

THE BRITISH TACTICAL REACTION TO BATTLEFIELD CONDITIONS DURING THE ANGLO-BOER WAR

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INTRODUCTION

Only eighteen years prior to the commencement of the Anglo-Boer War the Boers gave Great Britain an excellent demonstration of their tactical skills. A comparison of the casualties of the opposing forces during the few, but decisive battles fought at the beginning of 1881 during the Anglo-Transvaal War, surely should have raised a few eyebrows among British officers and politicians alike.

Battle	Date	British losses		Boer losses	
		Dead	Wounded	Dead	Wounded
Bronkhorstspuit	20 December 1880	56	92	1	5
Laingsnek	28 January 1881	83	112	14	27
Schuinshoogte	8 February 1881	74	67	10	7
Majuba	27 February 1881	96	117	2	5

Figure 1²

In spite of this, the British suffered severe losses against a "lesser" enemy on confronting the Boers during the Anglo-Boer War.

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² FA van Jaarsveld, APJ van Rensburg and WA Stals, (ed.), *Die Eerste Vryheidsoorlog* (1980). Figures taken from the different chapters where the respective battles are discussed.

In order to understand the imbalance in the effectiveness of British and Boer soldiers opposing each other on the battlefield during the initial phases of the Anglo-Boer War, the background of both will shortly be illustrated. The stalemate resulting from the tactical dilemma experienced by the British on the battlefield, with specific reference to Boer musketry and their use of the defensive to inflict high losses on the British, will be demonstrated. The developments in British tactics to overcome these conditions will be presented through an analysis of some of the major battles. Once these developments were implemented, the combination of better tactics and a larger force broke the stalemate and resulted in the Boer retreat ahead of Roberts's "steamroller".

THE OPPOSING FORCES

The British Forces

By the latter half of the 19th century, Great Britain had already entered the second phase of the industrial revolution. Because of this, its population more than doubled during the preceding 80 years, with the majority of the population living in Britain's cities and bigger towns.³ With conditions in a 19th century factory rather appalling, the British Army was viewed and joined voluntarily as a welcome alternative for many of Britain's urbanised males who could not secure a comfortable job somewhere else.⁴ The ordinary British soldier thus came from an industrialised, urban population.

The overwhelming number of recruits in the army came from the lower ranks of unskilled labour.⁵ Proper training and discipline were essential in order to convert this below-average human resource into an effective fighting force. The soldier spent most of his time on regimental duties, parade ground drill and keeping his uniform clean. The usual method of instruction was to learn passages from the textbooks by heart. Field training at home in Britain was dominated by exercising manoeuvres developed for the European theatre of war and was restricted to only three weeks per year.⁶ Joining the army thus increased the general quality of the volunteer by moulding a disciplined soldier to be utilised in mass.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-9.

⁴ This line of thinking is confirmed by R. Pope, *War and society in Britain : 1899-1948* (1996), p. 58.

⁵ LS Amery, *The Times history of the war in South Africa 1899-1902*, Volume II (1902), p. 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-4.

Although limited training in estimating distance was provided, musketry training consisted primarily of shooting at targets at a distance of 200 metres. This also had the nature of a parade ground exercise.⁷ Soldiers were, however, not trained on how to observe over longer distances, a skill that was essential because of the increased range possible with modern firearms.⁸ With the acquisition of improved rifles, and eventually the Lee-Metford with sights marked up to 1 600 yards, the quality of training improved. The forces in Umballa, India, under the command of Maj.-Gen. Penn Symons (shortly before his redeployment to South Africa), for example participated in musketry courses extending over a period of four to five weeks. In addition to this, regimental and brigade field firing exercises which "seemed very realistic", and integrating the arms of service, were held. The same level of training was however not conducted in Britain.⁹ Based on the assumption of an opponent in close order formations, as envisaged in the European theatre of war, training prepared the soldier for fighting in mass formations over distances much shorter than the actual range of rifles at the time.

The British military system further neglected the development of the soldier to think as an individual. Some officers, experienced in modern warfare, favoured the open order and individual fire in battle. Attempts to introduce these concepts into British doctrine were successful and in 1896 a new drill book advocating the open order and the end of the Aldershot set-piece battle was adopted.¹⁰ However, the majority of officers fell into the trap of tradition being "in favour of the solid line formation, mechanical precision, strict fire discipline, and bayonet charges".¹¹ Training in the majority of units still focused on manoeuvring the phalanx of a British square both on the parade ground and during practical training:¹² a tactical approach successful during almost all Britain's colonial campaigns against poorly armed indigenous peoples. It implied however that the soldier was not expected to think for himself during combat. He was a pawn in the hands of his officer, and had to shoot on command, irrespective of whether there actually was a specific identified target in sight.

⁷ Anon, "Pickets' vs Bullets" in *Chambers's Journal*, 29 January 1859, [<http://www.btinternet.com/~rrnotes/target/pickets.htm>].

⁸ The historical section of the Great General Staff, Berlin (translated by H du Cane), *The war in South Africa* (1906), p. 331.

⁹ AD Greenhill Gardyne, *The life of a regiment: The history of the Gordon Highlanders*, Vol. III (1972), pp. 1-3.

¹⁰ Greenhill Gardyne, p. 1.

¹¹ Amery, p. 32.

¹² *Ibid.*

During the fifty years prior to the Anglo-Boer War, Britain was involved in no less than thirty-four campaigns or military expeditions against the indigenous peoples of the numerous British colonies.¹³ The forces participating in these campaigns consisted primarily of the regular battalions of the various regiments of the army. However, with the exception of a few regiments that were from time to time deployed from one theatre of operations to the next, campaigning, and more specifically participating in actual combat, was far and in-between.¹⁴ The nature of the battles was also in essence drastically different from what they were to encounter in South Africa. The "fanatic [mass which] streamed across the open regardless of cover" were to be replaced by invisible Boers "and it was our men [the British] who were [to become] the victims".¹⁵ The effectiveness of Britain's forces during these colonial campaigns however served to reinforce British tactical thinking.

The Boer Forces

The burghers, as the Boer soldiers were called, originated from a community in which acquiring the skills of survival was paramount. In the absence of cities and with only a few bigger towns, the majority of the Boer population lived in the countryside. Surviving in the relative isolation of the southern African interior, with the constant threat of a possible attack by a wild animal or warriors from one of the indigenous polities during a period of conflict, necessitated preparedness.

