

THE BATTLE OF MAGERSFONTEIN - A RE-APPRAISAL

Leo Barnard*

The purpose of this article is to present a military re-appraisal of the Battle of Magersfontein, at this juncture, some months after the centenary of the battle. It has to be noted that this is not a classic army appreciation - the purpose is neither to outline the run-up to, the course and consequences of this battle, nor the most perfect defensive or offensive plans that should have been employed. However, now, a hundred years later, it is necessary that this battle, which is rated as one of the most significant of the Anglo-Boer War, should be re-appraised.

To gain an understanding of the strategy and tactics employed by both the Boer forces and the British, it is necessary to provide a succinct outline of the broad background of events that served as a backdrop for the battle. The Battle of Magersfontein was the fourth battle of the western offensive, undertaken by British forces. A British force, under the command of Lt.-Gen. Lord Methuen, advanced in a northerly direction, alongside the western railway-line with a view eventually to relieve Kimberley and Mafeking that had been under siege from the Boer forces.

During this advance, the two opposing forces engaged in three battles between the dates of 23 and 28 November 1899. These were the Battles of Belmont, Graspan (which is also referred to as the Battle of Enslin), and the Modder River (Tweeriviere).¹ The British were victorious on all three occasions; however, in the case of the latter battle, Boer forces inexplicably withdrew from their sound positions after the British had lost almost 500, and the Boers 75 men, wounded in the military action.

As a result of the Boer withdrawal, the British called a halt at the Modder/Riet Rivers, while Boer forces, under the command of Gen. PA Cronjé, retreated to Spytfontein, directly north of Magersfontein. The period from 29 November to 10 December 1899 was used by the two opposing forces to prepare themselves for

* Professor of History, Free State University, Bloemfontein.

¹ WHH Waters, *The German official account of the war in South Africa* (London, 1904), p. 82 et seq.

the final attack, and from the British perspective, if they were victorious they could then proceed to relieve the siege of Kimberley.

It is necessary to consider the opposing forces, their troop strengths, as well as their offensive and defensive plans.

THE BOER FORCES

After the Boer forces had lost three battles in succession on the Western Front in less than a week, it must have been clear to their strategists that they could not maintain the status quo.

If they intended to halt the advancing British forces of Methuen, they required a radically different strategy where surprise had to play a decisive role. Cronjé's plan to take up positions in the hills at Scholtznek and Spytfontein (see map 2) did not meet with approval from the younger Boer commanders, who counted among them the well-known Gen. JH (Koos) de la Rey.² With the assistance of Pres. MT Steyn, who visited the Boer commandos in the field at the time, the War Council decided on 4 December 1899 only to halt the British advance through the use of a system of trenches that would be dug along the anticipated line of the British attack.

Next we consider in greater detail the positions that the Boers prepared for the Battle of Magersfontein.

- Sources vary on the exact number of Boer soldiers that participated in the Battle of Magersfontein. Methuen estimated their strength at between 12 000 and 15 000 men³, while the military historian, Col. Geo Duxbury, in his well-known work, *The Battle of Magersfontein 11th December 1899*, estimated numbers at between 8 000 and 8 500 men.⁴ Other sources again calculate, "with reasonable certainty", that Boer forces could not have exceeded 7 000 men on 11 December 1899 when the battle took place. The exact strength of the Boer forces is not merely of academic interest because these numbers played a significant role in the strategy that they employed during the battle.

² JH Breytenbach, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, Vol. II (Pretoria, 1971), pp. 97 et seq; *Commando*, 1967, 18(5), p. 7; *Commando*, 1967, 18(3) and (2).

³ Breytenbach, pp. 114-6.

⁴ GR Duxbury, *The Battle of Magersfontein, 11th December 1899* (Johannesburg, 1974); Breytenbach, p. 114.

- As stated earlier, the Boers' plan entailed the use of defensive positions, with the possibility of an element of surprise, using a system of trenches.

