

## *Chapter I*

### *The conventional war*

#### *A brief survey of the first phase of the Anglo-Boer War : from 11 October 1899 to 27 February 1900*

##### *1. The imbalances*

This study deals primarily with the circumstances and the psychological influences on the Boers — officers and burghers — during the guerrilla phase of the Anglo Boer War. It would, however, be a mistake to approach this later phase of the war in isolation, as the scene for this type of warfare was set during the early months, when conventional positional warfare was waged. In this chapter the situation during the opening months will be examined. But before taking a closer look at what took place during the first phase of the war, one should perhaps pause to reflect on the vast dissimilarities between in the opposing sides.

Firstly, the military organization implemented by the British and that used by the Boers were markedly different. Traditionally the two Boer republics relied on the commando system when military action was required. In terms of the legislation of the republican governments,<sup>1</sup> the fighting force was made up of the citizens (burghers) of the country who were between 16 and 60 years old. It was called a citizen force (*burgermag*) and although it bears some resemblance to a militia force (which is normally used to supplement a regular army), in the case of the Boers very little military drill or training was provided. F. Pretorius points out, with reference to Jock Haswell's study on "citizen armies", that it was very much a people's army.<sup>2</sup> The Boers' method of operation was largely informal and initially most officers (excluding generals) were democratically elected.<sup>3</sup> During military action operational decisions were taken jointly by the officer-corps (*krygsraad*).<sup>4</sup> Each burgher was expected to supply his own rifle and thirty rounds of ammunition; in the Free State farm dwellers also had to have a horse, a saddle and bridle. In practice however the republican governments often supplied these necessities. Although many

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<sup>1</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902*, I, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> F. Pretorius, *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 37-39.

<sup>4</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 44-45.

burghers were farmers with little education, there were men from the cities and towns who were, for example, civil servants, doctors, clergymen, teachers, shop assistants, black-smiths, transport drivers, students and school boys.

When the Anglo-Boer War broke out on 11 October 1899, the military strength of the non-professional commandos was augmented by state artillery units – who were paid soldiers – from both republics. In addition there were police force units, primarily from the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek, with a small contingent (150 men) from the Free State, as well as numerous foreign volunteers.<sup>5</sup>

The British, on the other hand, used the usual infantry divisions as their major fighting force. These were supported by artillery batteries and cavalry, according to the Prussian model popular at the time.<sup>6</sup> The army was clearly demarcated into officers and those who belonged to the other ranks, namely the non-commissioned officers and privates. According to W. Baring Pemberton many officers viewed the army as a “congenial club for gentlemen” and showed little interest in the study of military matters.<sup>7</sup> Jay Luvaas quoted the British military historian, General Patric MacDougal, claiming as late as 1884 the British army had yet to produce a body of professional officers. He questioned the tactical instruction given to officers as being too focussed on offensive tactics at a time when, with the improved weapons, more could be gained by defence.<sup>8</sup> The British officer corps was clearly not as efficient as their German and French counterparts.

The other ranks in the British army were described by Pemberton as a “cross-section of the labouring population ... in general poorly educated ... a crowd of men in uniform; not an instrument of war.”<sup>9</sup> Roland Schikkerling, a young burgher, described his first glimpse of a British soldier with some degree of disillusion. He claimed that they were small and that some had “naked bully beef slapped in their pockets, so that the grease oozed through.”<sup>10</sup> They were clearly men who had signed up and were paid for their military duties. They were well drilled and were extremely well disciplined, but they lacked operational field training and musketry skills.

<sup>5</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 52-68.

<sup>6</sup> C.J. Nöthling, A short overview of the Anglo-Boer Wars and the Jameson raid in *South African Military Yearbook*, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> W.B. Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer war*, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> J. Luvaas, *The education of an army*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>9</sup> W.B. Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer war*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> R.W. Schikkerling, *Commando courageous (a Boer's, diary)*, p. 10.

Secondly the difference in the size of the opposing forces needs some consideration. The exact numbers of republicans liable for call-up will probably never be known as sources differ considerably on this. Pretorius alluded to these differences and concluded that the most acceptable number of burghers who were subject to commando service was J.H. Breytenbach's estimate of 54 667 men, 32 353 from the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) and 22 314 from the Free State.<sup>11</sup> Approximately 60% of these men were commandeered for military duty when war threatened in late 1899. Yet, according to statistics supplied by Breytenbach, many of these burghers did not answer the call. Of the Middelburg and Pretoria Commandos only 36.9% and 39.8% respectively reported for duty.<sup>12</sup> J.W. Meijer endorsed this tendency, noting the reluctance of members of the Johannesburg Commando to honour their call up orders.<sup>13</sup> The military attachés from the Netherlands reported that not even the commandant-general knew the exact number of burghers at his disposal. Then too, the number of ordinary burghers was augmented by the presence of foreign volunteers, Witwatersrand volunteers and the State Artillery Corps.<sup>14</sup> Ryane Kruger agreed that mobilization orders brought about 35 000 burghers into the field.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately for the republics, this figure was to shrink dramatically as the war progressed.

