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# WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA.

## Interesting Particulars of the Struggle Between Great Britain and the Boers.

**BATTLE OF COLENZO.**  
BRIGHT START AND ITS TRAGIC TERMINATION.  
(Special correspondent of the London Daily Mail.)

GRIEVELEY CAMP, December 20.—In my last week's letter I referred to the advance from Frere to here, and the elation which the move gave the men. It is now my unpleasant duty to record that this happy feeling was short-lived, as on the following day it gave place to dejection and disappointment, our repulse when we endeavored to occupy Colenso being responsible for this rapid change. The troops started out with the utmost confidence—confidence in their own strength and in the judgment of their commander. General Buller had given the mode of attack the serious consideration it deserved, for he was aware that the forces commanded by Lord Methuen and General Gatacre having been compelled to temporarily suspend operations the British public looked to him to inflict such a blow on the Dutch forces as would check their growing confidence and weaken them all along the line. But, though cognizant of our strength and capabilities, he either made the common mistake of underrating the numbers and fighting ability of the enemy, or was misled by an incompetent intelligence department.

At any rate, whatever the cause, subsequent events proved that in his mode of attack he attempted an impossible task, one which the utmost bravery of our troops could not accomplish, though the exhibition of that bravery must be added to the long list of heroic performances by British arms in the making of the empire.

As in previous engagements, the enemy had secured a considerable advantage in regard to position, and during a month's occupancy of the stronghold had made it

**WELL-NIGH IMPREGNABLE**

The scene of battle was a semi-circle eight miles long, with the Tugela river dividing the opposing forces. North of the river runs a low continuous range of hills, overlooked by a second range. This, in turn is peeped over by the Umbulwana, from which the Boers bombard Ladysmith. All these hills are exceptionally rugged, abounding in rocky cliffs and dongas, with here and there a clump of bushes, and covered with the innumerable boulders so dear to the heart of the Boer when in combat with Tommy Atkins. Anyone of the numerous kopjes would have made in itself a remarkably strong position, and the enemy had as its command fully a dozen of them. To the right Fort Wylie stood out prominently, with on its left the village of Colenso, which nestled between the hills. This fort turned out to be the centre of the Boer position, which extended fully three miles on either side.

The British position needs but little explanation. Imagine a gentle incline of grassy slopes, about three miles wide running a similar distance down to a river, and you understand the country traversed by our men to a nicety. There was no part of it that could not have been comfortably traversed by a cyclist. On the top of the incline were stationed some of our naval guns, and from them a splendid panoramic view was available.

At four o'clock on the eventful morning the camp was astir, notice having been given every one on the previous night that an advance was to be made. With the greatest confidence the troops sallied forth to take up their

**ALLOTTED POSITIONS,** and the brilliant morning was not one whit brighter than the ambition of each and every one to distinguish himself in the blow to be dealt for queen and country.

The plan of attack was as follows:

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JOHN A. MACDONALD.  
Publisher Aruprior Chronicle.

General Hart's Irish brigade was to advance on the left flank and cross the Tugela river under the range of which Grobler's Kloof hill forms the highest point. Supported by a field battery, the brigade was to force its way to a group of kopjes on the north of Colenso, driving the Boer flank on to its centre. The task of attacking in front was delegated to General Hildyard's English brigade, which was to strike straight for Colenso and, if the attack developed successfully, occupy the neighboring kopjes. Our right flank consisted of the Fusiliers brigade, under General Barton, who had to assist and defend the central attack. On the extreme right flank extended a long line of mounted infantry, including the Natal Carbineers, the Natal Police, a squadron of the Imperial Light Horse, Thornycroft's mounted infantry, the South African Light Horse, and Bethune's mounted infantry, the whole thing being under the direct control of Major Walter.

With the infantry advancing steadily in skirmishing order, the Naval guns opened fire. Fort Wylie was the first objective. Our ordnance, consisting of two 4.7 guns and six twelve-pounders, was situated directly facing and about 4,000 yards from Colenso and belched forth shell after shell of lyddite and shrapnel, the

**HEAVY REPORTS**

resounding from the hills beyond. N Boers were visible, and it might easily have been believed that the angry-looking hills were lifeless, and Colenso another "Deserted Village."

