

THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF PAARDEBURG

HEROES OF THE B



LORD ROBERTS

Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces at Paardeburg.

Seven years ago last month Canadian volunteers were helping British regulars to draw teeth from the lion of the Transvaal, General Cronje.

Seven years ago last month the final tooth was pulled, and upon the advice of Dr. Roberts, the patient left for a health resort in the South Atlantic, to recover from the effects of the operation.

The anniversary of Paardeburg! To some it is fraught with sorrow, for it only recalls that the bones of cherished sons and brothers mingle with the African soil.

To others it is chiefly reminiscent of painful pain, but to the majority it speaks of a time in their lives when they had the privilege of being present at the making of dramatic history.

Few can forget the blistering days and chilling nights; the sunlit sweep of many velds and the curving line of the Modder along the banks of which the stout and ragged Boers dug for protection in the face of a mercurial bombardment from machine guns and rifles. Few, indeed can forget that Paardeburg was part siege, part battle. Cut off, in attempting to ford Paardeburg Drift, the Boer leader's force of four thousand threw up fortifications along the high banks of the stream and settled down to resist until the arrival of reinforcements.

Then, British heliographs twinkled, British cavalry horses were ridden to death, and British infantry lived on excitement and hard tack. We all knew that something of supreme importance was impending. But to ask a question was to face, by way of reply, another query.

It was potent that a great movement

was in progress. The exact why or wherefore, though—that's where the shoe pinched. Although at the front, the rank and file knew less than the readers of the press despatches thousands of miles away.

Dusty columns plodded forward, cavalry jolted past, batteries lumbered along, oxen and mules straggled under the lash of Kaffir transport teamsters. Rumors flew, sweat beaded many faces, and shoulders ached under the rifle's weight.

Cronje was being pursued, Cronje was safe in Bloemfontein. Cronje had joined De Wet. Cronje was making a last stand. Cronje's men had mutilated, Cronje was fighting for his life—no one was positive as to what was just happening; but all were agreed that General Cronje was a very busy man.

The latter survival, if somewhat colorless, was accurate. The doughty chieftain was busy. He was handling a large order. He was trying to stem a khaki tide that rolled across the Modder plain from sun to sun. He was trapped, yet game. Though with a sinister, an almost black reputation, admiration of the Boer general was openly expressed as the day wore along. The burghers were stubborn to the verge of madness. Their position was ringed around with cannon.

Overhead hung a balloon. In it were men with field-glasses who signalled the substance of what was taking place in the enemy's laager.

Beyond were the bivouacs of many brigades. Miles away were patrols of cavalry to beat back any possible rescuers. On the bare, rounded summits of distant kopjes were posted

detachments to watch for the appearance of hostile troops.

It was my fortune, as a member of G. Company, to spend a couple of days and nights on one of these isolated hills.

We christened it Starvation Kopje. The bill of fare was not composing. We were haggard and profane. There was one youth who seemed to find deep gratification in referring to his mother's excellence as a cook. I never doubted him, but his confidential allusions to juicy steaks, meaty potatoes, frothy coffee, deep pies, and honey and hot cakes were peculiarly irritating. He became unpopular.

But if sustenance was practically eliminated, the view from the hill's bleak crest was exhilarating.

Under a sky of deepest blue, flecked with morsels of fleecy clouds, the yellow veldt stretched away, apparently endless in its scope. It had the vastness of the ocean. Here and there level-topped or cone-shaped kopjes, veiled in violet haze, dotted the great spaces. The winding course of the Modder could be traced, but one's gaze would wander to the clump of sickly brush in a loop of the river, where men battled against desperate odds.

There would be intervals between the bombardments, but the ensuing silence seemed more ominous than the crashing of the artillery.

More than once was opportunity given for the holding of an armistice, for a chance to surrender, but, with dogged and sullen courage, the burghers refused and clung to their works. Then would recommence a period of destruction. The Boers had burrowed beneath the banks, but it was difficult to convince oneself that life could continue, as shell after shell from the steel throats out on the plain whirled into the position. The turf was ploughed, the banks scarred, every apparent shelter searched by the relentless gunners, yet there was nothing approaching annihilation.