Let us look closely at an analysis of their trenches:

- The system spanned a distance of between 15-18 km from the West (i.e. west of the railway line), past Magersfontein Ridge up to the Modder River in the East (see map 3). The mid-point of this almost extended line, which veered towards the South on the eastern side, was Magersfontein Ridge. The trenches were dug between 75 and 150 metres directly in front of the ridge.
- This total distance was defended by \pm 7 000 boers, including artillery in the form of 5 x 75 mm Krupp cannons and 5 pom poms.⁵
- The preparation of the trenches themselves could only start on the morning of 5 December. For this reason, there was no intention of preparing a trench system; indeed, the Boers generally referred to them as defensive works.⁶ Moreover, they were not dug properly, and in most cases, served as defensive cover or supports for rifles.
- However, it was only in front of Magersfontein Ridge, on the western side (i.e. the railway line) that the trench system was relatively well-developed. Between the ridge and the river in the East, the Boers had to take up position behind natural cover such as antheaps, stones, and bushes.
- Viewed from the Boers' defensive system, it was almost impossible to believe that, almost in the middle of the extended line, there was a large area that had been left without any defence. This was the area immediately east of Magersfontein Ridge. Although sources differ on the exact distance where there was no defensive system whatsoever, it may be accepted that this distance was between 500 and 1 500 metres. None of the sources provide an explanation for this serious oversight.

There are a number of possibilities in finding an explanation for this state of affairs:

- △ The Boer commanders could have believed that the volunteers from the Scandinavian Corps who fought alongside them, would be defending this

⁵ Waters, p. 94; *British official account of the history of the war in South Africa*, p. 308.

⁶ MCE van Schoor, *SABC – Roemryke slag en roemlose nadraal: Die Slag van Magersfontein, 11 Desember 1899*; Breytenbach, pp. 104 et seq.

particular section of their defensive line.⁷ How such a small group of soldiers without specific orders could perform this task remains unclear.

- △ A second possibility is that the trenches on the eastern side of Magersfontein Ridge could lead to the Boer forces bringing down fire on their own forces. By merely changing the positions of the trenches, or by working with finely worked-out fields of fire, this problem could have been eliminated with ease.
- △ Seen from a military angle, it appears as if the Boers' plan was to entice the British into a natural vacuum that would force them into a bottleneck, which, in turn, would allow the Boer forces to cut them off from the main force, and then allow them to destroy or capture the British soldiers. However, the main problem was that, in terms of the Boers' plan, they had made no provision for a mobile reserve force that could be moved from one point to the next with ease. Moreover, there was also no force available to prevent the British soldiers, who were moving into the bottleneck, from attacking the Boers from the rear.
- When the Boer decision to prepare trench positions is analysed in greater detail, the following observations can be made:

The Boers had taken up defensive positions

- that allowed very little or no space to manoeuvre;
- that were static so that a follow-up operation would be out of the question. In any event, the issue remains whether the Supreme Command of the Boer forces would have executed any such operations. Cronjé's notorious words late on the evening of the battle are well known: "There are too many dead soldiers - let the English bury them. Enough blood has been spilt on one day";
- from which they could only deploy reserves to key points if they were willing to sustain heavy losses to own forces;
- where the battle effort could not be directed nor fought from a position of strength;

⁷ C de Jong, *Skandinawiërs in die Tweede Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902 (Vol. 1): Van Mafeking na Magersfontein en Paardeberg* (Amsterdam, 1983), pp. 77-93.

- where command and control over a line of 18 km could not be maintained at all;
- where, if the enemy broke through at any point on the defensive line to take high ground, within 100 metres behind the line, the entire Boer force could have been annihilated;
- where a large part of the defensive line did not safeguard the defensive positions (because of a lack of trenches), and any breakthrough at these points would have been catastrophic;
- where fields of fire had to be worked out meticulously to ensure that the forces on the Boers' left flank would not come under their own forces' fire. In a lower trajectory, a bullet from a Mauser rifle could still be lethal over a distance further than 2 km.
- A strong possibility when taking up trench positions is that opposing forces may come so close to you that bayonet charges can be carried out. This type of warfare was entirely unknown to the Boers, while British forces, especially after military action in India and Egypt, as well as their training, were more than prepared for this eventuality. Indeed, this kind of attack was what Methuen had envisaged in his orders to the British on the eve of the battle.
- The terrain and the placing of the trenches meant that the Boers' withdrawal routes could be neutralised by the British artillery with ease. For the same reason, the deployment of more forces from another point of the line could hardly be carried out without sustaining heavy losses. There are various sources that contend that the absence of a route for a retreat resulted in the Boers being forced to remain in their lines for the full duration of the battle. However, this specific argument is regarded as controversial.
- The extended defensive line made it impossible for the Boers' artillery to be used effectively. Add to this fact that they had few pieces of artillery, and it becomes clear why some salvos were only fired by the Boer artillery when the British forces were retreating in the late afternoon. During the battle, the Boer artillery played NO role. The effective placing of the burghers' artillery could, however, with equally effective utilization, have played a more significant role in the Battle of Magersfontein. The mere

presence of Von Albrecht and his Free State Government Artillery did not elicit any fear in the enemy anyway.