The Boer military system favoured a thinking individual. The burgher fighting as part of the Boer forces did not regard himself as a soldier, and openly opposed the notion that he was.¹⁶ He regarded himself as a free man participating in a war against the British as a private citizen. As such, irrespective of laws to the contrary, he did not regard himself bound by the same rules as soldiers. The majority of burghers were men living in relative isolation on farms far from town. There he had to ensure the survival of his family and ruled as patriarch making his own decisions, not allowing others to meddle with his way of life. Individuality and initiative therefore were integral parts of the burgher's make-up. Parade ground drill and shooting in volleys on command did not exist in the mind of the burgher. He was a free citizen organised in a loose, flexible military system that expected of him to shoot at the enemy on command, but allowed him to pull the trigger when he was willing and ready, thereby ensuring the opportunity for accurate fire aimed at a specific target.

¹³ JH Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, Vol. 1 (1969), p. 26.

¹⁴ Greenhill Gardyne, p. 1.

¹⁵ H Strachan, *European armies and the conduct of war* (1983), p. 77.

¹⁶ HC Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces* (1900), pp. 61-2.

The two republics actively opted for a process of modernisation supplemented with training.

The Z.A.R. held organised shooting competitions with prizes awarded by the government, ranging from cash to ammunition.¹⁷ It was expected of all burghers liable for military service to participate in these competitions and penalties in the form of a number of rounds to be paid by those not attending. The burghers participated in age groups, based on their likeliness of being called upon for military duty with the priority being to call on the 18-34 year age group first. Provision was also made for children younger than 16 years to participate, and prizes were awarded.¹⁸ A selection of the reports on the shooting exercises from the field-cornets to Commandant-General Piet Joubert, indicates that participation varied between 9 % and 65 % of the total number of burghers liable for service in the respective districts.¹⁹ With the introduction of Mauser rifles, the Z.A.R. improved its musketry training by doubling the number of shooting competitions and increasing the prize-money for these competitions from £3 000 to £6 000 during 1897.²⁰

There is no indication of organised field training or exercises held by the Z.A.R. during peace-time. This might not have seemed necessary based on the Z.A.R.'s war experience. In the forty years prior to the Anglo-Boer War the burghers of the Z.A.R. had been involved in no less than eleven wars in which different portions of the population had been mobilised.²¹ Based on the defensive policy that the first line of defence was that of the district closest to the conflict, and a mobilisation policy of first calling on the 18-34 year age group, most of the burghers over the years were experienced fighters.²²

In the Free State *Wapenschouwingen* were held with the intended dual purpose of formally inspecting the arms and equipment of the commandos and conducting military exercises.²³ Training in the Free State can be described as consisting of range and field exercises. During Rifle Association meetings, which

¹⁷ K.G. 1041, Report from JA Joubert, Field-Cornet of Ward 2 in the Wakkerstroom district: February 1895. A total of 1 000 Martini-Heuri rounds were issued as prizes during a competition.

¹⁸ Z.A.R. 111, See the attached "circulaire" dated 22 March 1897 to the "Rapport van den Commandant-Generaal over het jaar 1896".

¹⁹ K.G. 1040 and 1041, Reports from the respective districts and wards on shooting competitions held.

²⁰ Compare the respective reports on the *Schijfschleterijen* in Z.A.R. 111, "Finaal-Rapport van den Commandant-Generaal" for the years 1892 to 1898.

²¹ Anon, "A short chronicle of warfare in South Africa", in *Militaria* (1986), Volume 16/3.

²² Compare the respective reports on the *Krijgsoperaties* in Z.A.R. 111, "Finaal-Rapport van den Commandant-Generaal" for the years 1892 to 1898.

²³ F Maurice, *History of the war in South Africa: 1899-1902*, Volume I (1906), p. 80.

replaced the *Wapenschouwingen* during 1893,²⁴ formal "range" exercises were conducted. Ammunition and prizes (sometimes donated by individuals or other organisations) for these exercises were provided from state funds.²⁵

Field exercises were presented in the respective commando areas by the field-cornets assisted by the *Rijdende Diensmacht* (Mounted Guard) established in 1883 and consisted of members of the Free State Artillery on detached duty in the respective districts to assist the police.²⁶ In these field exercises, which differed from district to district, targets ranging from trees, anthills or even pieces of wooden board cut into the shape of a human body, were used. The burghers also exercised "immediate action drills" by riding towards the target, jumping from their horses, firing at the target, mounting their horses and riding off.²⁷ Compared with the British "textbook" approach, the burghers experimented with their new rifles, in the process developing musketry skills befitting the new technology.²⁸

The practising of their battle skills in both the Transvaal and the Free State implies that a tactical system developed and that the burghers did not simply fire away in battle. Amery identified three types of fire used by the Boers. The first of these was individual fire. This implied careful aiming at a specific target with each shot only fired if the burgher was sure that he would hit his target. Individual fire was primarily used during the opening stages of an attack or defence from good cover in order not to disclose the position of the burgher. The second type of fire was heavy continuous fire used during the last period of an attack or defence in order to prevent the enemy from charging. This type of fire was directed at the enemy position in general, rather than aimed at a specific target. The closeness to the enemy position, however, resulted in relative accuracy and the enemy being forced to keep its head down. The third kind of fire was snap fire. Fired from the hip or shoulder at close quarters, snap fire was used to counter the bayonet charge, or at the conclusion of a successful attack.²⁹ Since these types of fire coincide with the different phases of battle, they are characteristic of Boer tactics during battle.

²⁴ JA Steenekamp, *Die verdedigingstelsel van die Vrystaatse Republiek, 1854-1899* (Unpublished MA thesis, University of the Orange Free State, 1976), pp. 95-101.

²⁵ Breytenbach, p. 32.

²⁶ See thesis, TPE Swemmer, *Die geskiedenis van die Vrystaatse artillerie* (Chapter five, unpublished MA thesis, University of the Orange Free State, 1953) for more information.

²⁷ Steenekamp, p. 102.

²⁸ This is confirmed by Strachan in his conclusion that "(O)ribes with little formal military structure, accustomed to taking the defensive against the raids of neighbours [a description befitting the Boers], more readily adapted their methods of fighting to the new weapons", H Strachan, pp. 76-7.

