

# Modder River Battle.

## Fierce Work of the Artillery and Its Effect on the Enemy.

### INCIDENTS OF THE BATTLE.

How the Guards Crossed the River Only to Sink in the Mud—As Told By Julian Ralph.

The more one sees of Modder River battlefield, and the more one considers the battle the more terrific it is seen to have been.

Some phases of the battle and some of the tales we hear of the part the Boers played in it make it certain that there never was a battle like it.

At first we were impressed by the sagacity shown by the Boer leaders in entrenching their men where they did at the top and back of a vast smooth inclined plane, every inch of which was visible to these hidden men.

But by remaining here long enough to go thoroughly over the field we have learned that an even stronger and in all ways better position could have been made for most of them just behind the one they chose and on the island in the river.

It must be understood that their horse lay entrenched on the edge of the river at a point where the Modder and Reit join one another.

The land between the two is called an island, and this land continues the upward slope of the veldt, so that it is higher and more commanding and better yet for Boer purposes; it is LUXURIANT WITH TREES AND BUSHES.

Here, in fact, the Boers did put their sharpshooters, and here they manipulated their deadly "Putt-putt" gun, as our army has nick-named the Vickers-Maxim quick-firer, which commanded such respect as to make every man who heard it bow his head or prostrate his body.

Men so shrewd and instinctively soldierly as the Boers must have known that this more elevated position, with the river in front of it as a moat, was superior to the one they selected.

A story which many Boer prisoners have told us tends to explain why the lower ground was chosen—though it is a tale which can be credited only by those of us who are accustomed to the extraordinary phases and conditions of this strangest of modern wars.

The story is that a large proportion of the Free State Boers were so averse to fighting in the first place, and so shaken by our incessant and accurate artillery fire, that they were only kept in the trenches at the point of revolvers held over them by their leaders, who swore to shoot any man who tried to desert.

This story was told us by many prisoners taken at different times and places.

If it is true, it may well be that there was a serious purpose in choosing the lower ground for the Boer position, because thus the river, where it is the deepest and impossible to ford, was

#### IMMEDIATELY AT THEIR BACKS.

After I had seen no more of the field than their three-mile line of trenches, I could not understand how we had been able to dislodge them or why they had at last left the field to us. Their position seemed super-impregnable. But a search for the place from which the putt-putt gun was fired led me to the island overlooking the river and the trenches. Then I saw plainly why and how we had gained the victory. Beyond the British infantry lines, where our Guards' Brigade was so cruelly forced to lie for more than eight hours under a driving rain of lead from an enemy they could never see, we worked three Royal Artillery batteries. These were the 18th and 75th, which fired all day long, and the 62nd, which came twenty miles to our aid and got into action at half-past four in the afternoon with horses so fagged that the men had been obliged to walk the last few miles.

These batteries played on the trenches and on the island, which two points are so close that both were damaged alike. The shells which scattered their shrapnel upon the men in the trenches carried their heavy metal cases

#### OVER ON THE ISLAND.

Much of the shrapnel was also carried there. The result, as it is to be seen to-day, is a scene of surface devastation almost baffling description. In a space of a mile in length and a quarter of a mile in width, there is scarcely a square yard that is not torn up, perforated, riddled, ploughed, and raked. Shrapnel bullets, shell cases, fuses, and bits of metal lie all over

the place. Incredible as it sounds, there now lie on that ground two rusty old tins—one a small "bully-beef" tin and the other a biscuit tin. Both of these are riddled with shrapnel and shot.

In that scene lies the explanation of the flight of the Boers. In that scene one finds some confirmation of the story that the Boers had to be kept to their work at the point of the revolver.

A common reliance of the Boer was upon gin Emtv gin bottles, bottles still containing gin, and one full bottle of that liquor were to be seen stuck in the loose dirt of the trenches. In every trench was a surprising debris of shell cartridges of many sorts—Mauers, Martin-Henrys, and two or three sorts of

#### EXPANDING AND EXPLOSIVE BULLETS.

The island seems to have been where the sharpshooters were placed—on the ground, behind trenches, and in the trees. We understand from the prisoners that these were always stationed in couples, and that the orders were that whenever one was killed or wounded his companion was to bury or carry him off the field. I have told in a previous letter and in my despatches how continually we have found the bodies of the Boer dead in the river, buried in the sand with fingers or boots protruding, heaped in a trench, and elsewhere.

When I searched the island I found profuse proofs of other burials beside these—of new dead not included in any estimate. Here I found grave-shaped mounds of such fresh appearance and suggestive shape that I examined them. They were covered with short brush growths, and lo! when we touched these they came out of the earth and were seen to be tree-twig and branches cut from trees and stuck in the mounds. At some distance back in the island we found a very large trench, of a size to hold twenty bodies. It emitted indubitable proof of its contents. As we understand the tactics of our enemy, these graves are apt to be those of their humbler soldiers. We know that they carry off on carts and across their saddles the bodies of

#### THE MORE IMPORTANT DEAD.

This was done at this battle. A woman, whose cottage is in the rear of the field, north of the river, declares that all day long the wounded came to her cottage upon each other's heels to have their wounds dressed, and, she says, the dead in large numbers were carried upon planks placed upon the backs of ponies northward to the Boer lines. First in the minds of the Boers is the desire to hide his dead and to lie about their number. It is from their own that they most desire to hide the truth. The prisoners we took all said that only eighteen had been killed, but the deserters said the loss of life was very great and that in the river alone 100 were sunk with weights.