In retrospect, it is clear that the Boers were only concerned about defence, and that there was little or no aggression in their actions, and that the possibility of surprise on their side derived from a defensive system that was unfamiliar to them. Moreover, they were led by a commander who was advanced in years, and who had been forced, through the coercion of the Free State President, to set up defensive positions through a trench system that he did not want to be party to.

It was against this background that the Boer forces awaited the Battle of Magersfontein.

THE BRITISH FORCES

If the British actions during the Battle of Magersfontein are considered in detail, it is clear from their approach that they could be regarded as the aggressor from the start. The objectives of the western offensive were focused on relieving the sieges of Kimberley and Mafeking as soon as possible so that the capitals of the two Republics could be captured. As stated earlier, the battles at Belmont, Graspan and the Modder River took place in the process. Here the Boers found themselves, time and again, in defensive positions, and the British forces would gain the upperhand through the use of a frontal attack. After the third battle in a matter of days, Methuen and his command learnt the lesson that the Boers would take up defensive positions, but would rapidly withdraw from them if the pressure became too much and the artillery fire too heavy.

It is against this background that the British Forces prepared for the Battle of Magersfontein.

Before the British plan of attack is discussed in some detail, it is necessary at this juncture to pay attention to the question why the British did not maintain the momentum that they had gained in the preceding three battles, and why they did not continue their advance towards Kimberley within hours (days)? In retrospect, it may appear as if the interruption from 28 November to 11 December 1899 played a decisive role in the British defeat. Indeed, there are many sources that attribute the defeat to Methuen.⁸ However, on closer investigation, it is clear that various reasons contributed to their having to halt their advance at the Modder River/Riet River. Firstly, the British infantry were dead tired after the exhausting pace and

⁸ Duxburg, p. 17.

three battles. Breytenbach states in this regard: "[T]hey could scarcely move one leg before the other."⁹

The other most critical reasons can be summarised as follows:

- ◆ reinforcements and munitions had to be replenished per train from the south;
- ◆ a temporary bridge had to be built across the Riet River;
- ◆ with the assistance of heliographs, they were able to establish that hasty action was not required because the besieged town of Kimberley still had adequate munitions for 40 days;
- ◆ the strong Boer force had to be dealt a decisive defeat to ensure that the British lines of support would not be disrupted;
- ◆ an uncontrolled, unplanned advance by the British forces could lead to an unexpected setback against the strong Boer forces.

After the necessary replenishment of troops and munitions of, among others, the Scottish Brigades, which included the Highland Brigade, Methuen, who was recuperating from an irritating wound, decided that the attack had to be launched on 11 December. His force which, at that stage, consisted of at least 15 000 men, was supplemented by an impressive array of artillery:

6 x 12 pr. BL Field guns
 4 x 12 pr. QF Naval guns
 18 x 15 pr. BL guns
 6 x 5 ins. BL Howitzers
 1 x 4.7 ins. QF Naval Gun¹⁰

If one adds to these factors that Methuen was in command of the best troops in the British Army, and had available to him the Scottish Brigades under the command of the seasoned, yet well-liked Gen. Maj. AG (Andy or Red Mick) Wauchope - then it becomes clear that the British probably expected, from their point of view, that a frontal attack, as had happened some days earlier, would suffice to force the Boers from their positions.

Methuen's official orders for the attack are included as Appendix IV.

⁹ Breytenbach, p. 105.

¹⁰ Breytenbach, pp. 113-4; Duxburg, p. 14.

Briefly his plan meant that a heavy bombardment had to be directed at what he presumed to be the Boer positions. The target was the Magersfontein Ridge. This would then be followed by a night march and a frontal attack at first light from the one end of the Magersfontein Ridge. During the battle, the necessary reinforcements would be available and the artillery would be able to bombard the enemy, as well as provide cover for own forces. The command for the attack was assigned to Wauchope – "the honour is yours" were Methuen's words.

