspoort Disinfection Station, built of wood and corrugated-iron and standing on boggy ground, which became in July 1898 the Z.A.R. Government Bacteriological Laboratory directed by Arnold Theiler.

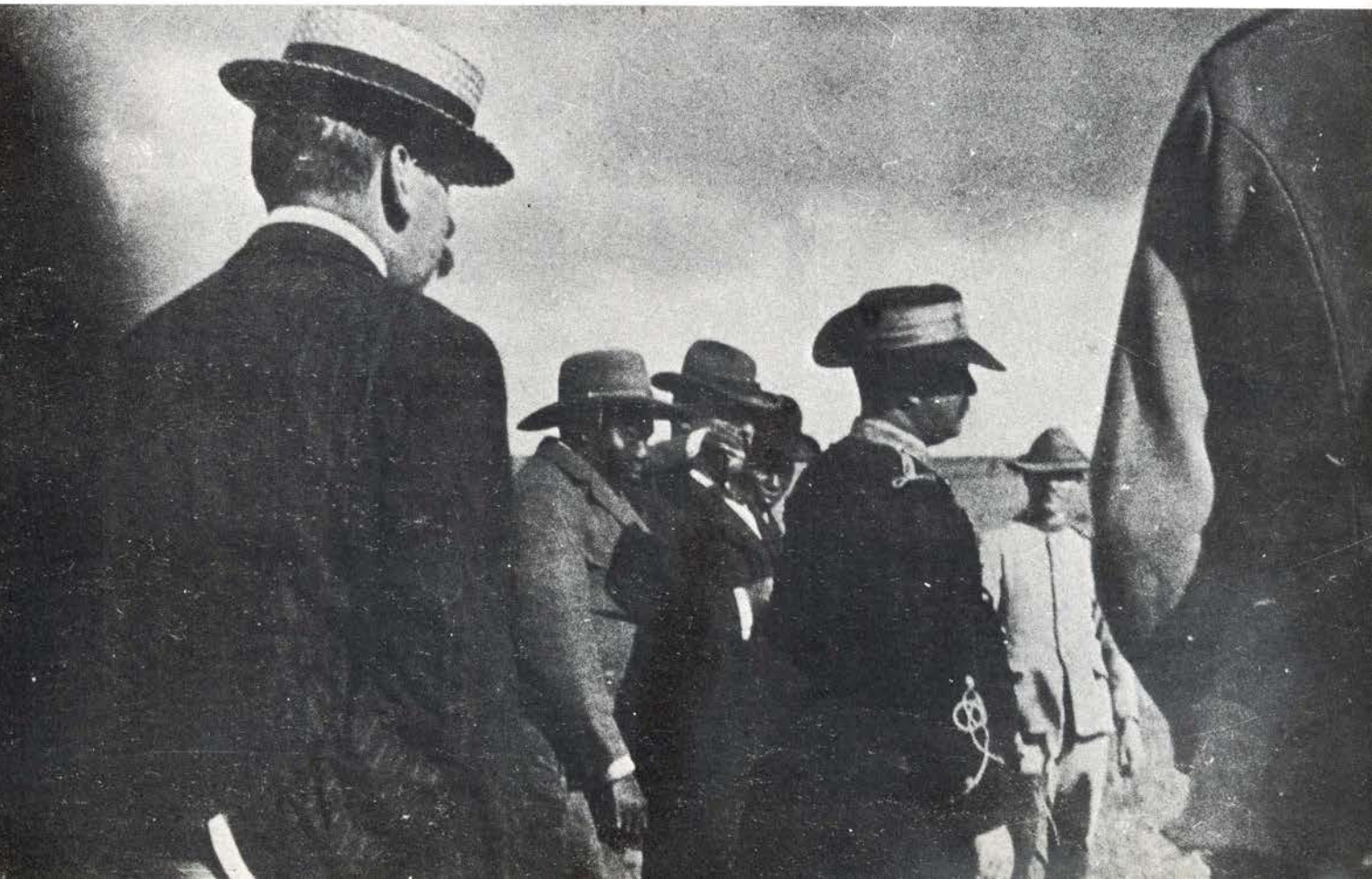
Government Veterinarian Theiler (wearing his famous white apron) in the Daspoort Laboratory with Charles Favre in 1899.





Swazi King Ngwane V (Bunu) with his bear-leader Commandant Matthys Grobler, his brother Lomwazi and an officer (Erasmus) of the Staatsartillerie in Pretoria early in 1899. Apart from this official picture, Bunu refused to be photographed.

Theiler's secret snapshot of Bunu with his arm familiarly on Commandant Grobler's shoulder at the Staatsartillerie's show of force.



made. When Ladysmith heliographed Colenso for help, the Boers intercepted the signal and replied 'We are coming tomorrow' to which Colenso flashed back 'Be damned!'.

73 Theiler and his Swiss did guard-duty for the big gun and were exposed to shell fire. Their nights were often sleepless and their days without water for washing. It struck him that 'this kind of life suits a great number of the Boers – the class of *bijwoner* or poor farmers who hardly have enough to live on. They find everything supplied, – meat, clothing, etc. I am sorry for these people because after the war, they will again have to do uncongenial work and I am convinced that they will bring the Government down . . .' In fact they achieved it before the war ended.