For my part I shall not be surprised if we learn some day that in killed alone the Boers lost quite 300.

It is wonderful how the formation of the country adds and perhaps inspires the Boer methods of warfare. You have heard how the burgher comes to battle with two horses, a poor one to carry him to the fight, and the best steed he has to be kept fresh until it is needed to carry him swiftly away. Usually we have seen the Boers run down the far sides of the kopjes they have been defending, to find best horses knee-haltered on the veldt, and to mount and ride them away.

At Belmont, when a thousand or more were in full fight, they all suddenly disappeared in a mysterious way.

We found that all had ridden into what they call a "sluit," which is broad and deep enough to hide a cavalry regiment. In this gutter or ravine they made their way to their next place of rendezvous. On the island at Modder River such a ravine or gutter exists. It is 30 feet wide and 15 feet deep. We found its bottom covered with hay and other fodder, and we knew that in it, out of harm's way and yet close at hand, they had kept their horses in readiness for their retreat.

After every battle the veldt has been dotted with Boer horses in consequence of the custom of bringing two horses for each well-to-do man, and in consequence of the loss of riders by



SECOND CAMERONIANS STORMING SPION KOP.

death and wounding. But both previous battle-fields combined showed no such number of riderless horses as Modder River. There was literally hundreds of them. I had lost mine in the fight, but in the first half hour of the next morning I took my choice of four, and might have made my pick from a hundred, saddled and bridled, before I had gone half over the field.

We know now that it was our artillery fire that thinned the ranks and broke the nerve of the enemy.

It was a fearful assault produced by an extraordinary discharge of ammunition.

The four naval guns fired, I believe, 514 rounds, the 18th Battery fired 1,100 rounds, the 75th fired 900 rounds, the 62nd 500, or 3,000 rounds in all. The reports of the rifle fire are not yet made out, but most of our men took into the fight 150 to 160 rounds, and I believe the average fire per rifle by nineteen battalions must have been 100 rounds. The

CLIMAX OF THE BOERS' DESIRE to vacate the field was reached when a stalwart British cheer broke upon their ears by their side and in their rear.

There should not be any confusion as to what men raised this cheer and were the first to ford the river; but there is. It is due to the fact that men of several ambitious commands composed the first body of forders.

To put history right, the credit of first crossing the river belongs to a small party of Coldstream Guardsmen who early in the day waded in to their waists and then swam, laden with all their gear and 160 rounds of ammunition. There were between twenty-four and forty men in this body, and though many got across, two were nearly drowned, and all saw it to be wise to return. The river was too deep, and when they reached the further shore they sank in mud to their knees.

This happened on the extreme right of the line, where Lord Methuen made his first gallant attempt to cross.

He tried again on the far left, and it was there that, beyond any doubt or dispute, Colonel Barter, of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, got across by a fairly good fording place with a score or two dozen men, some of whom were his own, while others were men of the Argyll and Sutherlandshire and the North Lancashire Regiments. They crossed against some trenches and an angle of stone wall which were held by some 800 Boers.

Just as they were crossing a battery of Royal Artillery rolled up in the rear of our men, and before its men had time to unlimber, all the Boers fled, jostling and even

#### KNOCKING EACH OTHER

down to get upon their horses. In time our forces across the river numbered 400, and Brigadier-General Pole-Carew took command. Our own shells and our own rifle fire beat upon this little band, and it halted and cheered to disclose its nationality.

That is the truth of a heroic movement, of which there are already too many untrue versions in print.

It is said that the Boers fight in deadly terror of our bayonets, which we have not yet had a chance to use upon them, and this increased their fever for flight. They have also had a wholesome dread of our lyddite shells—of which, likewise, we have not yet made any use but at this battle General Cronje, who watched the fight all day, supposed our naval guns were firing lyddite, and said to his staff:

"I've been watching that stuff all day, and I don't think much of it."

One word as to that phase of their warfare which must be touched upon, in justice, in every account we correspondents write of it. With my own eyes, being upon the scene, I saw the putt-putt gun and the fire of the sharpshooters trained upon our ambulance three times, and upon our stretcher-bearers on innumerable occasions—in fact, whenever they rose to their feet (on the right of the line) and attempted to perform their work.

#### TELEGRAPHERS UNDER FIRE.

Volunteer Workers on the "Tickers" are Doing Their Duty at the Front.

The British Government Post-Telegraph departments have already contributed to the army in South Africa nearly 500 men, of whom more than 200 were skilled telegraph operators, who could hardly be spared from the already undermanned service. Reports to the War Office state that the telegraphers are rendering splendid service. It is said that the use of the Wheatstone automatic system on the field of battle is the first in the history of warfare. Moreover, it was worked duplexed, which at the outset was prophesied to be impossible under the rough conditions of campaigning.