When a closer look is taken at the British attack on Magersfontein, the following aspects are worthy of attention:

BOMBARDMENT¹¹

The bombardment unleashed by British forces on Magersfontein Ridge commenced as early as 9 December when some shots were fired to zero in their systems. The next day (10 December), the British launched a two-hour long (16:00-18:00) bombardment - one of the heaviest bombardments since the Battle of Sebastopol during the Crimean War. The artillery fire had almost no effect on the Boers because they were relatively protected in the trenches, where they were positioned 75-150 metres in front of the Magersfontein Ridge. According to Breytenbach, a burgher was killed; however, most other sources arrive at the conclusion that only three burghers sustained light injuries from rolling rocks and shrapnel.¹²

If the heavy bombardment, especially on 10 December, is considered in retrospect, it has to be accepted that Methuen's assessment of the situation was that the Boers would take up positions in the hills, behind rocks, as they had done at Belmont and Graspan. From the Boer side, the bombardment had no other purpose but to serve as an early warning for the attack. There was no doubt among the Boer fighters that the British had prepared for a battle. Various military historians are highly critical of the objectives that Methuen wanted to achieve through the heavy bombardment. As far as the gunners' actions were concerned, Norris concluded, for

¹¹ Duxburg, pp. 20-2; LS Amery, *The Times history of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902*, Vol I, p. 312. Major-General GH Marchall gave the following evidence to the *Royal Commission on the War in South Africa*, Vol. II, p. 361. "The heaviest expenditure per battery in any action was at Magersfontein on the 11th December, 1899: 'G' Royal Horse Artillery 1,250 rounds, 18th Royal Field Artillery 1,012 rounds, 62nd Field Artillery 1,003 rounds, 75th Royal Field Artillery 924 rounds, an average of 1,047 a battery. The greatest previous record in any war was made by the Germans at Mars-la-tour, viz, average per battery 51, maximum by one battery 1,164.

¹² Breytenbach, pp. 118-22; Eric McPherson, "General Andrew Wauchope of Niddrie Marischal. A character sketch and brief historical tribute", in *Militaria*, 21, 1991, pp. 12-20.

example, that "as a demonstration, the effort was good; as a recce, it was useless and even misleading".¹³

It is clear from the preceding that if Methuen intended to demoralize the enemy before the battle through the use of artillery, then the bombardment had to be initiated directly before the battle. The approximately 10 hours that passed between the heavy artillery bombardment and the commencement of the battle resulted in this objective vanishing into nothing.

THE NIGHT MARCH AND THE ATTACK AT FIRST LIGHT

Although several sources refer to Methuen's plan of attack as a night march, followed by a night attack, only the first part of this claim is indeed true.¹⁴ Because it was high summer, daybreak was at 04:00, and it is clear that the British commander had a first-light attack in mind.

The attack was under the direct command of Gen. Andy Wauchope. All the sources allude to the fact that Wauchope did not like the idea of a night march. After he had been briefed in detail of what he was required to do, his words to Methuen's Senior Staff Officer, Col. Douglas, were the following: "I do not like this idea of a night march."¹⁵ Wauchope did not pursue the matter any further, however, it seems strange that the battle commander in such a decisive battle clearly did not agree with the plan of attack.

The next factor that demands attention is that the advance into battle took place during one of the heaviest thunderstorms in the area. It not only rained very hard, but the thunder and lightning must have been a strange spectacle to the British forces. Once the rain subsided, there was still heavy cloud cover in place, and as a result the night was pitch-dark, with no stars to be seen.¹⁶ Moreover, it has to be considered that the attack force had to move in closed columns across unknown terrain. The terrain was flat, but anheaps, stones, clumps of grass and two wire fences did not make the night march easy at all.

If the British plan of attack, involving a night march and an attack at first light at the southern end of the Magersfontein Ridge ("deliver an attack on the southern

¹³ See SL Norris, *The South African War, 1899-1900. A military retrospect up to the relief of Ladysmith* (London, 1900), p. 129.

¹⁴ JG Maydon, *French's cavalry campaign* (London, 1901), pp. 64-5; T Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), p. 203.

¹⁵ F Maurice, *History of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902, Vol. 1* (London, 1906), p. 311.