²⁹ Amery, p. 92.

In addition, Boer fire discipline also included the ability to hold back the opening of fire in order to entice the enemy to move into a position where escaping without heavy casualties would be extremely difficult.³⁰ The enforcing of this tactic, however, was not that simple. Ill-discipline amongst the burghers on numerous occasions led to premature shots being fired, often resulting in the general opening of fire from the Boer positions. In general, the withholding of fire until the trap had been sprung came natural because of the burgher's experience in stalking game and quite often influenced the battle decisively.

THE BATTLEFIELD DILEMMA

Gen. Joubert devised an operational strategy favouring the musketry skills and tactics of the burghers. Based on his experience against the numerically superior forces of the black polities and his belief that in modern warfare the attacker normally suffered higher casualties than the defender, he instructed the commandos to take up defensive positions when confronting the British. To further strengthen this, he added the guideline that the British had to be enticed to attack, thereby creating a situation where the burghers could fight from a defensive position.³¹ This instruction, in principle very similar to their experience of warfare, suited the burghers. It not only limited the risk to the individual, but also enabled the burgher to exploit his musketry skills to the maximum.

The battle for Talana (20 October 1899), being the first major battle of the war, provides us with a good example of the battlefield conditions the British were to face in South Africa. After occupying Talana Hill, approximately three kilometres east of the town of Dundee, the Boers under Gen. Lucas Meyer made no effort to conceal their position. The Boer artillery opened the battle, but was soon answered and silenced by the two British batteries. The bombardment of the Boer positions immediately forced the burghers to take cover. With the distance too great for effective rifle fire, small groups of burghers moved closer to the enemy by going down the front slope of Talana Hill.³²

Maj.-Gen. Penn Symons decided to remove the Boers from Talana by means of an artillery bombardment, followed by a frontal attack by the infantry, after which the cavalry was to attack the Boers as soon as they broke position and fled, a typical Aldershot set-piece battle. This in itself was contrary to the new tactics adopted in British doctrine since 1896. In addition to its primary task of destruction, the artillery bombardment had the secondary function of enabling the

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Breytenbach, pp. 165-6.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 218-9.

infantry to close distance towards the objective by delivering cover fire. However, the nature of the terrain at Talana limited the effect of the artillery fire on the burghers. The Boers, at a distance of 1 000 to 1 800 metres, started firing "well-aimed" shots from under cover resulting in the first serious British casualties from rifle fire being suffered as soon as the infantry stepped out of the riverbed en route to the trees at the foot of Talana.³³ While burghers were inflicting casualties, the British soldiers were doing as they were told, "breaking from quick-time into the double, and from that to a swift run upon the edge of the wood", not stopping to return fire on the invisible enemy.³⁴

Only on arrival at the trees and with the cover of a stone wall on the Boer side of the trees did two companies from the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers, detached specifically for the task, return fire by sending "volleys against the enemy ... upon Talana". The remainder of the infantry took cover, acting as reserve, not participating in combat.³⁵ The majority of these troops had no battlefield experience at all.³⁶ In spite of being delayed by the effectiveness of the Boer rifle fire, the advance up the hill continued and after almost six hours, they were in a position to concentrate behind the stone wall along the crest of Talana Hill.³⁷

By now Talana Hill had been vacated by the majority of the Boers and only a rear guard had been left behind to cover the retreat of Meyer's commando.³⁸ The British fixed bayonets and a few moments later the command for the bayonet charge came from Col. RH Gunning, Commanding Officer of the 60th Rifles. At that moment the Boer rear guard fired on the attacking British by snapping their rifles to tremendous effect.³⁹ Notwithstanding heavy casualties inflicted upon the British, the Boers were eventually driven from Talana Hill by sheer force of numbers.

From a comparison of the casualties suffered by the British (223) and the Boers (130), the following conclusions can be made.⁴⁰ Given the short period of engagement and relative ineffectiveness of the Boer artillery, the majority of the

³³ T Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), p. 130.

³⁴ F Maurice, p. 131.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

³⁶ Pakenham, p. 129.

³⁷ Breytenbach, p. 224.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

³⁹ Amery, pp. 163-4.

⁴⁰ The losses indicated are as provided by Maurice. From these figures had been deducted the losses obtained by the British because of the capture of Möller's cavalry as well as the POW (prisoners of war) taken by both sides. The figures shown are the number of men dead or wounded at Talana Hill.

223 men lost by the British must have resulted from rifle fire. Furthermore, given the extended periods during which the Boers were subjected to the British artillery, some of the burghers lost would have resulted from the artillery bombardment in spite of the alleged ineffectiveness thereof. The Battle of Talana Hill thus proved that the British suffered losses disproportionate to the outcome thereof. To Joubert, however, in spite of the disappointment experienced due to the defeat, it served as conformation to his tactical guidelines.

This general pattern was also followed the next day during Gen. Kock's defence of the hills a kilometre and a half south-east of Elandsplaagte Station. The Boer vanguard under Commandant AF Schiel and Field-Cornet J Pienaar were involved in skirmishes over long distances since early morning, fighting a retreating battle back to the main Boer position.⁴¹ The battle restarted in earnest after the arrival of the British reinforcements. Col. Ian Hamilton, responsible for the infantry attack on the Boer position, gave the order for the three infantry units to deploy in the extended order, leading to relatively few casualties during the initial advance.⁴²

Within the ranks, however, very little had changed. The effectiveness of the Boer rifle fire started to severely affect the British advance as the 1st Devonshire Regiment (responsible for the frontal attack) approached to approximately 1 100 metres. For the next 300 metres, the Devons continued to advance, acting on whistles and firing in volleys as if on a field exercise. Eventually the acting Officer Commanding, Maj. CW Park, gave the order for individual fire.⁴³ This enabled the individual soldiers to contribute to the battle in a more productive way. Not only could they now make effective use of cover, but they could also aim at leisure, ensuring fire that was more accurate. The Devons now served to keep the Boers' attention while the Manchesters moved into a position from where the Boer left flank could be attacked. With support from the artillery and firing from the Devonshire regiment preventing the burghers from delivering effective fire (and with some assistance from a thunderstorm), the Manchesters succeeded in dislocating the burghers from their position, sending the majority of them fleeing on their horses. This in turn led to a devastating cavalry charge on the fleeing Boers.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Amery, pp. 179-80.