Slowly but surely our brave fellows marched on—many of them never to return—and six o'clock arrived without any sign from the enemy. He was playing a waiting game, and it was not till a quarter of an hour afterwards that his opportunity came, and he made the most of it. As if by a signal, the volleys of rifle fire, punctuated by reports of a maxim and a maxim-Nordenfeldt resounded all along the line and continued with deadly effect. Then we were aware that there was no walk-over, for a fierce battle had recommenced.

The Boer artillerists also appeared to regard reticence as of no further avail, for a forty-five-pounder and four twelve-pounders now roared out, scattering shells promiscuously among our infantry. But they were soon located, and Capt. Jones, of H. M. S. Forte, who was in charge of the navals, and his officers and men positions with lyddite, their guns barking louder and oftener than the enemy's. They seemed to have a beneficial effect, though the rifle fire continued frequently, ultimately they ceased altogether for a time.

Mistaking the temporary cessation for the turning point in the battle, Colonel Long erred by imagining that the Boers had only to be tackled in earnest to surrender; and what in other circumstances would have been set down as bravery is now adjudged as foolhardiness. He had been doing some excellent practice with the 14th and 66th field batteries, two naval twelve-pounders, the objective being Fort Wylie, and with the aid of the guns under Captain Jones the kopje upon which the fort is situated fairly steamed with shell fire. Impatient, however, to get to closer quarters and see some of the effect of his work, the colonel gave the order to gallop up to a certain position. This spot has been estimated to be 800 yards from the river and 1,400 yards from Fort Wylie. Immediately on halting the gun-

ners were made the mark of a heavy rifle fusillade. Many of the men were disabled, and several horses killed. With great gallantry the forces stood its grounds and the guns were used with such effect that the rifle fire decreased, and it was hoped that it would be eventually extinguished.

Unfortunately, Colonel Long had not thought of the possibilities of having to retire; nor, indeed had anyone else. When the troops were advancing there was plenty of

**TRANSPORT OBTAINABLE,**

but immediately the retirement was ordered ammunition could not be brought to the front. The supply of shell had run almost out, and orders had been sent back for a further supply and also for reinforcement of gunners, but these orders were never executed, and the batteries had no opportunity to cover their own retreat. While waiting for the anxiously-desired ammunition those who were uninjured took shelter in a small donga, or hollow, near at hand, where the wounded had already been placed.

By this time the impregnability of the enemy's position was established beyond doubt, for though there had been six hours' fighting not more than a dozen Boers all told had been seen, and our casualty list was approaching four figures. On the left flank General Hart had suffered severely and failed in his object of attack. In the centre and on the right flank the men were being shot down by an invisible foe. The enemy's maxim-Nordenfeldt had been handled very effectively, and though the naval gunners repeatedly fired shells at its supposed position, it continued its work, finding new positions and new objectives from time to time. Altogether, during the engagement it must have been shifted a dozen times.

The story of General Hart's repulse on the left flank makes painful reading. In command of the dashing Irish brigade he advanced without incident to the vicinity of the river bank, his regiments being the Dublin Fusiliers, Connaught Rangers, Inniskillings, and Borderers. When the combined forces was about 300 yards from the river a small body of Boers were observed scurrying up one of the ridges as if in flight, and this prompted our men to quicker movements. The idea that the Boers were fleeing was, however, soon dispelled, for just as the British forward line reached the river bank they were fairly riddled by bullets at a distance, it was estimated, of 400 yards. The men quickly stretched themselves on the ground to gain the little shelter it afforded and return the fire. But what were they to fire at? There was no one visible; the smokeless powder did not betray from whence had come the deadly fusillade; and our "bhoys" were as defenceless as if unarmed. They had their rifles, but could not use them with any degree of success. To add to their peril, one of the enemy's big guns opened fire from a new position, and commenced to pump shells in among them; but our two central 4.7 naval guns came to the rescue, and silenced the Boer place, at a distance, it was said, of 11,500 yards. Despite this, however, the position of the infantry remained hopeless. A bayonet charge was out of the question owing to the intervening river, and a few of the men who got into the stream were drowned by coming in contact with skillfully devised wire entanglements.

There was no equality in the contest, and a color-sergeant of the Dublin's who was tired of being "potted" at, shouted to his section: "Fix bayonets, men, and let's make a name for ourselves!" and sprang to his feet to inspire confidence. But this daring act brought a heavy fire upon him, and

and he fell, seriously wounded into the arms of one of his men. The

END WAS NOW NEAR, however, as the order for recall was already speeding its way to the heroes, who would have submitted to retain their hopeless position rather than recede a yard without authority.

