

RENSBURG, 2ND JANUARY, 1900.

I am afraid this war will last longer than people imagine, but the number of troops and better guns to arrive will, or should, help everything. Our force here is about 2,800 all told. You know the proportion that camp routine takes off. The Boers are nearly of equal strength opposite us, and in position, so that we should have 2,000 or 3,000 more troops here. Picked shots have little show. There is nothing to see to shoot at until you get very close, and the new weapons any one can shoot.

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Last letter was cut short, and had not even time to write home an account of an early start on the 29th December, with 48 tons provisions and forage, for Taaisboch (shown in my last sketch), to find it evacuated. We then started off (the three squadrons—6th Dragoon Guards, two companies Mounted Infantry, and section Royal Horse Artillery) down and over the position, and thence as hard as we could to catch up the retreating force. We caught up to its tail going into Colesberg, but they had better artillery than we, so we could only occupy the kopje, shown in front of the sketch enclosed, which the G.O.C. intrusted to us, giving me the personal order that he had faith in us, and the position must be held until relieved. That night a company of Mounted Infantry came up to assist, and an outpost was formed to suit this awful country. During the late afternoon some slight firing was exchanged to keep back cheeky Boer patrols. They always bolted at once. We held this position for thirty-eight hours before relief came, as the main camp was being moved from Arundel to Rensburg. This is the time we learned that a scrap of hard biscuit and the remains of the contents of a bully-beef tin, with a sip of water, was sweeter than any meal ever before tasted. As we were not relieved till evening on the 31st, we had completely run out of food. Our men are just learning if they eat everything up at the first two meals there is none for the next six or eight meals, or even for the daily evening meal. The bed on a rocky kopje is too difficult to describe; it must be experienced. However, all ended well, and by arranging alternate companies we now have a night in camp and a night on fore-post.

As escort to the two guns before mentioned, No. 2 Company got a fair amount of shelling, but as this experience has now fallen to our lot on several occasions it creates no feeling, but it was peculiar the first time the Maxim-Vicker, or some such repeater, opened. These Maxim-Vickers fire five to ten shots in succession, and have been nicknamed "ten-a-penny."

The 1st January was spent on fore-post, and before dawn an attack was made by our whole force under the G.O.C. All day our 12 (? pounder) guns boomed, and succeeded at about 11 a.m. in silencing the Boer guns. The "ten-a-penny" went in about three-quarters of an hour. We could from our flank position see the shield and gunners blown up by the shells. I cannot at present give details, but the result of shrapnel falling among men and horses is terrible.

After us a flank party under Colonel Porter (6th Dragoon Guards), and two squadrons Carabiniers, with two guns, shelled a kopje held by the Boers on enemy's left. His instructions were not to commit himself to any attack or get held, but merely to prevent the enemy getting away in that direction. About 10.30 it was supposed the kopje was empty, and twenty-five New Zealand men, with forty Mounted Infantry, were sent to feel up to it, dismount, and see. I sent the New Zealand men out in wide interval to work from one kopje to another towards the big kopje. The Mounted Infantry were called up from another part, and thus came into support. They gained the first kopje all right, but on occupying the second the fire from the enemy's big gun became heavy. Our two guns at once moved forward and shelled to help us. The good pluck of the New Zealand men carried them on to another kopje, between which was a 400-yards open space. Colonel Porter directed me to go up and extricate the New-Zealanders, as more than what was required had been done. We had no infantry to support the party, nor keep the Boers from working on to our right flank, except the two guns, which had only nine rounds each left (the ammunition column not being expected until 2 p.m.). The "double," from about 1,500 yards to a mile, under fire, to catch them up, had better be told by some one else.

Thanks to the extreme steadiness with which the men behaved, the retirement was executed by rushes back by alternate parties from cover to cover. A regular cross-fire was kept up all the time on us. The Carabiniers in the meantime had been dismounted, and occupied a high isolated kopje, marked ⊕ on sketch enclosed, and opened a fire to cover us. Colonel Porter had a number of horses sent to meet us, and even at this point, about 3,000 yards from the kopje held by the Boers, the spent bullets fell. No casualty occurred, although there were a hundred marvellous escapes. Thus did half of the New-Zealanders spend New Year's Day; the other half were exhausted, and having a spell in camp. To-day (2nd) I am having the same, and it is just a relief. Want of sleep, with short food, and hard rocks, soon tell, unless one can get a rest occasionally. Again I must tell you that Colonel Porter, commanding Brigade 1st Cavalry, of which we are now a part, was very much pleased, and most anxious during the period we were engaged, as all who witnessed it felt sure the loss would be twelve to sixteen. Since we have been in South Africa, the loose formation of our work has been admired and commented upon.

I am pleased to recommend to you the services of Dr. Burns since he joined us from the Cape eight days ago. They are very short of medical officers. He is most attentive and willing.

During the time all the above was happening the main body were finely engaged on the enemy's right. The Berks Regiment ousted the Boers from one kopje. I have just heard that the Boer loss has been great. It must have been, as the R.H.A. got behind them, as well as in front. We, from where we were, saw much damage was done to the enemy. All the officers are working well, and so are the non-commissioned officers and men. No one could wish for a better lot. Many officers have asked the question where we get the men from.