⁴² Pakenham, p. 136.

⁴³ Maurice, pp. 164-5.

⁴⁴ Breytenbach, pp. 249-52.

A comparison of the total number of men lost, indicates that the British suffered 263 men killed or wounded, compared to 175 burghers killed or wounded.⁴⁵ When considering that the battle lasted for most of the day, the British losses, compared to those suffered at Talana, showed definite improvement.

The remainder of the battles fought in Natal as part of the Boer offensive, resulting in the siege of Ladysmith, was fought by Boer forces equal or larger in size than that of the British. During the initial stages of these battles, the British casualties resulting from the individual firing of the burghers, were so severe that the British were unable to carry through the attack.⁴⁶ The tactical dilemma the British found themselves in becomes clearer when considering the following statistics:

Battle	Boer casualties, excluding POWs	Number of rounds used by British ⁴⁷	Number of rounds used per Boer loss
Talana	130	82 000	631
Elandsplaagte	175	61 212	350
Rietfontein	44	52 951	1 203
Pepworth Hill	91 ⁴⁸	433 247 ⁴⁹	4 761

Figure 2⁵⁰

The initial battles fought on the western front against Lt-Gen. Lord Methuen's division were fought very much on the same lines. The most important difference, although not necessarily so intended, was that the Boer positions at Belmont and Graspan at the end emerged to be mere delaying positions. A few aspects of tactical importance did however materialise. The Free State burghers on Gun Hill (during the Battle of Belmont) held their fire until the leading British troops were within 150 metres from the foot of the hill. In spite of this the leading British battalions were able to close distance to the foot of the hill on which the Boers were

⁴⁵ The losses indicated are as found in Maurice, p. 464.

⁴⁶ Some of the attacks were mere demonstrations and therefore not intended to be pushed home, but even during these, the casualties were unacceptably high.

⁴⁷ All these rounds had not necessarily been shot. It seems likely that the figures include ammunition not accounted for after the battle. This however does not nullify the argument.

⁴⁸ Breytenbach, p. 338.

⁴⁹ This most probably includes the ammunition taken by the Boers with the capture of Lt-Col. Carleton and his force.

⁵⁰ Maurice, pp. 462-5. Unfortunately, comparative figures are not available to show the performance of the Boers in this regard.

positioned, with relative small loss. The reason for this was that they advanced in the open order and under the cover of darkness, denying the Boers the opportunity to inflict heavy casualties.⁵¹ In addition, attempts were made to reduce the visibility of the officers and men by removing, painting khaki or smearing all shiny and conspicuous parts of their uniforms and equipment with mud. The officers were further instructed to be equipped like the men in order to reduce their conspicuousness.⁵² Tactical solutions thus were used in rendering Boer rifle fire less effective.

The companies in depth also supported the attack on the hill by delivering rifle fire on the Boer positions on Gun Hill from the rear. The poor musketry of the British soldiers, unsupported by artillery fire, however, rendered this sensible tactical solution ineffective.⁵³ The burghers were not forced to take better cover and were "leaning freely over their breastworks and picking off" the British soldiers with individual firing during their ascent towards the crest.⁵⁴ As the attack on the Boers was driven home, the burghers that could, withdrew to positions in depth. This constituted the nature of the remainder of the Battle of Belmont with the burghers delivering individual fire up to the stage that their positions were threatened, resulting in the eventual withdrawal. The British suffered 297 men compared to the 35 Boers dead or wounded.⁵⁵

In spite of the benefit of advancing under the cover of darkness, so clearly illustrated at Belmont, the attack on the Boer positions at Graspan commenced in broad daylight and in full sight of the Boers in their defensive positions. Furthermore, surprise was sacrificed in favour of an artillery bombardment commencing at 06:15 on 25 November 1899. During the next few hours the infantry units, under cover of the artillery bombardment and at a distance of 2 000 metres from the Boer positions, formed up in the open order for the attack. As the Naval Brigade converged on the Boer position, the distances between the soldiers decreased to four feet and less, resulting in an increase in casualties and forcing them to stop and return fire at a distance just under 600 metres. From here distance was closed to the foot of the hill occupied by the Boers by fire-and-movement, the men rushing forward for 50 to 80 metres at a time while firing at the Boer position from the prone position between rushes. On ascending the hill, the continuous heavy artillery fire that was delivered on the Boer position was halted and the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-2.

⁵² Breytenbach, p. 24.

⁵³ The artillery only supported the attack at a later stage, but not during the attack on Gun Hill since, according to the plan, "surprise" was to deliver the success.

⁵⁴ Amery, p. 329.

⁵⁵ Breytenbach, pp. 32-3.

position stormed with bayonets fixed, only to find the fleeing Boers, now out of range, riding off.⁵⁶ The British lost 185 soldiers and the Boers 60 burghers (excluding prisoners of war).⁵⁷

The subsequent battles, that is the Battle of Modder River (28 November 1899) and the three battles of the Black Week namely Stormberg (10 December 1899), Magersfontein (11 December 1899) and Colenso (15 December 1899) were all characterised by mistakes made by the British during their advance to contact.⁵⁸ These include advancing in close columns within rifle range of the Boer positions and deploying into battle formations while under fire from the front, as well as cross fire from the sides. These battles further demonstrated the inflexibility of the British military system by persisting with frontal attacks while under devastating (individual) fire from the Boers. This, despite the textbook example demonstrated by Ian Hamilton at Elandsplaagte.

During these battles, with the exception of the Battle of Stormberg, the Boers changed the nature of their defensive, allowing them to exploit their musketry skills at the cost of the unfortunate British soldiers. The Boers were forced to withdraw from their positions during both the battles of Belmont (23 November 1899) and Graspan (25 November 1899). This they attributed not only to the overwhelming size of the British attacking forces, but also to the effectiveness of the British artillery on their defensive positions on the hills.⁵⁹ German observers with the British forces however indicate that the little cavalry available to Methuen was deployed too early in an attempt to envelope the Boer positions. Given the effect of the British cavalry at Elandsplaagte, they argue that the Boers withdrew as the cavalry moved into position.⁶⁰

In the meantime, on the morning of 24 November 1899, in Natal, Commandant Engelbrecht, with three hundred men from Pretoria were involved in a skirmish with the British on or near the Tugela River. In Engelbrecht's report he described how British soldiers had fired on his men from a prepared defensive position. The description then continued to tell how difficult it had been to dislodge

⁵⁶ Amery, pp. 336-9.

