

The Boer War.

Date: 11th December 1899.

Place: 6 miles north east of the Modder River in the North West of Cape Colony, South Africa.

Combatants: British against the Boers.

Generals: Major General Lord Methuen and General De la Rey.

Size of the armies: 8,000 British against 9,000 Boers.

Uniforms, arms and equipment:

The Boer War was a serious jolt for the British Army. At the outbreak of the war British tactics were appropriate for the use of single shot firearms, fired in volleys controlled by company and battalion officers; the troops fighting in close order. The need for tight formations had been emphasised time and again in colonial fighting. In the Zulu and Sudan Wars overwhelming enemy numbers armed principally with stabbing weapons were easily kept at a distance by such tactics; but, as at Isandlwana, would overrun a loosely formed force. These tactics had to be entirely rethought in battle against the Boers armed with modern weapons.

In the months before hostilities the Boer commandant general, General Joubert, bought 30,000 Mauser magazine rifles and a number of modern field guns and automatic weapons from the German armaments manufacturer Krupp and the French firm Creusot. The commandoes, without formal discipline, welded into a fighting force through a strong sense of community and dislike for the British. Field Cornets led burghers by personal influence not through any military code. The Boers did not adopt military formation in battle, instinctively fighting from whatever cover there might be. The preponderance were countrymen, running their farms from the back of a pony with a rifle in one hand. These rural Boers brought a life time of marksmanship to the war, an important edge, further exploited by Joubert's consignment of magazine rifles. Viljoen is said to have coined the aphorism "Through God and the Mauser". With strong fieldcraft skills and high mobility the Boers were natural mounted infantry. The urban burghers and foreign volunteers readily adopted the fighting methods of the rest of the army.

Other than in the regular uniformed Staats Artillery and police units, the Boers wore their every day civilian clothes on campaign.

After the first month the Boers lost their numerical superiority, spending the rest of the formal war on the defensive against British forces that regularly outnumbered them.

British tactics, little changed from the Crimea, used at Modder River, Magersfontein, Colenso and Spion Kop were incapable of winning battles against entrenched troops armed with modern magazine rifles. Every British commander made the same mistake; Buller; Methuen, Roberts and Kitchener. When General Kelly-Kenny attempted to winkle Cronje's commandoes out of their riverside entrenchments at Paardeburg using his artillery, Kitchener intervened and insisted on a battle of infantry assaults; with the same disastrous consequences as Colenso, Modder River, Magersfontein and Spion Kop.

Some of the most successful British troops were the non-regular regiments; the City Imperial Volunteers, the South Africans, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders, who more easily broke from the habit of traditional European warfare, using their horses for transport rather than the charge, advancing by fire and manouevre in loose formations and making use of cover, rather than the formal advance into a storm of Mauser bullets.

Uniform: The British regiments made an uncertain change into khaki uniforms in the years preceding the Boer War, with the topee helmet as tropical headgear. Highland regiments in Natal devised aprons to conceal coloured kilts and sporrans. By the end of the war the uniform of choice was a slouch hat, drab tunic and trousers; the danger of shiny buttons and too ostentatious emblems of rank emphasised in several engagements with disproportionately high officer casualties.

The British infantry were armed with the Lee Metford magazine rifle firing 10 rounds. But no training regime had been established to take advantage of the accuracy and speed of fire of the weapon. Personal skills such as scouting and field craft were little taught. The idea of fire and movement was unknown, many regiments still going into action in close order.

Notoriously General Hart insisted that his Irish Brigade fight shoulder to shoulder as if on parade in Aldershot. Short of regular troops, Britain

engaged volunteer forces from Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand who brought new ideas and more imaginative formations to the battlefield.

The British regular troops lacked imagination and resource. Routine procedures such as effective scouting and camp protection were often neglected. The war was littered with incidents in which British contingents became lost or were ambushed often unnecessarily and forced to surrender. The war was followed by a complete re-organisation of the British Army.

The British artillery was a powerful force in the field, underused by commanders with little training in the use of modern guns in battle. Pakenham cites Pieters as being the battle at which a British commander, surprisingly Buller, developed a modern form of battlefield tactics: heavy artillery bombardments co-ordinated to permit the infantry to advance under their protection. It was the only occasion that Buller showed any real generalship and the short inspiration quickly died.

The Royal Field Artillery fought with 15 pounder guns; the Royal Horse Artillery with 12 pounders and the Royal Garrison Artillery batteries with 5 inch howitzers. The Royal Navy provided heavy field artillery with a number of 4.7 inch naval guns mounted on field carriages devised by Captain Percy Scott of HMS Terrible.

Automatic weapons were used by the British usually mounted on special carriages accompanying the cavalry.



The Highland Light Infantry on the march

Winner: The Boers.

British Regiments:

Royal Horse Artillery:

9th Lancers:

Royal Artillery. 18th, 62nd and 65th Field Batteries.

Royal Engineers:

3rd Grenadier Guards.

1st and 2nd Coldstream Guards.

1st Scots Guards.