February, the 27th, was a whimsical day, from the weather point of view. The afternoon was gray, with occasional gleams of sunshine. Darkness fell, with the quickness common to the climate.

Our regiment had received orders, and we were expected to carry them out without wonder and without question. In conjunction with the other battalions of the brigade, the Gordon Highlanders, the Cornwalls and the Shropshires, we were to advance, under cover of the night, against one of the important Boer positions, dig a trench, occupy it, and await further instructions. It was felt that such a course would render the nearest Boer trench untenable, and that the movement would bring to a consummation the long-drawn struggle.

How little incidents stick in our memory! The regiment, beyond the field hospital, stood at ease by a growth of low brush along the river bank. Presently we received permission to sit down. Occasionally, you would hear the zip of bullet, seemingly fired at random from the laager ahead. We were too fatigued to comment at any length on the undertaking which had been entrusted to us. In my section, a man sank against some shrubbery, and, curling up, fell

asleep. A few yards away, or down on the narrow shore, a few officers stood chatting. One was an officer who has long been in the Canadian service. He is a native of Quebec, and is stationed there at present. He had removed his sun-helmet, and was gravely digging in the bowl of a briar pipe.

The few who were not too tired to talk conversed in whispers. At last, after about half-an-hour by the river bank, we were aroused by rudge, more than by voice, and moved to the outlying British trench, into which we silently filed. Ahead was darkness and the Boer position. The distance was perhaps two hundred yards. To find repose in the trench was to endure a cramped posture but within a quarter of an hour, after curling up on the ground, I was nodding. Then somebody prodded me, and I awoke, stiff and chilled.

It was past midnight, starlight and frosty.

"Fall in!" The order was whispered by the various section commanders along the line.

There were two ranks, the front with bayonets fixed, and the rear with rifles slung, and every man carrying alternately a spade and pick. I was in the rear rank. There was the soft shuffling of many feet, the anxious starting into the blackness ahead, the occasional grating of a pebble against a steel-shod boot, and the advance had commenced.

I cannot clearly remember how long our section sole forward, but all seemed to halt instinctively, as if intuition had warned us. A subaltern tip-toed down the line.

"For God's sake, don't talk out loud!" he whispered.

We stood irresolute. Ahead there was profound silence. We were about to take a few more steps, when from the left we heard a faint clatter. Someone had walked against tin cans strung on wires—a burglar's danger alarm.

Instantly, it almost seemed part of the disturbance, there rang out a single shot. We flung ourselves to the bare ground as the gloom in front was split by a dancing line of fire that zig-zagged and raced from end to end of the Boer position.

A hail of bullets sang overhead. Again, there was the rippling streak of red light, and the man on my right clutched his shoulder. Bullets were thudding the ground—whizzing from an apparently inexhaustible source. From volleys, the shooting changed to independent firing and, for at least half an hour the Mausers were worked incessantly.

But that half hour was well utilized by those who lay exposed, and the exposure was absolute. The enemy trench was hardly forty yards distant, and the only cover between us was a decaying steer. It required more courage to crawl behind the beast than to remain in the open, where the surroundings, if more dangerous, were less unbearable.

That half hour was occupied in digging. Personally, I was more concerned with that particular form of labor, than with answering the Boer shots. I devoted myself exclusively to it.

I dug with hands and bayonet. I had a passion for digging. I never worked with such whole-hearted fervor, with such unselfish zeal before. I have not toiled so recklessly since.

With the coming of the tender South African dawn, the trench, though crooked and crude, was completed. Inside crouched men, their rifles wavering over the heaps of fresh dug earth. A few yards down the trench lay a private. He had been shot in the stomach. He was writhing—that was all.