⁵⁷ Breytenbach, pp. 52-3.

⁵⁸ Compare Amery, pp. 320-459; Breytenbach, pp. 57-93, 196-325, Maurice, pp. 243-60, 285-303, 316-75 and Pakenham, pp. 191-206, 214-5, 224-41.

⁵⁹ Compare the telegrams sent by Gen. Prinsloo: K.G. 738, Item 336, report dated 23 November 1899 from Gen. Prinsloo to the State President, Bloemfontein, forwarded to the State President, Pretoria (also available in Breytenbach, pp. 464-5) on the Battle of Belmont and the reports forwarded by De la Rey and Prinsloo respectively on 25 and 26 November 1899 on the Battle of Graspan. The latter is to be found in Breytenbach, pp. 466-7.

⁶⁰ The historical section of the Great General Staff.

the British from the position, especially after reinforcements had arrived. He also referred to the difficulty to locate the enemy because of good cover among bushes and cliffs from where the British in the defensive position had been supported. Because of the British position in the bushes, cliffs and trenches (which might have been natural ditches) it had been impossible to close distance to the British position, while the British soldiers were defending their position unhindered. The report then proposed that the only solution was to envelop the British position by attacking from all sides simultaneously (see Appendix).

From Engelbrecht's report, two things become clear. The first is that an enemy entrenched is not easily removed from its position by means of a frontal attack, and secondly (possibly the more important realisation), that a good defensive position does not have to be on a hill as long as it is sufficiently concealed. A trench at the foot of a hill, hidden by bushes and boulders, increases the difficulty in determining the exact position and size of the force holding the position. Unfortunately it could not be confirmed whether this telegram was actually read by Gen. Koos de la Rey. However, it is likely that the contents of this report had been discussed given the intense communication between the commanders on the western front, Pretoria and Bloemfontein during De la Rey's attempt to convince the Boer generals to take up defensive positions on the Modder River. This however needs to be confirmed by further research.

De la Rey now took the next logical step by convincing generals Piet Cronjé and Marthinus Prinsloo (both his seniors) of the necessity to build their next defence on the Modder River with the high ground just north of the river in their back.⁶¹ After the success of Modder River, De la Rey at Magersfontein and Gen. Louis Botha on the Tugela implemented the same concept.⁶² This, together with the tactical mistakes made by the British, contributed to the British defeats at Magersfontein and Colenso. Not denying the above-mentioned factors, a comparison of the casualties suffered by the opposing sides clearly indicates the Boer superiority in their ability to hit their targets (see figure 3). When comparing these casualties (6,4 British soldiers for each Boer) with those before the introduction of well-concealed trenches (3,3 : 1), the effect of the trenches becomes even clearer.⁶³

⁶¹ Meintjies, *De la Rey: Lion of the West* (1966), pp. 37, 48-52 and 112-4.

⁶² Compare Pakenham, pp. 199-200 and 220-1.

⁶³ The casualties "before" include Stormberg while those "after" are illustrated in Figure 6.

Battle	British Casualties	Boer Casualties
Modder River	460	±80
Magersfontein	902	236
Colenso	898	37

Figure 3⁶⁴

In analysing the casualties a few related remarks need to be made. Firstly, the ability of the Boer commanders to enforce fire discipline on their burghers did not come without a conscious effort from their side. During the Battle of Modder River the burghers under Cronjé, deployed on the Boer left, opened fire on the advancing 1st Scots Guards when they were still more than 1 000 metres from the Boer positions.⁶⁵ This sacrificed surprise and the number of casualties that could have resulted from the initial salvo was much lower than expected.

During the Battle of Magersfontein this mistake was not repeated. The burghers only opened fire when the British were less than 400 metres from their position. This can be attributed to the combination of darkness, the sound of the marching soldiers, the orders to deploy, better discipline among the burghers and even the remote possibility of a spy among the British signalling their presence.⁶⁶ This resulted in much heavier casualties from the initial salvo (although most of the shots were high) and the British troops being pinned down much closer to the Boer positions, which in turn resulted in higher casualties.

Louis Botha, in realising the importance of fire discipline, took control over the fire of the burghers a step further. He understood that shots, both rifle and artillery, fired at long distances at the British, only enabled the latter to concentrate their artillery fire on the Boer positions before the infantry was within effective rifle-range.⁶⁷ He therefore, on 4 December 1899, ordered that no one was to fire at the enemy unless he had personally given the signal by firing a cannon. To ensure that this was adhered to, he appointed additional "fighting corporals", one for every 25 burghers.⁶⁸ This enabled him to obtain almost complete surprise when, on the

⁶⁴ See Pakenham, pp. 198, 206 and 240 and Breytenbach, p. 322, specifically for the Boer casualties at Colenso.

⁶⁵ Pakenham, p. 195.

⁶⁶ Compare Breytenbach, pp. 137-40 and Amery, pp. 399-400.

⁶⁷ This was actually advice given by Gen. Joubert after his injury and before his departure from Natal. See Breytenbach, p. 241.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

day of the battle, the burghers opened fire from their invisible positions on Hart's brigade, less than 300 metres from the Tugela.⁶⁹

Secondly, the British experienced extreme difficulty in locating targets to shoot at.⁷⁰ The Boers' knowledge of and skill in using terrain, together with the small, well-concealed target they presented hiding in a trench, combined with the use of smokeless powder, simply proved too much for the unpractised eye of the British soldier, even when using binoculars.⁷¹ Compared to this, the field-trained eyes of the Boers enabled them to deliver extremely accurate fire. "A movement of a hand, the flash of a canteen tin, even the twitch of an ankle attacked by ants - the price was paid in Mauser bullets."⁷²

The effective use of the new magazine-filled rifle with high velocity ammunition using smokeless powder in combination with a well-concealed trench, irreversibly changed battlefield conditions (not unlike those Britain were to experience during the First World War). The advantages obtained by the defender on tactical level implied that these battles never really developed further than the stage of individual fire. With standard practices, it became impossible to cross the battle zone.