Britain, on the other hand, was in a much stronger position. Although in October 1899 she only had 21 000 men in or on their way to South Africa, reinforced with an estimated 6 000 local colonial troops,<sup>16</sup> she had massive reserves to call upon. Even so, the borders of the two republics were too extensive to be held by the available men. On the eve of the war the British regular army was made up of nearly 228 000 officers, NCO's and men.<sup>17</sup> The additional reserves from the other colonies, namely Australia, New Zealand, Canada and India, are not included in these statistics. The British numbers increased sharply when it became clear that the Boers were not going to be easily defeated, and by early 1900 Lord Frederick Roberts had 180 000 men under his command.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> F. Pretorius, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899 - 1902*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 153, 161.

<sup>13</sup> J.W. Meijer, "Ben Viljoen se rol as kommandant van die Johannesburg-kommando, 1899-1900", in F. Pretorius (ed.), *'n Oorlog om by stil te staan - Die Anglo Boereoorlog 1899 - 1902*, pp. 243-245.

<sup>14</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 160-161.

<sup>15</sup> R. Kruger, *Good-bye, Dolly Gray*, p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> A. Wessels, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902 - 'n oorsig van die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 3; L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> R. Kruger, *Good-bye, Dolly Gray*, p. 201.

Thirdly the expertise of the men making up the two opposing forces differed notably. The burghers of the Boer force were not drilled to obey orders and were untrained in military matters. Their only training was in target-shooting practice and occasional military gatherings (*wapenskouings*).<sup>19</sup> However, their natural knowledge of the terrain, their ability to shoot accurately with the new Mauser rifles and their considerable horse riding skill compensated in some measure for other failings. Nevertheless, the lack of military drill meant that discipline would always be a stumbling block for the Boer forces, especially during the early part of the war. Pemberton, who called the 35 000 burghers who started the war “35 000 generals”, claimed that at a later stage their frontiersman mentality, self-reliance and self-sufficiency naturally led to individuality and this in turn led to a lack of discipline.<sup>20</sup>

Offsetting this Boer image is that of the typical British soldier. His military training, although it included drill work, parades and inspections, did not entirely prepare him for a war in the rough, harsh South African veld. Nor did it equip him to fight against an unconventional enemy such as the Boers. He came from a cool, wet European climate to the hot, dry African summer. He was not trained to shoot accurately with his Lee-Metford rifle, but to fire in volleys. The most important requirement as far as the British were concerned was to fire simultaneously, whether standing or kneeling, in the direction of the enemy. During group practice sessions a mere 200 rounds of ammunition per man per year were allowed. He was not trained to make use of the terrain and the shelter it offered, but to advance in marching order. To take cover was considered degrading for a gallant British soldier.<sup>21</sup> At the time the use of horses other than by officers or the cavalry was practically unknown to the British.

An appraisal of the supply of weapons available to the two adversaries highlights the fourth basic difference between them. Britain was largely self-reliant as far as weapons and ammunition were concerned, manufacturing .303 inch caliber Lee-Metford (and after 1895, Lee-Enfield) rifles for their infantry,<sup>22</sup> and Armstrong and Howitzer guns for their artillery. The two Boer republics, in contrast, had to import all their weapon and ammunition requirements, primarily from Europe. These included the modern German Mauser 7 mm. bolt action rifles, that had been issued to many burghers, and the French Creusot and German Krupp guns, as well as all the ammunition they needed.

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<sup>19</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, p. 48; F. Pretorius, *Kommandolewe*, p. 207.

<sup>20</sup> W.B. Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer War*, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> W.B. Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer War*, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 7-8.