74 On the 10th January 1900, Lord Roberts landed in Cape Town as Commander-in-Chief replacing the stymied Buller. He ordered numerous radical changes which took time to have effect. An immediate priority was the reorganisation of Army Transport and its servicing by tens of thousands of oxen, then particularly prone to Lung Sickness. Southern Africa could not be conquered by a series of dashes. It must be solidly and reliably plodded through with no risk of a break in supplies. Major Frederick Smith was withdrawn from Colenso to see to it with the assistance of Hutcheon and his staff at the Cape. Before Roberts could change the order of battle, the pace of the horse was finally defeated. It was, as Theiler had frequently noted, the pace of Boer warfare. In conflicts with natives, the Boers rode up on their ponies, fired their roers and withdrew to reload. In later wars, they tethered their horses behind a hill, hid among rocks, ambushed and fired upon orderly forces and, depending upon the result, either regained their mounts and escaped or came down for the capture. The sieges of Kimberley, Mafeking and Ladysmith were quite foreign to their manner and subdued their dash and spirit. Elsewhere the old commando tactics were devastating to the English. They made it possible for 'each man to be his own general' and to obey the orders of a commandant because he agreed with him.

* * *

75 Early in January 1900, Theiler accompanied by Kollmann and Otto Meyer returned to Pretoria on two weeks' leave to attend to his local obligations. In two long letters to his parents (subsequently published in the *Schweizer Freie Press* under the title of 'Boer Camp near Ladysmith'), he expressed his deep disillusion with the capacity of his confrères to wage war and the integrity of their intentions. At that time, they were conceited with success. To have humbled mighty England whom no European nation would dare challenge, went to their heads. Such braggadocio also went to Emma's head – 'Who repairs the railway lines for them and who organises the colossal railway traffic to the various war areas? The Hollander. Who organises the postal service to the camps? the telegraph service (which connected all the camps to Pretoria)? The Hollander likewise. Who casts their gun-shells and repairs their big guns for them? "A few Frenchmen". Who makes the munitions for their Mausers? "A few Germans" . . .'; but nothing either she or Arnold could write abroad would change the sentimental glorification of 'the Boers' which possessed all Europe.

76 Theiler 'arranged things' in his laboratory and contemplated taking some of it into the field. He had found the ennui intolerable on top of Bulwana and proposed making researches on active service. All was well at home but the Auditor-General constantly harassed him to account for the £200 he claimed for expenses, ignoring the impounded receipts. His father must write to Jean Dietschi in Cape Town to enquire about his cases and at least ensure that they were dry and safe. Emma was saving all she could and economising on the now costly foodstuffs. 'It would not be surprising', she wrote, 'if through cares and anxiety, I soon went grey!' The Government itself was breaking into locked and barricaded chemists, outfitters, drapers and boot shops to 'commandeer' their contents.

An English offensive had already started in Natal when Theiler left Pretoria on the 22nd January 1900. He had been re-posted to another hilltop near Colenso where Wolmarans and his battery had taken station and the veterinary wagon had already been brought by his assistants. The battle of Spionkop was nearing its appalling end with Favre in the final assault and capture of English prisoners. Louis Botha's strategies had triumphed. Riding a few days later with Wolmarans round the senseless British positions, Theiler commented – 'It was sad to see the dead English soldiers, still unburied, lying around in an advanced stage of decomposition.' To Emma he wrote that it was a gruesome sight that he would never forget. Scorching heat by day, bitter cold by night and the withering fire of the burghers in their favourite fight among rocks, had massacred the bravest. At the end of it all, Botha, Wolmarans and a secretary making their report in Wolmarans' tent, were found with their heads on the table in exhausted sleep. Dr F. V. Engelenburg, editor of *De Volksstem* recorded it and, himself a witness of the Natal battlefield at the end of 1899, displayed photographs of the English dead at Spionkop in the windows of his office in Pretoria. They brought no solace to Emma.

She knew that Arnold was in the thick of heavy fighting as the British drove toward relieving Ladysmith (while other forces pushed on toward Kimberley). He and his men were now plagued by the myriad flies which they had escaped on Bulwana Hill. It was the season for Horse Sickness and, Emma reflected bitterly, the Boers would mock him again for having no panacea. His disenchantment would deepen and he would lose the will to work. His aims and ambitions were now in her hands – his orders for lymph and cultures from abroad were arriving as well as letters from his new renowned friends, Kitt of München and Nocard of Alfort. It was gratifying for her to know that 'such people interest themselves in Arnold'. To her manifold duties (Schroeder was now back at the laboratory and frequently requiring her advice), she added the copying of two immensely long letters written on the 11th and 16th February by Arnold describing the Battle of the Tugela and 'the explosion of the war situation' of which he had already warned her. They were duly published in Switzerland.