1st Northumberland Fusiliers:

2nd Black Watch:

2nd Northamptonshire Regiment:

1st Loyal North Lancashire Regiment:

2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry:

1st Manchester Regiment:

1st Highland Light Infantry:

2nd Seaforth Highlanders:

1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders:

Account:

Following Lord Methuen's hard won victory at Modder River on 28th November 1898, the British paused to rebuild the railway bridge, broken down by the Boers; a precaution essential in Methuen's view to enable him to relieve Kimberley and bring out Cecil Rhodes and the civilian inhabitants of the town.

Although forced back from the Modder River position, the battle justified De la Rey's tactic of entrenching his riflemen on level ground, rather than on the top of hills, where they were vulnerable to fire from the powerful British artillery.



**Major General Andrew Wauchope:
commander of the Highland Brigade at
the Battle of Magersfontein.
Wauchope was killed in the battle**

The British delay at Modder River bridge enabled De la Rey to dig a further line of trenches at the base of Magersfontein Hill, 6 miles to the North East.

To carry out his task of relieving Kimberley, Methuen was bound to make the single strand of railway leading north to the town the axis of his advance; giving the Boers no difficulty predicting the British line of approach. Methuen made it easier still for De la Rey by announcing the imminent attack during the afternoon of 10th December 1899 with an extensive bombardment by his field artillery; the target for the gun fire being the summit of the hill, rendering the bombardment completely ineffectual.

During the night the Highland Brigade under Major General Wauchope, comprising the 2nd Black Watch, 1st Highland Light Infantry, 2nd Seaforth Highlanders and 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, made its approach march in close order, guided by the brigade major, Major Benson, to deliver a dawn assault on Magersfontein Hill. Daylight was breaking as the brigade approached the hill. At 1,000 yards from the Boers' concealed entrenchments, Major Benson urged Wauchope that the brigade should move into open order, but the brigade commander, fearing that the soldiers would become disordered in the near darkness, continued the advance in close columns. As the order was finally given to move into open order the Boers opened fire.

The initial volleys were not particularly effective, the Boers taking a little time to get the range in the dawn twilight, but the highland battalions were thrown into confusion by the surprise attack, the soldiers rushing about or going to ground behind whatever cover they could find. Attempts were made by the officers to lead their men in the charge against the Boer positions, but no move developed.

The sun came up, revealing the Highlander Brigade pinned to the ground in front of the Boer positions, where it stayed for the rest of the day. Whenever a soldier moved he attracted fire. Some rushes were made but no general advance was achieved.

Watching, almost powerless to intervene, Methuen sent forward companies of the 1st Gordon Highlanders to support their fellow highland regiments and moved the Guards Brigade up on their right to engage the Boer left. The artillery batteries fired in support of Wauchope's stranded troops as best they could.



The main Boer trench from which the Highland Brigade was decimated.

The Boers had left a substantial gap between the Magersfontein positions and the Free Stater's trenches leading down to the river. There was an opportunity here, but Methuen did not attempt to take advantage of the gap and in due course the Boers moved reinforcements in to cover between the two entrenchments.

After nine hours exposed to constant fire in front of the Boer positions the highland regiments finally broke up and withdrew, suffering substantial losses as they rose from whatever cover they had found and made for the rear. The battle was over and Methuen had been soundly beaten.

Casualties:

British casualties were 902. The Highland Brigade lost 53 officers and 650 soldiers, among them the brigade commander, Major General Wauchope, and 2 commanding officers killed. The commanding officer of the Gordons was also killed. Boer casualties were 236.

Follow-up:

This defeat caused Methuen to be side-lined. Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener, on their arrival with further reinforcements, took over the advance in the West, leading to the inexorable invasion and conquest of first the Orange Free State and then the Transvaal and the relief of Kimberley and Mafeking.

Regimental anecdotes and traditions:

- Magersfontein, Stormberg and Colenso were the defeats that made up “Black Week”. Although there were more failures for the British, Lord Roberts in the West and General Buller in Natal pushed the Boers back, relieving Kimberley, Mafeking and Ladysmith, capturing the capitals of the Free State, Bloemfontein and the Transvaal, Pretoria and finally after a protracted guerilla campaign bringing the war to a successful conclusion.
- The losses in the Highland Brigade caused great distress in Scotland. The battle is commemorated in the pipe retreat march “The Highland Brigade at Magersfontein”. Major General Andy Wauchope was something of a Scottish celebrity, having stood against Gladstone in the contest for the seat of Midlothian during the 1892 General Election, reducing the Prime Minister’s majority to 690. He is said to have been greatly mourned.
- The citation for Captain Towse of the Gordon Highlanders, awarded the Victoria Cross for his conduct later in the war when he was blinded, described him as assisting the rescue of an officer of his regiment at Magersfontein.

References:

The Boer War is widely covered. A cross section of interesting volumes would be:

- The Great Boer War by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- Goodbye Dolly Gray by Rayne Kruger
- The Boer War by Thomas Pakenham
- South Africa and the Transvaal War by Louis Creswicke (6 highly partisan volumes)