

HISTORY OF THE  
1ST BATTALION SHERWOOD FORESTERS  
IN THE BOER WAR

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LIEUT.-GENERAL SIR H. L. SMITH-DORRIEN, K.C.B., D.S.O.

*Frontispiece.*

**HISTORY**  
of the  
**1st Batt. Sherwood Foresters**  
(NOTTS. AND DERBY REGT.)  
IN THE BOER WAR, 1899-1902

BY  
**CAPTAIN CHARLES J. L. GILSON**

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
**LIEUT.-GEN. SIR H. L. SMITH-DORRIEN, K.C.B., D.S.O.**  
(Colonel of the Sherwood Foresters)

WITH 10 PLANS, &c., AND 4 PORTRAITS



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## INTRODUCTION

IN 1899 the 1st Battalion Sherwood Foresters was quartered at Malta, and on the 2nd October, H.E. the Governor-General, Sir Francis Grenfell (now Lord Grenfell), lunched with the Battalion, and in telling the officers that all preparations for a war with the Boers was in full course of completion, and that war appeared inevitable, gladdened our hearts by predicting that the Battalion would be almost sure to go.

On the 8th October it seemed that the Governor's prophecy was going to be fulfilled, for a private cable arrived from Captain Maurice of the Regiment in England, containing the one word, "Nottingham," the interpretation of which was that the Battalion was to mobilise and proceed to take part in the great Boer War which, by that time, had become a reality. But gladness was turned into sorrow by the arrival of another cable on the 12th October, contradicting the previous one. We hadn't long to wait, however, for our mental barometers to rise again, for on the evening of the 31st an official cable ordered the Battalion to the Cape. Curiously enough, on the 25th October, the 2nd Battalion, under Lieut.-Colonel Bulpett, had arrived from Aden, and were doing a period of quarantine at Fort Manoel, and so when this exciting news arrived the two Battalions were practically alongside each other, an event which seldom happens in the history of a regiment. I will pass over the hearty congratulations from our comrades in the 2nd Battalion, and the earnestly expressed wishes that both Battalions might soon meet in South Africa, and will

proceed to the 21st November, when the Battalion embarked in the good transport ship "Dunera." Seldom has a Battalion been given a heartier send off. H.E. the Governor, published a general order, of which we were very proud, and Sir Francis Grenfell himself, with the Naval Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir John Fisher, in the Admiral's barge, accompanied the ship to the mouth of the harbour. All the ships of the Mediterranean Fleet, which were in Malta harbour at the time, were manned, and the "Dunera" passed down the line and out of the harbour with ringing cheers, which were heartily responded to. I do not here propose to enter into the causes of the War, which are fully described in the *Times* and official histories, but I will give the briefest outline of the first stage of the campaign, which had resulted in reinforcements (the 1st Battalion Sherwood Foresters amongst the number) being sent out with all despatch.

It was after the failure of the Bloemfontein Conference in June, 1899, that the British Government realised that war was possible. For such a war the Imperial Troops at that moment in South Africa, viz., 9,000 to 10,000, were manifestly inadequate. In June, 1899, the then Commander-in-Chief, Lord Wolseley, advised mobilisation, but the Government were opposed to a policy of menace.

From June to September, however, defensive preparations on a small scale were carried out.

Early in September the Natal Ministry asked for reinforcements to prevent an invasion of that Colony, and on 8th September the Cabinet decided to raise the force in South Africa up to strength adequate for defence of the whole territory of the Colonies. An additional 10,000 men were thought sufficient for this purpose, and were to be drawn from India and the Mediterranean, and General Sir George White was sent out to command in Natal.

In the meantime it was decided to occupy Natal as far



north as Newcastle. By the end of September Major-General Sir W. P. Symons moved the Ladysmith troops to Glencoe, in the direction of Newcastle.

In Cape Colony the defence of the line of the Orange River had been delayed. On the 19th September Colonel Kekewich was put in command of a garrison at Kimberley.

Detachments were also placed by the end of the month to guard the bridges over the Orange River, and the railway from De Aar to Mafeking. In addition, every endeavour was made with the troops available to guard the Rhodesian frontier against invasion.

On the 7th October mobilisation was ordered at home, the result of which was that, by 4th December, 47,000 reinforcements had been landed in South Africa.

The command of the whole of the forces in South Africa was assigned to General Sir Redvers Buller, who sailed from England on 14th October.

The plan of campaign decided on was an advance through Cape Colony. To carry out the latter the army corps to be sent out was to be landed in three parts, viz., at Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London, and to concentrate, *via* De Aar, Naauwpoort and Stormberg upon Norval's Pont and Bethulie.

The Boer plan of campaign was roughly as follows:—A large force was to invade Northern Natal from west, north and east, crush the little garrisons of Dundee and Ladysmith, and then rapidly overrun Natal down to Durban; other forces were to seize the British towns scattered along the Bechuanaland Railway, Mafeking, Vryburg and Kimberley, and then to advance south.