In the fury of Buller's artillery assault, he was frequently under fire. Wolmarans now took his orders from the State Attorney J. C. Smuts who had temporarily forsaken his Pretoria office. Always in attendance, Theiler had ridden with Wolmarans to call on Smuts and Schalk Burger and later on Louis Botha where he received an order to see the Commandant-General Joubert at the main camp near Ladysmith. With Otto Meyer, he rode all day to reach Joubert who ordered him to inspect all the English horses captured by the burghers, kept apart in a camp two hours distant. There were so many that an English trick to infect the Boer horses with Glanders was suspected. (English horse and ox transport was in fact afflicted with Glanders and Lung-Sickness by the burghers abandoning infected animals – an accepted device of war.) Making his examination next day, Theiler found none and rode back, dead-tired. He was now 6 hours daily in the saddle, often without food or sleep, in hideous heat and plagued by 'the millions of flies almost as troublesome as the English'.

The British attack intensified and General Botha, commanding in the area, made his headquarters in Wolmarans' tent. 'He sat coolly there', Theiler wrote, 'every inch a soldier, and precisely gave his orders, made his dispositions and encouraged his men to coöperate energetically as soon as the first shot fell. We received orders to saddle up. There was no thought of sleeping. Everybody felt the seriousness of the situation.' The carnage among the attacking English, seeking to command the Tugela crossing, had been horrifying, reminding Theiler again of the casualties of Spionkop which he had described in the moving detail also recorded by J. C. Smuts – 'The rocks were blue from the impact of bullets, the ground red from floods of blood. The bodies looked terrible – almost all were shot in the head and the facial features were frightfully disfigured. One had the impression that they had died a horrible death.', Theiler wrote.

94 'This view of horrors will remain with me forever. I know now what war means.' Encamped on a farm serving as an ambulance station, he now saw the horror of the British wounded.

95a In Ladysmith, there was carnage of another sort. The inhabitants, civil and military, died in great number from malnutrition, typhoid, dysentery and shrapnel. The survivors depended on the butchering of horses. It fell to Watkins-Pitchford, a tottering victim of dysentery, to supervise their selection and death. Soldiers cut steaks from the quivering corpses of cavalry horses shot in battle on the periphery of the town; but within it, only staggering wrecks remained. Like Theiler, Pitchford wrote a daily chronicle to his wife but, unlike his friend whose letters were eagerly published in Switzerland, Pitchford's 'Besieged in Ladysmith' was not published until 1964 in South Africa.

95b As the British offensive developed on the Tugela heights early in February, the cavalry awaiting consolidation and establishment of supplies, remained inactive except for patrols at Modder River in the Northern Cape. The underfed horses grazed on ravaged ground and developed sand colic and laminitis. Large numbers of others became unfit for service, mostly from defective saddles, through 'sore backs which became a veritable epizootic'. Nonetheless while 96 Theiler performed his duties (as 'Horse Doctor and State Veterinary Surgeon - fortunately 97 diseases and wounds occur seldom among the horses') on all parts of the chaotic Natal front, the British swept north and relieved Kimberley on the 15th February. On the 18th, they surrounded Cronje and his forces at Paardeberg and forced his surrender. The cavalry by then was approaching exhaustion; but, while Buller made his last drive on Ladysmith, Roberts was determined to traverse the comparatively short distance to Bloemfontein and capture the Free State capital.

The 27th February was the anniversary of Amajuba - the day on which the Boers had destroyed the British forces apparently impregably encamped on top of a mountain in 1881, thereby winning the First War of Independence in conditions humiliating to the British Army. The thought of vengeance was in many minds but most among the burghers in Natal. At dusk on the 28th, Lord Dundonald and his cavalry rode into Ladysmith and relieved the siege. The first to grasp Pitchford's hand was his colleague Verney. Their mutual colleague Theiler was lost in the rout in the hills. Fatally, Joubert had allowed the initiative to slip from his trembling fingers.

98 Disaster loomed on every front. The old President, barely returned from an arduous rallying mission to the Natal front and accompanied by Piet Grobler, Frikkie Eloff and his physician Dr Heymans, courageously hurried to Bloemfontein to confer with his ally, President Steyn. On the 5th March, they cabled the British prime minister, Lord Salisbury, proposing peace. They hoped that General Christiaan de Wet would oppose Roberts' advance at the Modder River and that Louis Botha, newly-appointed Acting Commandant-General, would hold the British forces from his new base in the Biggarsberg in Natal. Together the two men tried to hearten their dispirited forces at a new line intended to block the British progress to Bloemfontein.

99 During all this time, Emma had had no word from Arnold - previously in close and quick communication through the Staatsartillerie despatch lines and telegraph service. She knew that Kimberley was relieved, that a great offensive was taking place in Natal though the papers published no news, and that everywhere the British seemed to be prevailing. The tension grew too much. Arnold's last letter was dated the 16th February. It was now the 5th March. She instructed Schroeder to telegraph from the Laboratory to the Staatsartillerie camp in Natal, asking that he be recalled. There was no reply. On the 6th, she asked the Artillery Headquarters to telegraph to the same effect. No answer came. On the 7th, she herself telegraphed into the void. That night, Theiler and Favre walked into the house.