Fifthly, the British were also supported in the field by the newly formed Royal Army Medical Corps which could deal with battle casualties and other health problems. This corps was part of the military command structure, with a trained doctor and two medical orderlies for each brigade. There were sufficient medical equipment and a good supply of medicines to accompany British troops in the field.<sup>23</sup> The republicans were not so fortunate. The burghers had to rely on the volunteer *Transvaalsche Roode Kruis*, which was later replaced by a government appointed medical commission, or on the Free State's ambulance corps under the direction of Dr. A.E.W. Ramsbottom. A number of civilian doctors and nurses offered their services, and several volunteer ambulance units came from Europe to augment the medical support for burghers on the war front.<sup>24</sup>

The British were technologically more advanced in matters of signalling and reconnaissance, as is shown by their early experiments with radio and their use of fixed balloons. Very important too was the fact that the British enjoyed the full use of four colonial harbours – Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban – each connected by rail to the interior (see Map I-1 below). Historian Leopold Scholtz makes the point that the development of rail transport since the mid 1800s had a positive as well as negative impact on military operations. While it enhanced the movement of troops and goods, making for faster transportation of larger quantities over difficult terrain, it also made armies much more dependent on the proximity of railways.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to this situation, the two republics were landlocked. All their requirements from overseas before the war had to be channelled through Portuguese controlled Delagoa Bay (Lourenço Marques) in neighbouring Mozambique. Although there was a rail link between Pretoria and Lourenço Marques by the time the war started, the value of the railway was curtailed when Britain enforced an old, unratified, treaty she had with Portugal. When the British under Major-General R. Pole-Carew occupied the border at Komatipoort on 24 September 1900, this link was finally broken.

The influence of these disparities, largely in favour of Britain, become more complex when one considers that each Boer, from the commandant general to the lowliest burgher, perceived that he was fighting to maintain republican independence and to protect both his country and personal property. The British, though technically they did not begin the war, were nonetheless seen in Boer

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<sup>23</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 18-19.

<sup>24</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 72-74.

<sup>25</sup> L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 36.

eyes as the aggressor, aiming to vanquish the *volk* and take control of their land. Scholtz makes this clear when he pronounces that Britain's strategy was to destroy the Boer republics and replace them with British colonies which could then be merged with the Cape, Natal and possibly Rhodesia.<sup>26</sup>

When the early progress of the war and the imbalances discussed above are considered, it becomes clear that it was a lopsided contest from the first. Despite the dissimilarities that made the gauge swing heavily in favour of the British, it was indeed the Boer republics who delivered their ultimatum on 9 October 1899. It is a well recorded fact that although the British were themselves planning to deliver an ultimatum by the end of October,<sup>27</sup> it suited them very well that the Boer republics had decided to take the initiative.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. The first battles

When hostilities commenced in October 1899, three major fronts could be identified. They were the eastern front along the Natal-Transvaal border, the southern front along the north-eastern Cape Colony and Free State borders and thirdly, the western front near the border between the north-western Cape Colony and the western Free State and western Transvaal. A fourth front, the so-called northern front between the northern Transvaal and the then Bechuanaland, is mentioned by various historians,<sup>29</sup> but it was comparatively insignificant. The disposition of the forces and the geographical location of the three fronts are illustrated below.

Table I-B.1. The disposition of the forces at the beginning of the hostilities in October 1899<sup>30</sup>

Front	Republicans	British
<b>Eastern</b> (Natal / Transvaal border)	17 500	15 811
<b>Western</b> (NW Cape / Transvaal & OFS western borders)	10 800	5 145
<b>Southern</b> (NE Cape / OFS southern border)	2 500	approximately 3 300

<sup>26</sup> L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, pp. 15-16.