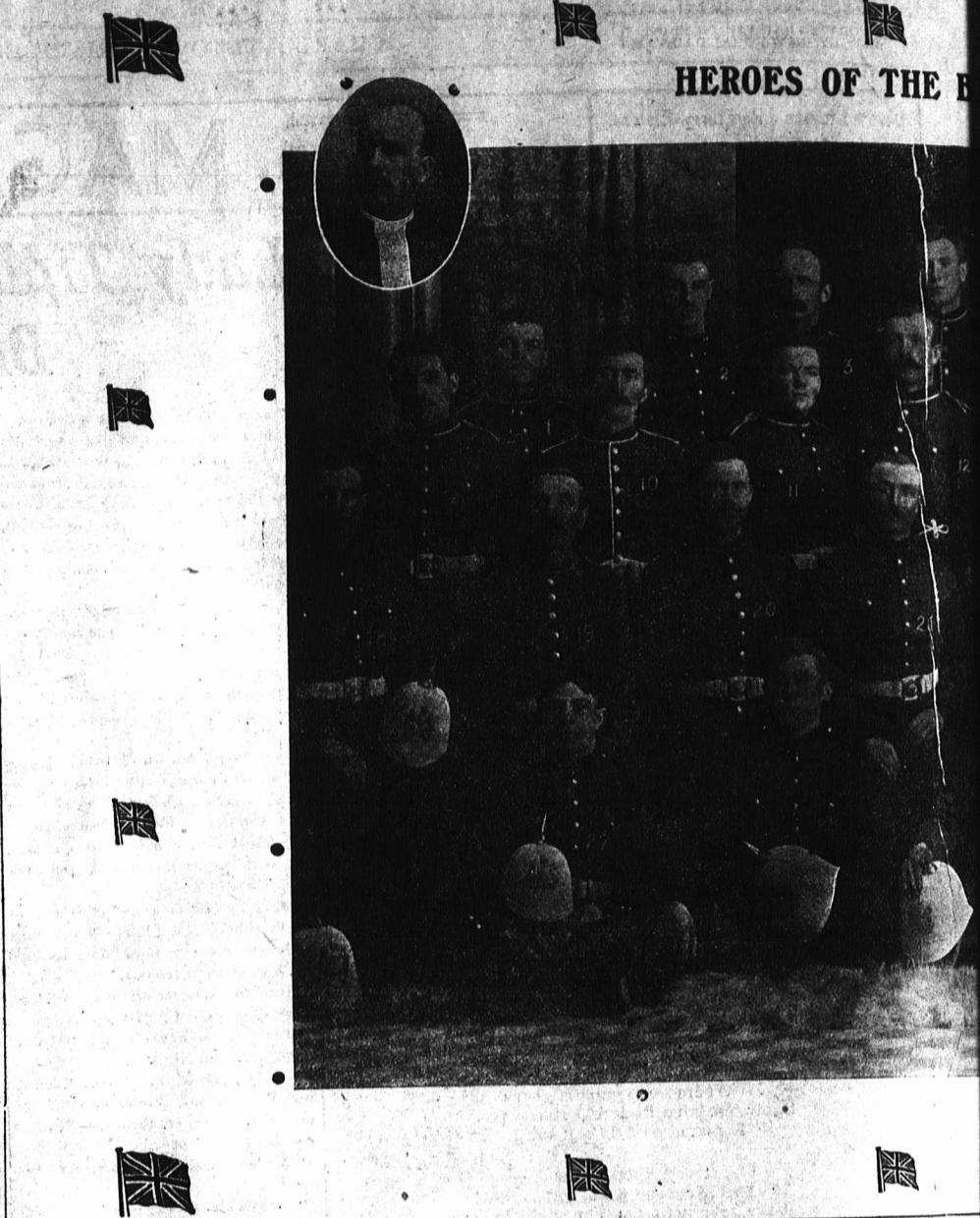
Out in front lay scattered a half dozen or so still forms. Close by on the ground was wet, and over the body swarmed a myriad ants. The tension was almost to snapping point. Someone with a husky laugh, mentioned "bayonet charge." Both sides waited and watched. Presently a rag fluttered above the opposite trench.

A voice yelled "They are coming in—coming in!"