By 11th October 38,000 Boers were in the field, and were disposed as follows:—The main body of the Transvaalers—in all, some 8,000 to 9,000 men—were at

Sandspruit, twelve miles from Laing's Nek. In front of the main body two smaller forces, numbering 1,800 to 2,000 strong, were at Wakkerstroom Nek; 12,000 were on the Klip River, west of Majuba; 1,500 to 2,000 were camped at the foot of the Doornberg, twenty miles from Dundee. The Free State commandos, numbering 6,000 to 6,500, were concentrated at Van Reenan's Pass. In all, there were 20,000 Boers on the Natal frontier. The Orange River was watched by some 2,500 to 3,000 Free Staters. The Basuto border, and the frontier from Orange River to Jacobsdal, was being patrolled by 2,500 men. North of these 3,000 to 4,000 Boers were at Boshof ready to pounce upon Kimberley. North of the Vaal 800 were watching the border from Fourteen Streams to Vryburg. Beyond these some 7,000 were at Ottoshoop near Mafeking. Detachments threatened Lobatsi, Crocodile Pools and Deerdepoot. The rest of the Northern frontier was guarded by 1,600 men on the Limpopo. A few men were posted at Kumati Poort, and 800 to 1,000 burghers watched the Swaziland frontier. Lastly, a small force remained in or near Johannesburg.

Sir George White's task when he landed at Durban on 7th October was a most difficult one. He finally decided to concentrate at Ladysmith, and a force was retained at Dundee, General Symons being given the command in that region. General Forestier Walker in the old colony, with vastly inferior numbers, found it almost impossible to hold the whole frontier, or even the line of the Orange River in the western field of operations. The defence of the Rhodesia and Bechuanaland frontiers were entrusted to Colonel Baden Powell, who placed one regiment under Colonel Plumer at Tuli, while he himself with another withdrew into Mafeking, and placed it in a state of defence. The long line of frontier from Orange River Bridge to

Mafeking was assigned to Colonel Kekewich, who determined to hold Kimberley in force.

The campaign actually commenced on 11th October. The invasion of Natal was carried out between 12th-19th October; the Transvaal forces closing in on Dundee by the latter date. In the meantime the Free Staters were engaged in keeping Ladysmith occupied.

It was becoming evident that the Boers were contemplating the complete envelopment of the British forces north of the Tugela. Sir George White, whilst fully realising the somewhat isolated situation of General Symons' command about Dundee, decided not to withdraw it.

On the 19th October Elands-laagte was occupied by the Boers, who thus established themselves on the Ladysmith-Dundee lines of communication.

On the 19th October the Boers east of the Buffalo determined to make a night march on Dundee. On the 20th October the battle of Talana was fought and won by the British, General Symons being mortally wounded. After the battle the Boers retreated across the Buffalo.

The eastern wing of the Boer invasion was thus disposed of for the moment. General Sir George White, on hearing of the Dundee success, determined to clear the line, and on 21st October sent a force, under Major-General French, to operate against the Boers at Elands-laagte. On reaching there General French found himself very inferior in numbers, and asked for reinforcements from Ladysmith, which were sent. The battle of Elands-laagte ensued, and resulted in a complete victory for the British after a very stubborn fight.

On the 22nd October, however, it was found necessary to hurriedly evacuate Elands-laagte owing to the danger threatening Ladysmith itself. Next day Elands-laagte was reoccupied by the Boers.

Meanwhile Colonel Yule (who now commanded the Dundee Column) decided to retire from that place on Ladysmith on 22nd October. Sir George White, on the 24th, moved out to cover this retirement.

The action of Rietfontein which resulted enabled communication with the Dundee Column to be established. On the 26th the Dundee Column reached Ladysmith. On the 23rd the Boers had occupied Dundee; but not for long. They moved down the Glencoe Pass on the 25th, and advanced on Ladysmith, which they approached on the 27th. Thus the forces of the two republics had joined hands, and were posted in strong positions so near Ladysmith that the movements of our troops could be easily watched. On the 30th Sir George White determined on a general action outside Ladysmith. The battle of Ladysmith ensued, and ended in failure; our force had to retreat into Ladysmith again with disaster—especially at Nicholson's Nek.

Sir George White then decided to defend Ladysmith itself.

During the above operations in Natal those on the western field were less dramatic but more successful. The Boers, wasting no time, crossed the frontier on 12th October. Between the 13th and 31st operations round Mafeking took place, and the Boers realised that they had a hard task before them to capture this place.

North of Mafeking, along the western frontier and along the Limpopo, fighting took place during October.

Vryburg, south of Mafeking, was occupied by the Boers on 18th October. Operations round Kimberley were successfully carried out by Colonel Kekewich up till 4th November, on which date the siege of that place may be said to have begun.