THE BRITISH REACTION

The reverses of Black Week forced Britain to rethink its commitment to the war against the two Boer Republics. Field-Marshal Lord Roberts replaced Buller as Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in South Africa and a strategy of giving up terrain and with it the towns under siege for the sake of first achieving military superiority, was adopted. In order to achieve this, the resources, both human and material, available to Roberts were drastically increased.⁷³ Up to the arrival of Roberts's force, the Boers enjoyed a numerical superiority over the British. The arrival of Roberts and the subsequent increase in the number of British soldiers, together with the concentration of his forces against a much smaller opponent, resulted in the Boers not being able to resist in any other way than delaying actions against Roberts's steamroller.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Pakenham, p. 227. There are suggestions that fire was opened moments before Botha's own signal, however the desired effect was achieved irrespective of this.

⁷⁰ Compare Pakenham, pp. 195-6, 227 and Maurice, pp. 249 and 355.

⁷¹ Greenhill Gardyne, p. 101.

⁷² Pakenham, p. 205.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 243, 245, 249-53.

⁷⁴ Compare Breytenbach, pp. 163-253, Maurice, pp. 1-230 and Pakenham, pp. 311-30, 419-37.

After the Franco-German War, military thinkers, on debating the effect of modern rifles, regarded the defence the stronger form of warfare and argued that the frontal attack against a defensive position was impossible. The British victories at Talana, Elandslaagte, Belmont, Graspan and even Modder River, to some officers were proof to the contrary, arguing that it (Talana) was "a splendid example of what British infantry could achieve against modern rifle fire".⁷⁵ During these battles different techniques (as discussed) were used to different effect, resulting in casualties at different stages of the attack. The number of British casualties compared to that of the Boers, however, were unacceptably high and increased as the Boers adopted their defensive approach, combining their musketry skills with the benefits of the defensive. Numerical superiority as answer to Boer firepower, based on their musketry skills and the use of trenches, thus was not enough and the solution had to be found somewhere else.

Roberts, on his arrival in South Africa, realised that "any attempt to take a position by direct assault will assuredly fail". Together with this, he understood that, due to their mobility, the Boers were able to change their position and the direction of their defence, thereby turning any flank attack into a frontal attack. Roberts therefore decided that success was to be found, firstly, in avoiding frontal attacks by attempting to outflank Boer positions, and secondly, in destroying Boer mobility by the "capture or destruction of their horses". This he formalised in his *Notes for Guidance in [the] South African War* dated 5 February 1900.⁷⁶ In the above-mentioned guidelines, he added that the infantry were to deploy in open order (six to eight paces between troops) at a distance of 1 400 to 1 700 metres from the enemy, thereby decreasing the ability of the Boers to inflict casualties during the vulnerable stage of forming up for the attack.⁷⁷

On the western front, Roberts accomplished the outflanking of the Boer forces by leaving the railway and marching eastwards and then turning north towards Bloemfontein. In doing this Roberts forced Cronjé to leave his position at Magersfontein, commencing a retreat before the British divisions towards Bloemfontein.⁷⁸ In so doing, the outflanking movement on operational level was achieved. On the tactical level however, the stubbornness of Kitchener to implement these guidelines resulted in the highest number of British casualties on any one day during the war, 1 209 dead and wounded during the Battle of Paardeberg.⁷⁹ After Lt.-Gen. T Kelly-Kenny had forced Cronjé into a defensive position, he devised a plan by which

⁷⁵ Greenhill Gardyne, p. 15.

⁷⁶ Maurice, p. 445.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 444.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 412-3.

⁷⁹ Pakenham, p. 339.

Cronjé's position was to be sealed off with infantry and then the Boers would be bombarded into surrender with artillery.⁸⁰ This plan was consistent with Roberts's guidelines.

Gen. Lord Kitchener, on arriving at Paardeberg, assumed command and decided on an immediate assault on Cronjé's position. This resulted in numerous senseless frontal attacks before, eventually, Kelly-Kenny's plan was adopted, leading to the surrender of Cronjé.⁸¹ Maurice's attempt to justify Kitchener's actions by arguing that Roberts's guidelines might not have been distributed to all levels at Paardeberg,⁸² is wrong since the guidelines had been distributed in a memorandum under the signatures of both Roberts and Kitchener.⁸³ The remainder of the advance on Bloemfontein and later Pretoria was opposed by nothing more than delaying actions.

With regard to tactical solutions to Boer musketry skills, combined with the defensive, one further development justifies mentioning. Buller realised through trial and error that co-ordination was the key to breaking through the Boer defences on the Tugela. On deciding to launch yet another attack against the Boers (after the failures of Spioenkop and Vaalkrans), this time by enveloping the Boer defences at Colenso, he decided to first seize Cingolo. Then, after establishing a firm footing, to continue onto Monte Cristo, thus rolling the Boer defensive line up in a westerly direction. In order to achieve the first objective Buller concentrated his artillery on Hussar Hill with the mission to "assist in the preparation of the attack".⁸⁴

To further strengthen fire support for the attack on Cingolo, Buller deployed the Fifth Division on Hussar Hill and Col. Lord Dundonald's Brigade as well as the Second Division in the Blaaukrantz Valley on the 14th of February. These forces immediately started entrenching in a position from where rifle fire could be delivered on the Boer positions on Cingolo and the hills from where the Boers on Cingolo could be supported.⁸⁵ The attack was initiated by an artillery barrage starting at 06:00 on 17 February 1900 with 50 guns firing at the Boer positions, the infantry from their trenches also contributing to the fire. Maj.-Gen. N Lyttelton's Division, with the two leading brigades in open order, now started closing distance towards Cingolo. At just over 800 metres, a favourable firing position was occupied from where the Boers on Cingolo were further pinned down. Maj.-Gen. HJT

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 333-9.