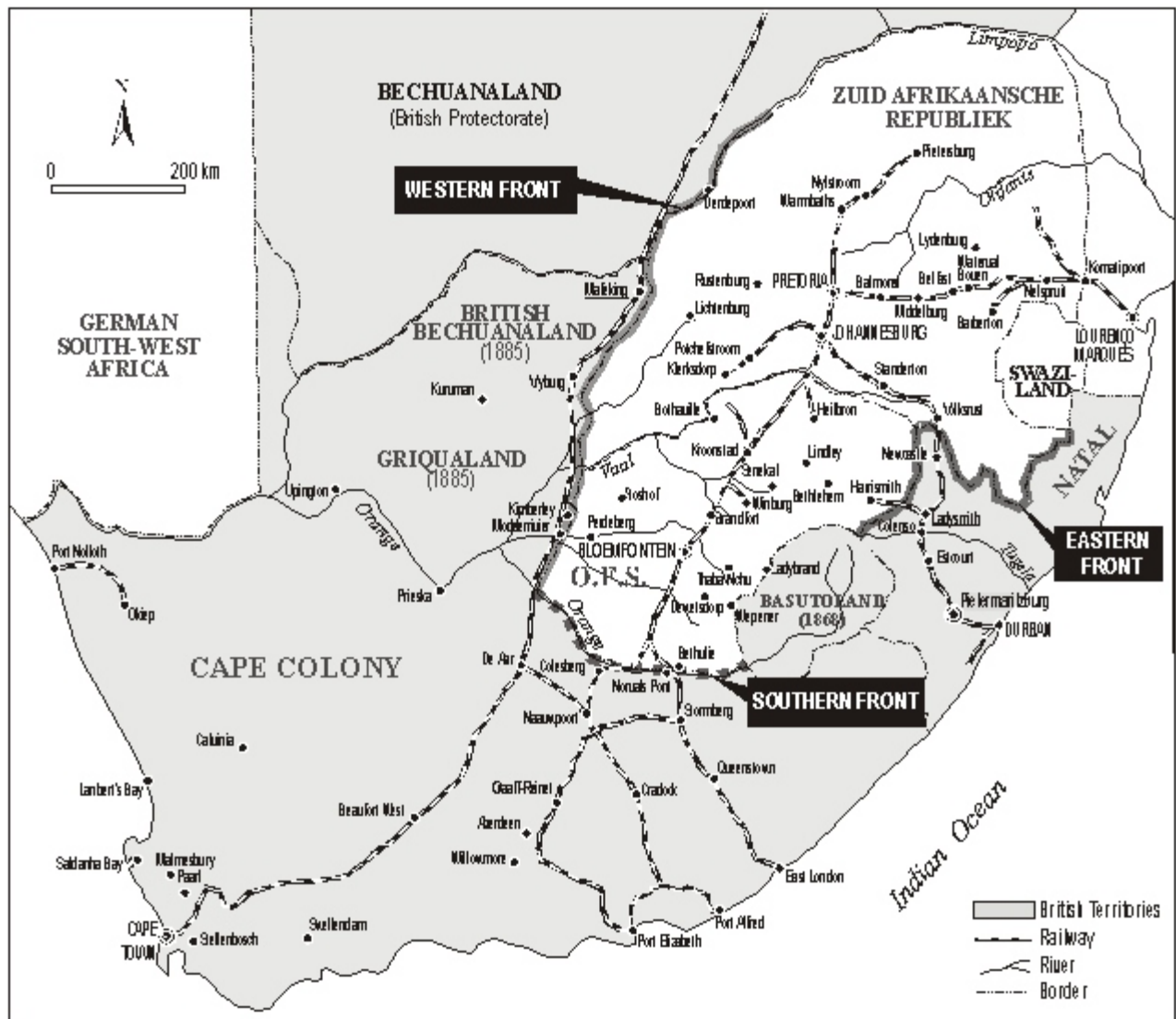
<sup>27</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 126-127; L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> R. Kruger, *Good-bye, Dolly Gray*, p. 55; T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 109; P.G. Cloete, *The Anglo-Boer War a chronology*, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> A. Wessels, *Die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 146-153.

<p><b>Other</b> (Northern Transvaal, Swaziland &amp; Basutoland borders)</p>	<p>approximately 4 500</p>	<p>500</p>
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Map I-1. Southern Africa in October 1899, illustrating the harbours and railway lines and the three contested fronts.

When the surprisingly cheeky ultimatum<sup>31</sup> expired at five o'clock on 11 October 1899 there was no immediate action. The reason for this may be found in the fact that the Boer supreme commander, Commandant General P.J. (Piet) Joubert, was himself opposed to any direct confrontation with Britain. Furthermore, the Boer leaders did not see this as a war of conquest and

<sup>31</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, pp. 103-104.



were thus reluctant to enter into enemy territory.<sup>32</sup> This might also have been the reasoning of General P.A. (Piet) Cronjé on the western front; he left it to his second-in-command and adviser General J.H. (Koos) de la Rey to initiate the first action of the war at Kraaipan, south of Mafeking, on 12 October 1899.

The debate about whether or not the leaders of the Boer republics had a clear plan to guide them once hostilities began, hostilities which they surely realised their ultimatum would unleash, is discussed in some detail by Scholtz. The lack of what General J.C. (Jan) Smuts called an “all encompassing plan” and the uncertainty that this gave rise to,<sup>33</sup> leads one to form the impression that the Boer leaders were hoping that the British would make the first aggressive move, which in the event, however, the British were loath to take.<sup>34</sup>

Instead, the British used the respite to their advantage. It gave them the opportunity to strengthen their forces and to make their final arrangements. In fact the designated commander of the British forces in South Africa, the somewhat reluctant General Sir Redvers Buller, only left Southampton docks aboard the *Dunottar Castle* on Saturday 14 October.<sup>35</sup> The war in South Africa had actually started without Britain’s chosen commander. It is hardly surprising that they welcomed any deferment of military action.