At the Modder River fight the telegraphers were under fire for a whole day. Then they worked through the night on official and press messages. Later, despite the rules limiting the number of correspondents and the length of a message each man can send, the operators sent 100,000 words. The total after the Magersfontein battle was much greater, but the operators got it through without a hitch at the high average speed of about 200 words a minute. Delays invariably occurred after the despatches reached the coast. A majority of the telegraphers are volunteers—members of the Twenty-fourth Middlesex "Post Office Rifles."

The officer in charge of the heliograph signals with General Buller's column has flashed 14,000 words to and from Ladysmith in the past three weeks.

#### Indian Troops' Generosity.

The whole of the 3rd Bengal Cavalry have voluntarily subscribed one day's pay towards the Transvaal fund. The regiment is composed of Sikhs, Jats, Rajputs, and Mohammedans. Their example is likely to be followed by other regiments. A movement is on foot among Europeans to raise a special fund for the relief of the royal colonists in Natal whose farms have been raided by the Boers.

#### Has Become an Expert.

"Are you never uneasy when your husband comes home late at night?" "Bless you, no! I can always tell what lodge he has been attending by the quality of the cigar odor he brings home with him."

#### A Needless Question.

"Could yez identify the man that struck yez?" asked Mr. Rafferty. "Do yez mane ty insult me?" rejoined Mr. Dolan. "In course OI couldn't. After OI got through wit' 'im his own mother wouldn't know 'im."—Washington Star.

As Far as She Would Trust Him. "Madam, you can't carry your umbrella, that baby and bandbox and hold your dress up. Let me assist you by carrying your bandbox." "No; that's got my new hat in it. You carry the baby."—Chicago Record.

## "STRATHCONA'S OWN"

That is the Name the London Press Has Given Canada's Third Contingent.

North-West Mounted Rifles Given a Hearty Reception at Winnipeg and Made a Fine Impression.

It is hoped the inclusion of North-West horses in "Lord Strathcona's Own," as the papers call Lord Strathcona's North-West corps, will lead the War Office to revise its decision against Canada as a source of supply for army horses.

It is understood that the Canadian Government have made special representations to Lord Lansdowne since the war began, with a view to induce the War Office to make purchases of Canadian ranche horses, but without effect.

So far nine thousand tons of Canadian hay and two thousand Canadian saddles have been purchased, however, as well as large consignments of tinned meats, dried fruit, and vegetables.

#### A WESTERN OPINION.

Speaking of Lord Strathcona's project to raise a troop of 400 strong, Premier Haultain, of the Territories, who is visiting in Winnipeg, says that there were more than enough efficient men turned away from service in the Mounted Rifle corps to make up the required 400 desired by His Worship. Regarding the officers for the force, he said: "I think it would be a mistake to put these Western men under Eastern militia officers, who would not likely understand either them or their work. There are still sufficient experienced officers left in the West for the purpose."

#### COLONIALS IN HIGH FAVOR.

Lord Roberts' Body Guard Will be Selected From Them.

Recognizing the importance of colonial troops, Lord Roberts has authorized the formation of a complete division of colonials under General Brabant. It is intended to raise in Cape Colony additional mounted regulars.

As a further mark of favor Lord Roberts, it is said, intends to select his own bodyguard from the colonials.

Lord Roberts, purposing not to alienate the Cape Dutch and to see that the military respect the rights of non-combatants, regardless of race or sympathies, has issued, through Lord Kitchener, his chief of staff, the following order:

"The commander-in-chief wishes to impress upon all officers who may at any time be in charge of columns or detached commands, the grave importance of doing all in their power by good and conciliatory treatment, and by securing compensation for the people of the country in all matters affecting either their own interests or those of the troops.

"In all cases where supplies of any kind are required, these must be paid for on delivery, and a receipt for the amount taken. Officers will be held responsible for the observance of the rule that soldiers are never allowed to enter private houses or to molest the inhabitants on any pretext whatever; and every precaution must be taken to suppress looting or petty robbery by persons connected with the army.

"When supplies are absolutely necessary for the subsistence of the army and the inhabitants are unwilling to meet such demands commanding officers may, after having satisfied themselves by careful, personal investigation, that such supplies are necessary, and available, order these in such case to be taken by force, and a full receipt being given."

#### Exploiting Kipling.

The vicinity of Mr. Kipling's home at Rottingdean seems to be permeated by the "Pay, pay, pay" refrain of the "Absent-Minded-Beggar." During the holidays the conductor of the Brighton and Rottingdean omnibus has sent his hat round for contributions from the passengers as they alighted at Rottingdean, rewarding their generosity with information regarding the distinguished novelist. The motor car which Mr. Kipling has lately started in place of his familiar pony chair is a general topic of interest.

#### Longer Not Higher.

A Caper relates an amusing story of an incident that took place at one of the formal gatherings of the leading members of the Volksraad at President Kruger's house. The President desired to consult some papers relating to the subject under discussion, and, as they were placed on a shelf some distance from the ground, made one or two futile attempts to reach them. Joubert, who is tall, came to his assistance, saying, "Let me bring them; I am higher than you." "You are longer, Piet; not higher," corrected Kruger with a frown.