⁸² Maurice, p. 113.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

⁸⁴ The historical section of the Great General Staff, pp. 230, 236 and 239.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

Hildeyard, the commander of one of the leading brigades, then sent a battalion to carry out a flanking movement on the Boers on Cingolo. With fire converging from so many directions and no substantial support arriving, the Boers on Cingolo soon withdrew.⁸⁶

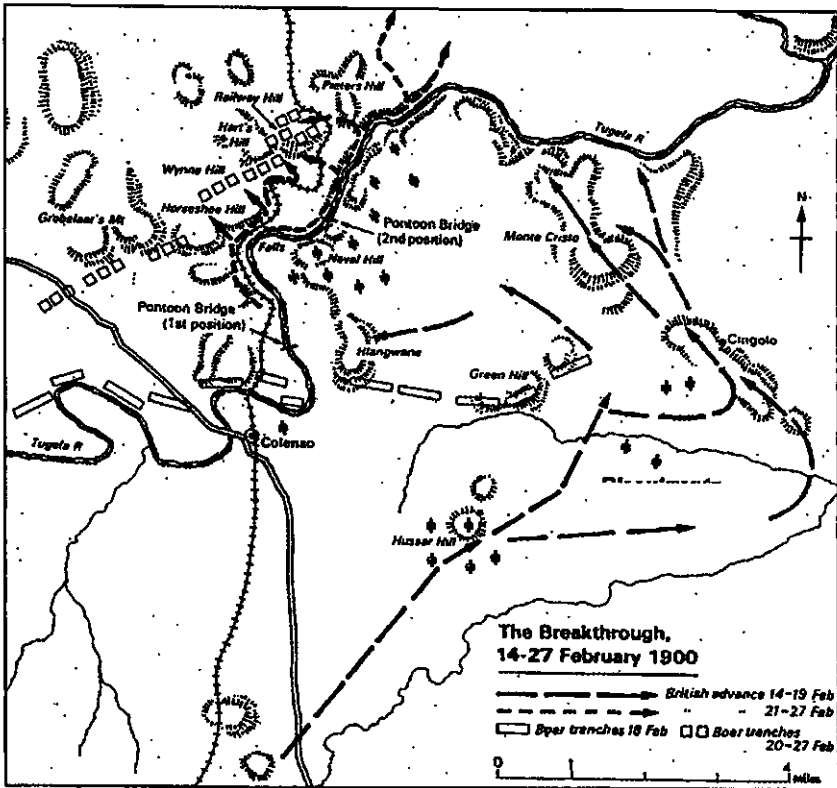
The following morning Hildyard's Brigade, with Dundonald's Brigade as well as the artillery in support, headed for Monte Cristo. As the advancing troops moved out of sight of the artillery, it seized firing. The two leading battalions now, upon having to cross an almost level few hundred metres towards the Boer positions, soon came under effective fire from the Boers forcing them to delay their advance. At 08:00, after repeated demands, the artillery again opened fire on the Boers, enabling the infantry to cross the stretch of open ground without heavy casualties, thereby forcing the Boers to evacuate their positions on Monte Cristo.⁸⁷ From this, two things were clear. Firstly, that close fire support by artillery was essential in order to reduce casualties on the side of the attacker, and secondly, that initial steps had to be taken to breach the mental block in delivering close fire support to own forces while they were not visible to the artillery. Unfortunately for many a loyal British soldier, it took another frontal blunder at Hart's Hill, with the Boers standing upright in their trenches firing heavy continuous fire into their ranks, for the British infantry commanders on the Tugela to realise that the days of the infantry attacking in isolation were over.⁸⁸

Buller's plan (in which the role of his staff and that of Lt.-Gen. C Warren should not be denied) for breaking through at Pietershoogte, was simple but effective. Of importance is the employment of his infantry, but more specifically artillery in neutralising the effectiveness of Boer musketry. The 1st Corps was divided into four groupings. The first grouping, the fixing force, consisting of the 2nd Division under Lyttelton and Coke's Brigade, was to launch limited attacks against the Boer positions from Colenso and Wynne Hill. These attacks fixed the Boers over a wide front, restricting their ability to redeploy by moving reinforcements against the main attack.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 234-6.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 239-41.

⁸⁸ Pakenham, pp. 356-8.

Figure 4⁸⁹

The second grouping, the reserve, consisting primarily of mounted units, was kept south of the Tugela to exploit a successful attack.⁹⁰ The infantry units in the reserve were also to deliver fire from the northern slopes of Hlangwhane and Monte Cristo in order to prevent the Boers from delivering effective fire from opposite the Tugela.⁹¹ The effectiveness of these units were further increased by the 22 machine-guns concentrated there like an artillery battery.⁹² Although this in

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

⁹⁰ CM Bakkes, *Die militêre situasie aan die Benede-Tugela op die vooraand van die Britse deurbraak by Pietershoogte*, as published in the Archives Year Book for South African History, Thirtieth Year, Vol. I (1967), pp. 37-8.

⁹¹ Maurice, p. 508.

⁹² Breytenbach, p. 543.

itself can be criticised, one must not forget that when providing fire-support, the concentration of a recourse reaps benefits since such fire can then be controlled more effectively and directed to where concentrated fire is needed.

The third grouping, the attacking force, was organised into three brigades respectively under the command of Maj.-Generals G Barton and Norcott and Col. W Kitchener. Barton was to open the attack on Pietershoogte with Kitchener's attack on Railway Hill to follow as soon as Barton's attack had taken effect. In doing so, the effectiveness of the Boer fire was further reduced by denying them the opportunity to concentrate their defence against a single attacking force. The third phase, consisting of Norcott's attack on Hart's Hill, was to await the successful occupation of Railway Hill.⁹³ This implied that the British now occupying Railway Hill, would support the attack on Hart's Hill. Furthermore, the Boers on Hart's Hill would be denied support from Railway Hill, further reducing the risk to Norcott's force, enabling them to focus on the objective ahead.

The fourth grouping consisted of the overwhelming majority of artillery available to Buller. After having concentrated his artillery en masse on the southern bank of the Tugela, the instructions to the artillery, issued by Warren on the 27th, deviated from the traditional role of the artillery. Apart from the normal preparative bombardment on the Boer trenches, they were instructed by Warren not to seize fire as the infantry closed, but "[w]hen no longer safe to shoot at [the] enemy's position, ... shoot over the enemy's trenches ... so as to make the enemy think he is still being shelled, and also catch him as he runs down the other side".⁹⁴ Amery goes as far as to say that the gunners were warned "not [to] be afraid of hitting their own men".⁹⁵ The intention of this was initially not fully grasped, and the orders to the gunners before the battle commenced, had instructed them to redirect their fire to at least 460 metres behind the Boer position as soon as they were of the opinion that own forces might be injured as a result of artillery fire. This restriction, however, was not adhered to by all as the battle progressed.⁹⁶ Cdr. Limpus, in command of the naval guns, later wrote: "[W]e felt that they [the Boers] must be crushed down by shell fire and that our own men must be helped all we knew".⁹⁷ This implies that the gunners themselves now also realised that by firing as close as possible ahead of the advancing infantry, the Boers would be denied the opportunity to deliver effective musketry fire on the advancing British soldiers. This enabled the infantry

⁹³ Maurice, p. 508.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 509.