The most significant early battles of the war took place on the eastern front. Breytenbach and Scholtz both show that the republicans were not planning to occupy Natal; they hoped to crush the threatening British force on the Transvaal border. Only on 14 October 1899 did Joubert cross into Natal and on the following day he occupied Newcastle. With the war already nine days old the Boers made an attempt to enter Dundee and the first real battle took place at Talana Hill. This turned into a comedy of errors. According to the Boers’ battle plan, General Lucas Meyer would launch the attack from Talana Hill, supported by General D.J.E. Erasmus with 1 500 burghers.<sup>36</sup> However, due to heavy early morning mist, Erasmus did not move from his position as previously agreed. Deneys Reitz, who was a member of the Pretoria Commando under Erasmus, described how they were anticipating joining the fray, the sounds of which they could hear coming from below, while their general “merely stood glowering into the fog without reply”. Breytenbach

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<sup>32</sup> L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, pp. 29-32.

<sup>33</sup> L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, pp. 29-32.

<sup>34</sup> W.B. Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer War*, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 113.

<sup>36</sup> D. Reitz, *Commando*, p. 27.



confirms that Erasmus did not participate as planned.<sup>37</sup> During the action General William Penn-Symons, the commander of the Dundee force, rashly led a frontal counter attack against the Boers on Talana and was mortally wounded.<sup>38</sup> Despite this Meyer's burghers retreated, conceding defeat. The British supreme commander in Natal, General G.S. White admitted: "... it was hardly a satisfactory victory".<sup>39</sup> It was indeed a victory to the British only because the Boers had fled.

Then followed a few sparring actions. The very next day an over confident General J.H.M. Kock and about 1 000 men, including Commandant A. Schiel and 140 of his German Corps and roughly 130 Hollanders under V. de Witt Hamer, ran into trouble at Elandslaagte station.<sup>40</sup> A concerted attack by British units under Colonel Ian Hamilton, gave rise to serious problems for Kock and the hapless Hollanders and Germans, many of whom were killed and wounded and Adolf Schiel among those who were captured. When the Boers and their foreign compatriots fled in defeat, they ran into the waiting cavalry who applied cold steel, reputedly ignoring attempts to surrender.<sup>41</sup> On 24 October, General White with a sizeable force of over 5 100 troops and 18 field guns, clashed with 1 000 Free State burghers under General A.P. (Andries) Cronjé at Rietfontein. In spite of the impressive British force, the action ended undecided, because the Free Staters were too scattered in the hills for White's artillery fire to be effective.

On 30 October 1899, nineteen days after the ultimatum had expired, two battles took place in close proximity. At Modderspruit the Boer artillery was responsible for a resounding victory over the three pronged attack out of Ladysmith by White's troops. Due to the difficult terrain, lack of proper communication and unexpectedly tenacious opposition from the Boers, the British were unable to implement their battle plan. When White received reports that Ladysmith was under threat, he faltered. Before noon he ordered to his forces: "Retire as opportunity arises".<sup>42</sup> While the British were still in full retreat, Joubert refused to push home his victory.<sup>43</sup> Reitz, who was embroiled in the nearby battle for Nicholson's Nek, reported that he could hear Acting Commandant Christiaan de Wet, mutter "Los jou ruiters, los jou ruiters!" ("Let loose your horsemen – let loose your horsemen!").<sup>44</sup> Scholtz discusses this incident in some detail, quotes *The*

<sup>37</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, p. 219; D. Reitz, *Commando*, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 222-223.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> B. Pottinger, *The foreign volunteers*, pp. 95, 112, 114.

<sup>41</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 237-263.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, p. 333.

<sup>43</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, I, pp. 327-328; A. Wessels, *Die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> D. Reitz, *Commando*, pp. 42-43.

*Times history* and others and he concludes that Joubert, should undoubtedly have followed up on his earlier success. Had he done so, Ladysmith would have been taken and the road to Durban and the sea would have been open to the Boers. Instead, due to this one tactically wrong decision the long and unproductive siege of Ladysmith followed. Notwithstanding this blunder, the outcome of the day was grave enough for the British press to label it *Mournful Monday*.

Elsewhere the republican forces seemed even more shy of engaging in active warfare. After the skirmish at Kraaipan on 12 October, little action took place on the western front. Likewise on the southern front, the time passed without any dust being raised. The possibility of occupying strategic railway towns such as De Aar and Naauwpoort was not grasped when the opportunities arose, and the war drifted into an unproductive and boring affair. Only on 13 November did the commandos cross the Cape border and occupied Colesberg, Aliwal North as well as the railway junction of Stormberg. Still, no further penetration into the Cape Colony was attempted, presumably due to the “no conquest” policy of the republics.<sup>45</sup>

### **3. *The three sieges***

After the sluggish start to the war, the republican forces tied themselves down by besieging three towns. On the western front Mafeking and Kimberley and on the eastern front Ladysmith were placed under siege. This was a passive style of warfare, merely leading to the constraint of the already-limited Boer forces and evading assertive confrontation with their enemy.