¹⁶ WB Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer War* (London, 1964), p. 88; Amery, p. 396.

end of Magersfontein Ridge" - as stated in Methuen's orders)¹⁷, is taken as a point of departure, the plan cannot be faulted. Indeed, in Walters, the official German military historian's view of the plan of attack, the statement is made that "the plan was an excellent one".¹⁸

The logical question that should be asked is the following: What went wrong? How is it possible that the best soldiers from the British Army and the Scottish Brigades, who were not only well trained, battle ready and well equipped, and in addition, were under the command of the famous Andy Wauchope, could lose the Battle of Magersfontein?

The answer may be traced to a number of factors.

- Andy (Red Mick) Wauchope, as the commander of the British attack force:¹⁹
 - Δ He was a seasoned militarist, with much battle experience – it is claimed in various sources that in every campaign in which he participated, he was wounded.
 - Δ In South Africa itself, the Battle of Magersfontein would be his first exposure to local conditions, but especially the enemy. The question may be posed whether the "honour" to lead the attack under these specific conditions was not perhaps misplaced?
 - Δ Although Wauchope clearly disagreed with the plan of attack, he did not discuss it with his supreme commander. In this way, he followed the typical approach of British Army Officers; however, through timeous action he could have converted a total failure into a famous victory for the British.
 - Δ Wauchope's further action also borders on stubbornness. Two examples are adequate proof of this claim: When the heavy thunderstorm occurred, Wauchope should simply have called off the night march and the attack. He was bent on executing the assigned task, adopting a stoical persistence. The second example is even more self-explanatory. Maj. Benson, who was the compass reader and distance controller, recommended to Wauchope approximately 700 and 800 metres away from the Magersfontein Ridge,

¹⁷ See Appendix I.

¹⁸ Waters, p. 111; Pemberton, p. 80.

¹⁹ G Douglas, *The life of Major-General Wauchope*, CB, CMG, LLD (London, 1904), pp. 404 et seq; W Baird, *General Wauchope* (Edenburg, 1902), pp. 196 et seq.

that the attack force had to be deployed.²⁰ The Commander did not respond to these recommendations, and he himself directed the attack forces without any further directions. Immediately after he had ordered that his forces had to deploy, the unsuspecting British forces drew the Boer forces' rifle fire from their trenches. Before Wauchope could regroup his force, he was fatally wounded.

- Δ Wauchope's actions signify those of a seasoned fighter, who was forced into an attack, and through his almost stubborn action, had allowed his force to land in a difficult position, which cost them the battle.
- Δ Of course, there are historians who assign the blame for the failure to Methuen and his plan of attack, *inter alia* saying: "But for that disaster, he (Wauchope) was in no sense or degree responsible."²¹ However, the events on the battlefield indicate the opposite.

RECONNAISSANCE - OR THE LACK THEREOF

- Δ Almost all the sources agree that Methuen used almost no reconnaissance for purposes of planning the attack. Compare Breytenbach pp. 123-4.²² He did indeed send out some mounted patrols; however, they immediately left the terrain when they drew fire from the Magersfontein Ridge.
- Δ An air balloon, which could have been used to great effect for reconnaissance purposes, was available as early as 10 December 1899. However, due to bad weather, it could not be used on that particular day.
- Δ The question that historians have yet to address is whether Methuen would necessarily have changed his plan of attack if he had performed exceptional reconnaissance. Granted, Methuen would then have known that the Boers were positioned in shallow trenches and not on the Magersfontein Ridge. This surprise on the side of the Boers could have been eliminated. The other side of the coin is that Methuen would then have known that the Boer lines extended over a distance of almost twenty kilometres; that there was a thin line of defence; that there was not really any reserve forces in depth; that the Boers' artillery would play a minor role in the battle due to their placement; but

²⁰ Amery, *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, Vol. II (London, 1902), p. 399; Pakenham, p. 204; Pemberton, pp. 91 et seq; Norris, pp. 97-100.

²¹ Douglas, pp. 404 et seq.

²² Breytenbach, pp. 123-4.

especially that there were several hundred metres that had no defence at all within the Boer lines.

- △ Thus, in spite of the recommendations of Pemberton and Pakenham²³ that Methuen had to postpone his attack by a day to reconnoitre the enemy positions more meticulously, such a reconnaissance would, in my view, have had no substantial impact on the plan. It could have led, for example, to the axis of attack being shifted more to the East so that the opportunity could be created to outflank the enemy (Boers) and then to attack them from high ground from the rear (Magersfontein Ridge).