By the end of October, also, President Steyn had set in

motion the Free State commandos across the Orange River, *i.e.*, the southern frontier.

On 31st October Sir Redvers Buller landed at Cape Town.

Between 1st and 3rd November the Free Staters crossed the Orange River, and Sir Redvers Buller withdrew from Naauwpoort and Stormberg. On 3rd November the Garrison of Colenso was reported to have fallen back on Estcourt.

Sir Redvers Buller then decided to deviate from the original plan of campaign and divert a part of the army corps to Natal. In pursuance of this decision the dispositions arranged were as follows:—Hildyard's and Barton's Brigades were diverted to Ladysmith; Lord Methuen was to advance rapidly on Kimberley to relieve it; Clery, Gatacre and French were to watch the whole of the front from Orange River Station to Aliwal North.

By the 15th November it was found necessary to further break up the army corps by sending more reinforcements to Natal. General Clery was therefore sent to take command, and arrived at Durban on the 19th November.

Fourteen thousand men had now collected south of the Tugela, but the situation was becoming worse. On 22nd November Hildyard at Estcourt was completely cut off by a Boer force, numbering 7,000. Barton was being bombarded at Mooi River, and Nottingham Road was being threatened. This necessitated a still further portion of the army corps being absorbed in the vortex of the Natal complication.

On 22nd November Sir Redvers Buller left Cape Town, bound for Durban and Natal. Leaving Natal for the moment, the following are briefly the events which took place elsewhere:—

On 9th and 10th November the Belmont Reconnaissance, under Colonel Gough, was unfortunate in its results. On the 12th Lord Methuen arrived on the Orange River and took over command.

The Free Staters made a slow advance into Cape Colony, and Olivier entered Aliwal on 13th November.

On the 14th the Boers entered Colesburg, and the British reoccupied Naauwpoort on the 19th.

Meanwhile the advanced body of the Bethulie burghers had entered Burghersdorp on the 15th.

Olivier, on the 18th November, occupied Jamestown, Lady Grey and Barkly, but it was not till 26th November that Stormberg Junction was occupied by the Boers.

Gatacre reached Queenstown on the 18th November, and had the Naval Brigade not been withdrawn to join Lord Methuen on the Orange River on 16th November, it is possible that the reoccupation of Stormberg might have been safely effected. North of the Orange River, except for Kimberley, Kuruman and Mafeking, the whole of British Bechuanaland and Griqualand West was annexed to the two republics.

On the 21st November Cronje and 4,000 men were withdrawn from Mafeking and entrained at Klerksdorp, being at once sent, *via* Johannesburg and Bloemfontein, to meet Lord Methuen's advance.

To return to Natal — by the 4th of November the investment of Ladysmith had been completed, and the British at Colenso had fallen back on Estcourt. Up to the 13th the Boers had contented themselves with the task of investing Ladysmith and spreading themselves over Northern Natal, and it was not till that date that they decided on an expedition south of the Tugela. A picked force of 3,000 to 3,500 men having been collected at Colenso for this purpose.

On the 14th the Boer patrols reached Estcourt, which resulted in great alarm both at that place and at Maritzburg.

On the 15th an armoured train, sent out from Estcourt, was surprised and captured by the Boers at Frere. Elated

at this success, the Boers, during the 15th to 20th November, moved round Estcourt in two bodies, and finally effected an undisturbed junction on the 21st, establishing themselves on the heights of Brynbella Hill, south and south-east to Joubert's position, between Estcourt and the Mooi River.

Barton meanwhile remained inactive at Mooi River, thinking that he was opposed by very superior numbers.

This brief history of the early days of the War sets forth the military situation up to the date the Battalion embarked.

It will be seen from the above that the state of affairs, at the time we left Malta, were such as to lead us to believe we might, with luck, be in time for very considerable fighting, but over and over again fears were expressed that we might be too late. None, I think, anticipated that before the Battalion would again settle down under peace conditions two and a half long years of war were before them. On board the "Dunera" we found many officers of the Battalion, and a splendid body of reserve men, who had embarked in England to bring the Battalion up to fighting strength. The names of the officers, and the strength of the Battalion and the reserves will be found in the history itself. We were now all complete, except for a detachment of 100 men with Lieutenants Radford, Anley and Percival at Cyprus, and these were picked up at Limasol on the 24th November. At Aden Major-General O'Moor Creagh, V.C. (originally an officer in the 2nd Battalion, the 95th), gave us a hearty welcome, and at Zanzibar, where the ship stayed one and a half days, the Battalion landed and greatly impressed the inhabitants by taking a short route march in the island, about 1,100 strong, with the band playing. Here the greatest hospitality was extended to the Battalion by H.H. the Sultan, his Prime Minister, General Mathews, and the British Consul, Mr. B. S. Cave, C.B. It is interesting to note that Colonel