On 14 October 1899 Mafeking was encircled. Much has been written about the futility of this action. Firstly, the original number of Boers involved – approximately 6 000, or about 20% of the Boer force – was disproportionately high, both in terms of the total republican military strength, and of the 1 000 troops of various backgrounds who were restricted in the besieged town. Moreover Mafeking was an unimportant, remote town, on the border of the Transvaal, with a desert to the west. It was the administrative centre of British Bechuanaland and it is possible that the ZAR saw Mafeking as a symbol of British rule. A question which has often been posed is why the strong Boer force did not simply occupy this small town. It is well known that General De la Rey disagreed with Cronjé’s views on the way the siege was carried out.<sup>46</sup> Cronjé’s withdrawal with 4 000 burghers to the Free State border in order to help check General Lord Methuen’s

<sup>45</sup> L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 60.

<sup>46</sup> L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 57.

march on Kimberley<sup>47</sup> appears to indicate that the ZAR government had at last become aware of the relative unimportance of Mafeking. Nonetheless, the siege continued for 216 days until 17 May 1900.<sup>48</sup>

It is perhaps easier to justify the significance of a besieging of Kimberley. This encirclement was initiated on 15 October 1899. The new diamond centre was situated on the border of the Free State, and well within striking distance of Bloemfontein, thus indeed posing a threat to the capital of the Free State. It was defended by 4 200 men under Lieutenant-Colonel R.G. Kekewich. Nevertheless 7 000 Boers were used to enforce the siege. An additional 7 000 republicans under Cronjé were deployed specifically to waylay Methuen in his effort to liberate Kimberley.<sup>49</sup> Thus 14 000 men, or 40% of the theoretical total republican force of 35 000, were tied down in defensive positions to uphold the siege of Kimberley.

Lastly, the siege of Ladysmith began on 2 November, when the war had been in progress for 22 days. This action should be appraised somewhat differently as the town was indeed an important military base for the British, the hub of their operations in Natal. At the beginning of the siege, which lasted a total of 119 days, there were 13 500 British soldiers encircled by about 16 500 Boers.<sup>50</sup> The siege was finally lifted on 28 February 1900.<sup>51</sup>

#### **4. Black Week**

While these three seemingly ineffectual manoeuvres were in progress, three important battles – two of them related to the sieges – took place. They were fought on three different fronts and were destined to have a marked influence on the conventional stage of the war. Despite the fact that in all three cases the Boers were the victors, they were unable to capitalise on their successes.

On 10 December 1899 General W. Gatacre and his 2 700 men on the southern front tried to clear Stormberg railway junction which had been occupied by the Boers. This attempt failed as General J.H. Olivier, with only 1 700 burghers, managed to hold their position until reinforcements arrived. When the British subsequently fled in disorder, the republicans neglected to press home

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<sup>47</sup> A. Wessels, *Die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 144.

<sup>49</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis II*, pp. 57, 113.

<sup>50</sup> S. Watt, *The siege of Ladysmith*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>51</sup> S. Watt, *The siege of Ladysmith*, p. 25; P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 112.

their advantage.<sup>52</sup>

In the dark hours before dawn of the next day, 11 December, when the war had been in progress for two months, General Andrew Wauchope and his Highland Brigade marched on Magersfontein-koppie, south of Kimberley. Their purpose was to sweep Cronjé's force – which was still engaged in preventing Methuen from relieving Kimberley – out of the way once and for all. The battle, which followed has been exhaustively analysed and reappraised by historians and military theorists. It began in the pearly grey hours of dawn after a stormy night. Wauchope's Highlanders marched directly into the entrenched Boers. Murderous fire poured into them from the hundreds of Mausers fired by an invisible enemy.<sup>53</sup>

Nonetheless, the republicans suffered a grievous blow when the Scandinavian volunteer corps, which had moved forward into an exposed position during the night, was severely trounced by the Scottish troops. The Scandinavians fought back bravely, but suffered heavy casualties losing one out of every three of their men.<sup>54</sup>