Throughout the fighting line there were similar experiences with but little variation, though elsewhere the losses were not so great. Within range of the enemy's concealed rifle fire there was a perfect zone of death, and our men were lured into that zone before they were aware of it. The seriousness of the position realised, they did not know where to return the fire, and awaiting instructions, had to submit to be made targets of.

**TO SUPPORT THE GUNS.**

but a heavy enfilade of bullets considerably diminished their numbers ere the donga was reached. Repeated efforts were made to remove the guns, but each failed. One officer harnessed in a pair of horses, which were promptly shot, and he repeated the operation with a like effect, and was coolly proceeding to a further repetition when ordered to desist. General Buller had seen enough to satisfy him that the pluckily attempted task could not only result in the loss of valuable lives, and he was reluctantly compelled to order his abandonment. By this time the enemy's guns were "crowding" as if conscious of victory, and the retirement, which was proceeding in an orderly manner, was attended to many dangers.

Our casualties are roughly stated at 1,200, including 150 killed and 300 taken prisoners. The Boer losses it is impossible to compute accurately. Native scouts attached to our Intelligence Department, who had been in the Boer camp, report the enemy's loss at 200, nearly all of whom were killed outright. This disproportionate record of killed and wounded is in accord with the known results of lyddite, and has therefore been accepted in some quarters as fairly accurate. It is said to reflect that this same effect would have been obtained if the infantry had merely

**MADE A DEMONSTRATION**

and the artillery had done the rest—while our casualty would have been practically nil.

The general result can be summed up in a sentence. Our troops were called upon to do an impossible task, and though they behaved with the utmost heroism they were repulsed. I attribute this unfortunate result to a lack of reliable information as to the strength and movements of the enemy. It is well known that they command an almost impregnable position, but what uses they make of it, or the number or disposition of their forces, were subjects of pure conjecture. Even now no one can give any accurate idea of the Boer strength beyond estimating that as it was distributed over an area of eight miles, with no doubt certain

forces for reserve it must have reached at least 10,000.

They must have expended considerable labor on their fortifications and entrenchments. It proved beyond a doubt, and that they could have carried on this work during the past month without our being aware of its extent is certainly not creditable to those who had—or should have had—their attention riveted on the obtaining of these recalls.

Had accurate information been forthcoming General Buller would never have done anything so suicidal as to attack the position fair in the face as he did. A few miles west of Colenso the Tugela could have been crossed with little difficulty; and by leaving a

**SUFFICIENT FORCE TO HOLD**

the Boers on the position subsequently attacked, there should have been comparatively little opposition, and before the Boers had time to entrench themselves anew, we could have ousted them.

The Boers are now apparently convinced that there will be no more direct attacks, and they are vigilantly patrolling the Tugela to prevent surprise. The destruction of the road-bridge by us is another indication that a frontal attack is not favored. What the bridge was destroyed for it is impossible to imagine. Surely Buller was not afraid lest the enemy would cross it to attack him? But whatever the reason for the act, the structure held out with remarkable tenacity under the shell-fire of the naval guns. For over an hour 4.5lb. shells were lodging all around it, until it appeared as if it had a charmed life, and then, when the task of striking it was regarded a almost hopeless, one of the end spans was carried away and the structure was rendered useless for travel. Its demolition must have cost close on £5,000.

The average "Tommy Atkins" views the future philosophically. He regrets that his cherished dream of partaking of his Christmas dinner at Pretoria has not been materialized, but he is not at all discouraged by the fighting. If required, he would go through it all again, but he would dearly like to be able to see his opponents. If once the enemy allows our men a fair fight, they will more than wipe off the score now standing to the Boer credit.

Owing to the operation of the press censorship, the fact that General Buller was personally in command was not allowed to be published until some days after the engagement. The leadership was at first attributed to General Clery and probably it was to shield him from the doubtful honor of the command that information was subsequently given to the press representatives that General Buller's name might be mentioned.

It was also permissible to state that both generals mentioned were in the thick of the fighting and had narrow escapes! In fact, General Buller was struck in the stomach with a spent bullet, which had only sufficient force to wind him for a few seconds.

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