⁹⁵ Amery, p. 535.

⁹⁶ Maurice, p. 510.

⁹⁷ CM Bakkes, *Die Britse deurbraak aan die Benede-Tugela op Majubadag 1900*, as published by the Central Documentation Service, SADF, Publication No. 3, (1973), p. 32.

not only to advance much closer to the Boer positions before starting the assault, but also restricted casualties for the duration of the assault.

The remainder of the war saw very few battles in which the Boers opposed the British in full-scale battles. After losing control over the two republics to the British, the Boers no longer possessed the resources to do this. This forced them to adopt a strategy of guerrilla warfare. The nature of their contact with the much larger British forces also changed to one of hit-and-run, or fleeing ahead of superior numbers.

CONCLUSION

In confronting the Boers in southern Africa, Britain exposed her soldiers to yet another colonial war in which a successful campaign depended upon the ability to adapt as quickly as possible to the unique circumstances of the new colonial war. The opponent it was to face in South Africa differed vastly in nature from what the army was used to in colonial wars. The disciplined British Army, trained for combat in the European theatre, faced a force comprising of "burghers" not regarding themselves as soldiers and organised in what can be called an informal structure based on co-operation rather than discipline.

The British Army with its institutionalised systems and procedures acquired modern rifles before the war. In spite of a new tactical doctrine, the army was not able to fully realise the effect these weapons were to have on the battlefield. This resulted in generals adhering to old practices and frontal attacks. The soldier was a mere pawn to react on command and to refrain from own initiative. Similar institutionalised doctrine and systems, did not restrict the Boers in making the initial changes by adapting to the all-important technological development of the time: the smokeless, long-range magazine rifle. This the British did not anticipate, resulting, in spite of the apparent tactical victories, in severe casualties and the inability to cross the battle zone in an attempt to effectively engage in battle with the Boers. As hostilities continued, the Boers gained experience and the crucial connection was made between the destructive firepower possible with modern rifles in the hands of a good marksman and a good defensive position. This led to the British reverses of Modder River, Magersfontein and Colenso and an increase in British casualties in relation to that of the Boers from 3,3:1 to 6,4:1.

Roberts on his arrival came to the correct conclusion. The solution for Boer superiority on the battlefield was to be found in tactics. By avoiding frontal attacks and, when attacking, to do so with the support of all available resources, he was to reduce the effectiveness of the Boer rifle fire to tolerable levels. Unfortunately for many a British soldier, the old ways were to be tested once more at Paardeberg. After the initial blunder at the hands of Kitchener, the guidelines provided by Roberts were applied leading to possibly the biggest British military success of the war with the surrender of Cronjé and what could be described as the Boer Main Force. Buller added to this by improving on the optimisation of fire-support to the attacking infantry and thereby further reducing the effectiveness of Boer rifle fire. With the numbers now against them and the effect of their musketry skills reduced, eventual defeat was unavoidable.

The variables contributing to the effective waging of the battle were the familiarity with firearms, experience, individuality, training, flexibility and discipline. In all of these, with the exception of discipline, the Boers outperformed the British during the opening stages of the Anglo-Boer War. As experience was gained, the British developed tactical solutions and were able to reduce these disadvantages by dictating the battlefield conditions.

Appendix

Telegram d.d. 24/11/99 van H.T.D. aan Asst Genl Grobler, Oshoek⁹⁸

9.30 nm. Volgende telegram ontvangen van Comdt Engelbrecht te hulpen aan asst. genl Meyer. Pretoria begint laaste nacht met drie honderd manen uit getrokken naar Tugela. Hebde huizen naby de drift gestoppen en in leezit gevormen zonder geschoten te hebben. Doch, na een kort poosje werd uit het schans naby het drift op mijn burghers gevuurd en daar het rivier vol was kon ik nig door trekken. Toen werd doorde burghers die een positie had in een berg naby het drift het vyand by honderden gewaar dat zij aan het naderen waren aan het schans weer in bezit te nemen. Toen waren de burghers die de huizen in bezit hadden omtrent twee honderd schreden van het schans verplicht dezelve te verlaten en een andere positie in de bergen en bosschen in te nemen want die vyand vuurde toen zoo geweldig met de maxim kanon dat van onze zijde geen tegenstand kon gedaan worden met de mausergeweren. Daarde vyand in hun schans waren sommige ook in de ruige bosschen en kranzen zoodat men nauwelijks een te zien kon krijgen. Een hevig gevecht volgde toen voor omtrent twee uren lang. Daarna moest ik mijne burghers laten terugtrekken aan onze zijde. Een licht door de hand gewond van Bethal burghers met name Piet Delport. Van den vyand door ons gezien eenige gesneurveld, eenige gewond, ook enige paarden gedood. Doch het is onmogelijk te zeggen hoeveel van den vyand is thans gekampen op het berg aan de andere zijde van Tugela. Doch het schans naby het drift word door een sterken macht bewaakt en zoodra ons bespeurden komt de geheele macht en daar en zulke slooten, kranzen en bosschen kunnen wy hen niet verhinderd. De beste plan dien uren bestaan om de vyand te verdrywen of gevangen te nemen is dat men het van alle kanten bestormen, namelijk van de achterzijde en van onze zijde. Want al zonden wy hem uit het schans verdrywen hebben zy zulke sterke en goede posities in de ruige bosschen en kranzen dat voor een Commando onmogelyk gemaakt wordt om den vyand achterna te zetten. Eindigt.

⁹⁸ K.G. 738, Item 355, Report dated 24 November 1899 from Commandant Engelbrecht forwarded by the H.T.D. to Pretoria via Asst Gen. Grobler at Oshoek. The original document contained no punctuation or capital letters. These were included to facilitate reading. The document is indulged in the paper since I was unable to find any reference to this specific telegram in any of the sources used. Breytenbach for example refers to the telegrams preceding and following this telegram in the above mentioned file. I am therefore of the opinion that the existence and possible effect of this document justify further research.