After facing the Boers' deadly fire during the long, scorching morning hours, the Highlanders fled in disorder after midday, when their officers' orders were misunderstood and it was thought that the Boers were advancing out of their trenches. But once again a Boer general would not allow his men to follow up on their advantage. According to Breytenbach, he was unwilling to endanger any more human lives.<sup>55</sup>

On 15 December the British suffered a third disaster, this time on the eastern front. The newly-arrived General Sir Redvers Buller attempted to remove the Boer force under General Louis Botha from the Colenso Hills. The day started badly for the British artillery as well as for General A.F. Hart and his Irish Brigade. After a narrow escape when a shell exploded almost on top of him, a perturbed Buller decided at 10.00 to call off the attack. Cloete quoted a German staff historian as saying: "The general and not his gallant force was defeated."<sup>56</sup> And yet another Boer commander, this time Louis Botha, refused to push home his victory. Wessels maintained that because of this it could only be labelled a tactical defeat for the British.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> A. Wessels, *Die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 21; P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 66.

<sup>53</sup> G.R. Duxbury, *The battle of Magersfontein*, p. 26.

<sup>54</sup> B. Pottinger, *The foreign volunteers*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>55</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis II*, p. 164.

<sup>56</sup> P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 72.

<sup>57</sup> A. Wessels, *Die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 19.

The general reluctance of the Boer commanders to take full advantage of initial success was a serious deficiency in the republican offensive against a large, highly professional and well equipped army such as that fielded by the British.

Thus ended the week of three defeats for the British, a week which the cynical British press soon dubbed *Black Week*. In three battles the British lost 460 men dead and a further 1 550 wounded. The fact that this took place so close to Christmas when it had been confidently predicted that the forces would be home to celebrate the festive season, made the adversities all the more acute. Indeed, the British secretary of war, the Marquis of Lansdowne, and the deputy prime minister, A.J. Balfour, wasted no time in trying to set matters right. On Sunday 17 December the ageing General Lord Frederick Roberts, whose son had been mortally wounded two days earlier at Colenso, was appointed the supreme commander of the South African forces.<sup>58</sup>

This appointment was to prove a turning point in the war. Unlike Buller, who was disinclined to take command and had shied away from responsibility, Roberts was more than ready for the assignment. He had already formed his own strong ideas about how the situation should be handled and despite his age he welcomed the opportunity. Thus, out of the ashes of Black Week, an old, but talented and experienced strategist appeared, one who was soon to turn the tables on the republicans.

The first two months of the war were over but still the three sieges continued. What is more, the sieges were to drag on, Kimberley being the first to be relieved on 15 February 1900. Although it is argued that from the Boers' point of view this was a negative form of conducting a war, Pretorius has pointed out that the sieges caused considerable losses on the British side. Perhaps then Joubert and Cronjé should not be too harshly judged and some credit should also be accorded to them. He does add, however, that the tying down of the Boer forces provided the British with the ideal opportunity to assume the offensive.<sup>59</sup>

### ***5. Roberts takes over***

Lord Roberts and his chief-of-staff, General Lord Horatio Kitchener, arrived in Cape Town on 10 January 1900 and immediately began developing a new campaign. Scholtz described in detail how the ultimate plan – to relieve Kimberley by outflanking Cronjé to his left and then to

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<sup>58</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, pp. 244-246.

<sup>59</sup> F. Pretorius, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, p. 15.

straightaway proceed to Bloemfontein – was devised. It is interesting to note that Scholtz stressed the role of Maj. G.F.R. Henderson as adviser to Roberts. Henderson was at the time a leading military scholar in Britain, yet many of his theories originated from the American Civil War and in particular the role played by General Stonewall Jackson. He placed great importance on an army's mobility as a counter to trench warfare.<sup>60</sup> The merits of this approach were soon to be realized by the British.

While the planning and the necessary build up of men and equipment was in progress on the western front, Buller was left largely to his own devices in Natal. It was only after three costly, and unsuccessful battles, that he eventually managed to relieve Ladysmith.<sup>61</sup>

It should be stressed at this stage, that during these battles the Boer forces, under the newly-appointed General Louis Botha, were becoming increasingly disheartened. The motivating presence of the Free State president, M.T. Steyn, on the eastern front on 22 January 1900 helped to boost Boer morale over the short term,<sup>62</sup> but the negative spirit soon prevailed again. Schikkerling, who claimed that the Boer's national spirit was normally weak and that it was only during the hour of adversity that the sterner stuff showed itself, commented on the continual cry for leave by the burghers, which became so serious that many took *French leave*, and simply went home.<sup>63</sup> Despite this low morale of the Boers, the final encounter at Pieters Hill on 27 February cost Buller another 87 men killed and 427 wounded. Still, the next day the siege of Ladysmith was lifted and Botha's burghers were streaming northwards. Buller, like his Boer counterparts, failed to follow up on the fleeing Boers. In fact he stayed on in Ladysmith for two full months.