Then a face appeared below the rag, and next, a man dragged himself out of the trench, and with the emblem of surrender held aloft, walked forward a few spaces and halted. He looked like a seedy clerk or book keeper. He seemed uncertain as to his reception, but by this time, practical assurance was given that the signal was comprehended—and Paardeburg was won.

A few hours later, a detachment was sent over the ground to gather up the coats, picks, spades, bottles and guns, which were dropped during the construction of the trench.

We were busy, when a dapper little man on horseback, riding in advance



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| 1. H. H. Brown. | 8. J. Edw. Small. | 15. The |
| 2. H. L. McLean. | 9. Fredk. Waye. | 16. Fre |
| 3. A. J. B. Mellish. | 10. F. B. McRae. | 17. Nel |
| 4. Leslie McBeth. | 11. LeRoy Harris. | 18. Jan |
| 5. L. Gaudet. | 12. J. S. Walker. | 19. Mic |
| 6. H. V. McKinnon. | 13. R. Ernest Lord. | 20. Jos |
| 7. J. O'Reilly. | 14. Lorne Stewart. | 21. Ric |

of other officers went past. He wore plain khaki dress, had keen gray eyes, a red face, and heavy gray moustache. "Who's that cover?" asked a member of our detachment.

"That coye," answered the lieutenant in charge. "is Lord Robert."

W. J. R.

The disaster following so closely on the Zulu massacre of the 24th Regiment at Isandula, in a campaign against Cetewayo, rankled deeply for nearly twenty years in the hearts of British soldiers, and the nation, for at Majuba Mountain the Boers turned the British out of what was considered a strong position. The Boer revolt of 1890-1 began with the ambush of the right wing of the 94th Regiment, at Brakenburg, while on the march to Pretoria, where the troops had orders to concentrate. In less than half an hour over a hundred officers and men were treacherously killed or wounded by the Boers in ambush. This base action was followed by others as bad, notwithstanding that the British army had saved the Transvaal from being captured by Cetewayo and his warriors, and their agreement of 1877.

The small British garrisons were at once besieged, the one at Potchefstroom especially being short of provisions. Sir George Colley, in command at Natal, though having but a small army—about twelve hundred bayonets and artillery—gallantly determined to fight his way in, if possible, and relieve the latter place, and then hold on the defensive until reinforcements were sent him from India and Great Britain. His route march was by the road running through the pass of Laing's Nek, which the Boers had occupied on the first gunshot, and put in a strong state of defence. Still Colley hoped to dislodge them and clear the road with the few troops he commanded.

He began his advance on the 31st January, 1881, to Laing's Nek, with the 88th Regiment, a battalion of the 60th Royal Rifles, a number of sailors and marines, and some troops of Natal

Mcun'e's Rifles. The Boers held the pass with three times his number, and were entrenched on the side of the hills bordering on Laing's Nek. Joubert and Smidt commanded the enemy.

As the storming party moved up the slope of the pass in open column of companies with colors flying, they were met with a terrific fire on all sides from modern rifles, and soon fully one-third of the brave fellows of the 88th were put out of action. It being futile, with so small a force, to dislodge the enemy, the survivors were ordered to draw off, reforming their shattered lines behind the 60th Rifles, who covered the retirement in good order, the Boers not daring to come out in the open plain and give battle.

The steady assault of the 88th and their discipline as they guarded their colors under such a murderous fire from breech-loaders in the hands of unerring marksmen, was magnificent, but it was not war, scientifically carried out. The British troops were not discouraged by the repulse at the Nek, but the Boers at once began a movement with a view to cutting General Colley's communication with Natal. On the 8th February the general sallied out from his camp at Mount Pleasant, this time with a wing of the 60th, four guns, and a small party of mounted



SIR GEORGE COLLEY.

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1. In da s of Wolfe And plant On Ca Here may And, The Thist The
 2. At Queens Our t For freed Firmly And these We swe Our watch The Ma
 3. Our fair D From C May peace And ple At d may t Which And flouris The Ma
 4. On merry i May kin God bless And Irel Then swell Till rock God save on The Ma



BIVOUAC AFTER BATTLE