ARTILLERY

- △ There is very little doubt that the British artillery exerted a decisive impact prior to and during the Battle of Magersfontein. It has already been explained that the bombardment prior to the battle on Sunday, 10 December, could, at best, have served as an early warning, as well as their zeroing in their systems.
- △ In my view, the artillery fire on the day of the battle served the following purpose:
- to subject the enemy to as much fire as possible
 - to keep the enemies' heads low
 - to demoralise the enemy
 - to inflict losses on the enemy
- △ As far as the defined objectives were concerned, the British artillery had been successful in a large measure because the systems fired continuously on the Boer positions for almost an entire day. Because of the course of the battle, various sources clearly state that the forces sometimes suffered under the fire of the British artillery and that casualties were caused to own forces.
- △ As a result of the defensive positions that the Boer forces took up, it is clear that a large percentage of their casualties were caused by the artillery fire of Methuen's attack force.

²³ Pakenham, pp. 201-6; Maydon, p. 66.

- △ As a result of the heavy bombardment, Methuen committed a tactical error, which, in the case of a counter-attack by the Boers, would have left him vulnerable. In his official report on the Battle of Magersfontein, Methuen's review submitted to the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa included the following observation: "I had got through so much ammunition at Magersfontein that I could not really have gone on. I had to wait then for a fresh supply. But that was my own fault - firing so much."²⁴

THE BRITISH ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE BATTLE

- △ If the attitude of the British Supreme Command on the western front on the eve of the Battle of Magersfontein is considered, it appears that they had a don't-care attitude - even an over-confident attitude that bordered on arrogance.
- △ A series of examples of an inappropriate attitude on their side include inadequate reconnaissance, transferring the command for the battle to a person who was entirely unfamiliar with the conditions, the fact that they persisted with the night march in spite of a heavy thunderstorm in stead of postponing the attack by a day or longer, etc.
- △ It is not clear whether the British Supreme Command had miscalculated the Boers as a military force, or whether the relatively easy victories at Graspan, Belmont and Tweeriviere had created a false sense of security, namely, that the Boers were a military force that could not cope at all with artillery bombardments, and that would retreat very easily; or perhaps Methuen could not imagine that fighters who had not studied at a military college could devise a plan based on trenches.
- △ What is clear is that the element of surprise in the battle was on the side of the Boers. Moreover, the over-confident attitude of the British was also a factor that contributed to the failure of the attack.

²⁴ Mimites of evidence taken before the Royal Commission on the war in South Africa, Vol. II (London, 1903), p. 127.

IN CONCLUSION

Seen purely from a military angle, the Battle of Magersfontein had the following lessons for the two forces that participated in the battle:

Δ The Boer Forces

- To be victorious in a particular battle does not mean that the war has been won (because within weeks of the battle, Piet Cronjé and more than 4 500 burghers surrendered);
- A static force cannot allow itself to be outflanked, as happened weeks after the Battle of Magersfontein;
- When a military force intends to take up defensive positions, these positions have to comply with some basic requirements, including a reserve force, concentration of fire, sound lines of communication, etc., which are absolutely critical;
- If the force had artillery available, these arms should have been utilized more effectively;
- An inherent part of a defensive system using trenches is to launch a counter-attack once the victory has been achieved and the enemy is in retreat. The fact that the British forces' ammunition for their cannons was depleted could have led to one of the greatest defeats in their military history.

Δ The British Supreme Command learnt that:

- a military battlefield is the one place where one does not become over-confident at all;
- the watchword must be to do the basics correctly and consistently to perform the normal drills;
- they should NEVER underestimate the enemy;
- in the plan of attack, one has to make provision for an element of surprise coming from the enemy;