While Buller was struggling along in Natal, Roberts' new campaign was taking shape on the western front. He skilfully misled Cronjé and his senior officers as to his real objective by making a bogus move to Koedoesberg,<sup>64</sup> Thereby he took the republican leadership completely unawares. General John French and his cavalry were employed as a flying column to achieve the wanted mobility and after a few fient moves, he outflanked Cronjé to his left and entered Kimberley on 15 February 1900 – bringing relief after 123 days of siege. Roberts then showed his mettle by not allowing the unexpected capture that same day of his supplies at Watervalsdrift by General Christiaan De Wet — by then recalled from the eastern front and appointed combat general by

<sup>60</sup> L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>61</sup> A. Wessels, *Die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 85.

<sup>63</sup> R.W. Schikkerling, *Commando courageous*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>64</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis IV*, pp. 141, 201.

President M.T. Steyn — to deter him from his objective. The aftermath was that his troops had to march from Kimberley to Bloemfontein, a route which had no railroad support, on limited rations. Despite this setback Roberts continued his advance.

At this stage most of the remaining Boers under Cronjé, having lived through two months of stressful inactivity at Magersfontein and Langberg, fled in an easterly direction in the hope of reaching Bloemfontein. The British, naturally expected this withdrawal and at Paardeberg (Vendusiedrif) the fleeing Boers were cut off and forced to hole up in the banks of the Modder River. Then followed a protracted battle lasting 10 days, which was marked by a number of dramatic events.

On 18 February, the day that Lord Kitchener was placed in command of the British assault, an ill advised frontal attack on Cronjé's well embedded force resulted in the highest British casualties for one single day namely 303 killed and 906 wounded. However after days of constant shelling by the British, which killed off most of the Boers' animals and destroyed their wagons, heavy late summer rains started on the afternoon of 23 February. The rainy weather persisted. Wet and muddy conditions and the unfordable Modder River made life agonizing for Cronjé's men.<sup>65</sup> Hence, when the daring Danie Theron managed to cross the British lines on the 25 February, and tried to convince Cronjé to follow De Wet's plan for a break out, Cronjé's *krygsraad* rejected the idea. The raging river, the lack of horses and draught animals and their unwillingness to abandon the laager, where a number of women and children still lingered, are often given as the reason for this decision. Yet, the utter exhaustion following the 65 days of stress at Magersfontein-koppie, probably played a crucial part in the *krygsraad's* decision.<sup>66</sup> Theron returned to take the bad news to De Wet, his daring achievement ensuring that his name was added to the list of Boer heroes.<sup>67</sup>

On 27 February, the nineteenth commemoration of Majuba Day, under pressure from his *krygsraad*, Cronjé sent a note to Roberts, stating that he was ready to surrender.<sup>68</sup> Cronjé's capitulation should be seen in the context of the events. His force was out-numbered by 10 to 1 by the British soldiers and 20 to 1 by their field artillery. The normally subdued Modder River was a torrent which made a break-out virtually impossible. Most of the few horses which the Boers had left when the battle commenced had been killed by the heavy shelling. Moreover the republicans were utterly demoralized. Demoralized to the extent that white flags were raised early in the

<sup>65</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 340; R. Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray*, p. 244.

<sup>66</sup> For more details see A.J. McLeod, *The Magersfontein sojourn*, unpublished M.A-mini thesis, 2000, p. 75.

<sup>67</sup> C.R. de Wet, *Three years war*, pp. 52-54; F. Pretorius, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, p. 22.

<sup>68</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis IV*, p. 421.



morning of 27 February, indeed even before Cronjé's note had been delivered.<sup>69</sup> The mass surrender that followed involved 4 091 persons, of whom 11 were women who apparently preferred to be sent to Cape Town.<sup>70</sup>

Much has been written about this battle and there have been many speculations. One thing remains certain – that this encounter was one of the most dramatic turning points in the Anglo-Boer War. There have been conjecture about the possible outcome if both republics had opted for peace in February 1900. Would a situation have developed as it did in the American Civil War, when after General Robert E. Lee's capitulation at Appomattox a period of reconstruction of the nation began? This will have to remain a hypothetical question. It did not happen that way. Instead Cronjé's surrender initiated the next stage upon which this study will concentrate – the phase of guerrilla warfare.

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<sup>69</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis IV*, p. 427, 428, 420.

<sup>70</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis IV*, p. 424.