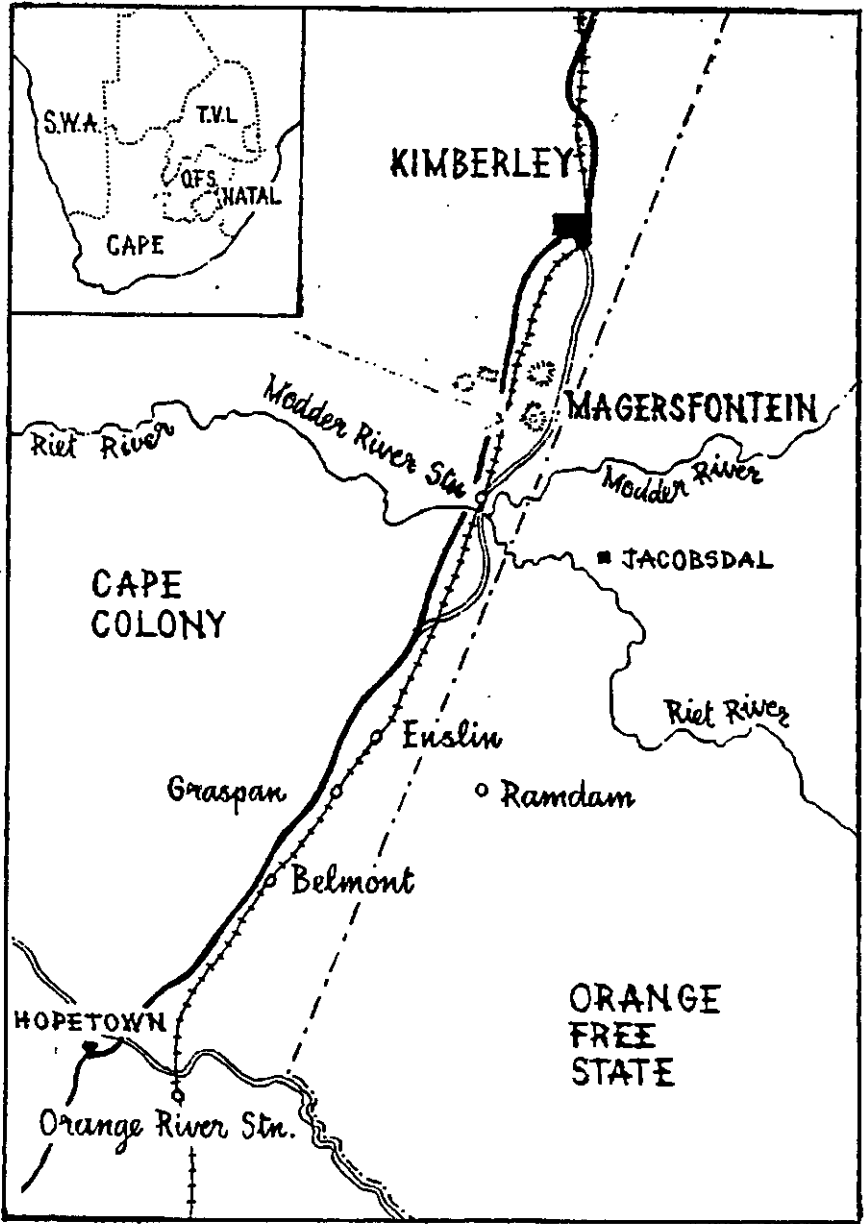
- the artillery may not use up all its ammunition during a battle;
- the command should not be assigned to a commander who is unfamiliar with the terrain and the enemy;
- one should not hesitate to postpone an attack until weather conditions permit; and
- some of its mounted reserves should have been used in an attack from the flank.

The last words should perhaps be taken from Methuen's report:

"We were within an ace of carrying the position - everything depended on one word: that word was FORWARD."²⁵

The Scottish Brigades would NEVER forgive him for taking this stance.

²⁵ R Kruger, *Goodbye Dolly Gray - The history of the Boer War* (London, 1959), p. 134.



APPENDIX IV**LT-GEN LORD METHUEN'S ORDERS FOR THE ATTACK ON
MAGERSFONTEIN RIDGE (AS PUBLISHED IN THE BRITISH
OFFICIAL HISTORY, VOL. I)**

1. Enemy in occupation of koppies to N. and N.E. of camp and also high ground between Modder and Riet Rivers.
2. It is intention of G.O.C. to hold enemy of north, and to deliver an attack on southern end of Magersfontein ridge. On the afternoon of 10th December the position will be bombarded; it will be assaulted on the 11th. With this end in view three columns will be formed.
3. No. 1 Column will assemble on ground N.E. of 9th brigade camp at 3 p.m. on 10th December in following formation:
9th Lancers
Mounted Infantry
G. Battery R.H.A.
Brigade Division R.F.A. and Howitzer Battery
Highland Brigade (in mass)
Bearer Company, Highland Brigade
2nd Yorkshire Light Infantry
Sec. T.B., R.E.
Balloon Sec. r.e.
The C.R.A. will arrange for a portion of the ammunition column to accompany this force.
4. The advance will be directed on the southern end of Magersfontein Ridge.
5. At 3 p.m. the R.H.A., cavalry and mounted infantry will advance covering the front from railway to Modder river, the mounted infantry forming escort to R.H.A. After the reconnaissance the cavalry will withdraw to the right flank of Highland brigade and protect that flank, leaving a party to watch the left of artillery.
6. At 3.10 p.m. the remainder of the column will advance on the southern end of Magersfontein ridge, keeping well under shelter of Outpost ridge (concealed from view of enemy) in following order:

Advance Guard - half battalion; followed at 2.30 p.m. by half-battalion, R.F.A., remainder of force (except 2nd Yorkshire L.I.) in the order of parade.

7. The R.F.A. will, when within range, open fire on the ridge, applying to G.O.C. Highland brigade for an escort.
8. The remainder of column will form up concealed to right rear of artillery in action.
9. The 2nd Yorkshire L.I. will proceed from place of assembly along the northern bank of Modder river (under guidance of Rimington's Guides) to Bridle Drift four miles up river, where they will entrench themselves against attack from all sides - especially from north-east to south. Entrenching tools to be carried. Signal communication to be established (if possible) with Highland brigade, and with Modder River camp.
10. The Sec. T.B., R.E., will lay a field cable from 9th brigade camp to Highland brigade as they proceed.
11. G.O.C. will receive reports at head of main body of Highland brigade.
12. Half rations for 11th December will be carried in haversacks; and half forage for animals on them. These rations and forage not to be consumed before 11th.
13. One blanket per man will be carried (rolled by dismounted troops). Great coats will not be taken, but will be stored in tents or brigade stores, under charge of details left behind.
14. Tents will not be struck,
15. All horses will be watered immediately before starting.
16. On the 10th December No. 2 Column, under the command of Major-General Pole-Carew, C.B., composed of 1 battalion, 9th brigade, naval brigade with 4.7-in. gun), and Rimington's Guides, will assemble at such hour and place as may be fixed by him, so that the column will be in position at 4 p.m. to co-operate with No. 1 Column, making a diversion against Magersfontein ridge (along the railway).
This force will remain in position on the night of 10th, and will recommence the bombardment on the morning of 11th, but the fire is *on no account to be directed on the southern end of the ridge which the infantry will be assaulting.*

17. No. 3 Column, under command of Major-General Sir H. Colville, K.C.M.G., C.B., composed as under, will assemble on the same ground as No. 1 Column at such hour as the commander will direct, so as to enable the column to reach 500 yards to the left rear of the R.F.A. brigade division position (of No. 1 Column) by 3 a.m. on the 11th December, where the commander will report to an officer of the Divisional Headquarter Staff sent to meet the column. A Staff Officer of No. 3 column will accompany No. 1 Column to ascertain the position of artillery brigade division. The orders regarding great coats, blankets, and tents (paragraphs 13 and 14) for No. 1 Column will apply to No. 3 Column. No. 3 Column will consist of 12th Lancers, no. 7 Field Company R.E., Guards' brigade, Bearer Company Guards' brigade, Field Hospitals Guards' and Highland brigades and divisional troops, ammunition column.
18. The Supply Column (with five days' rations) escorted by half Gordon Highlanders, will assemble at the place of assembly of Nos. 1 and 3 Columns at 4 a.m. on the 11th December, and will follow the route taken by No. 1 Column for two miles, and await orders.
19. The Divisional Signalling Officer will arrange for signalling communication being kept up between Nos 1 and 2 Columns on the 10th December.
20. Outposts protecting Modder River camp will be taken over by 9th Brigade at 8 a.m. on 10th December.
21. No light is to be lit or smoking allowed from 7 p.m. on 10th to 4 a.m. on 11th.
22. During the absence of the Lieut.-General Commanding, the command at Modder River will, after departure of No. 3 Column, devolve on Major-General Pole-Carew, C.B., details of Nos. 1 and 3 Columns being attached to 9th brigade.
23. Arrangements will be made by G.O.C. Cavalry brigade for the care of all horses belonging to Nos 1 and 3 Columns left at Modder River. Horses and men of Divisional Headquarter Staff left behind will be attached to 9th brigade.
25. If any of these orders are not understood, a Staff Officer should attend at Divisional Headquarters.

Modder River, 10th December, 1899.

By Order
C.W. DOUGLAS, Col. C.S.O.