

War Office, April 17, 1900.

THE following Despatch, with its enclosures, has been received from Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, V.C., G.C.B., &c., Commanding-in-Chief, South Africa:—

To the Secretary of State for War.

Army Head-quarters, South Africa,
Camp, Dekiel Drift, Riet River,

MY LORD, 13th February, 1900.

I HAVE the honour to submit, for your Lordship's information, despatches from General Sir Redvers Buller, describing the advance across the Tugela River on the 17th and 18th January, 1900, and the capture and evacuation of the Spion Kop position on the 23rd and 24th January, as well as certain minor operations between the 19th and 24th January on the right or eastern line of advance.

2. The plan of operations is not very clearly described in the despatches themselves, but it may be gathered from them and the accompanying documents themselves that the original intention was to cross the Tugela at or near Trichardt's Drift, and thence by following the road past "Fair View" and "Acton Homes," to gain the open plain north of Spion Kop, the Boer position in front of Potgieter's Drift being too strong to be taken by direct attack. The whole force, less one brigade, was placed under the orders of Sir Charles Warren, who, the day after he had crossed the Tugela, seems to have consulted his General, and principal Staff, Officers, and to have come to the conclusion that the flanking movement which Sir Redvers Buller had mentioned in his secret instructions was impracticable on account of the insufficiency of supplies. He accordingly decided to advance by the more direct road leading north-east and branching off from a point east of "Three Tree Hill." The selection of this road necessitated the capture and retention of Spion Kop, but whether it would have been equally necessary to occupy Spion Kop, had the line of advance indicated by Sir Redvers Buller been followed, is not stated in the correspondence. As Sir Charles Warren considered it impossible to make the wide flanking movement which was recommended, if not actually prescribed, in his secret instructions, he should at once have acquainted Sir Redvers Buller with the course of action which he proposed to adopt. There is nothing to show whether he did so or not, but it seems only fair to Sir Charles Warren to point out that Sir Redvers Buller appears throughout to have been aware of what was happening. On several occasions he was present during the operations. He repeatedly gave advice to his subordinate Commander, and on the day after the withdrawal from Spion Kop he resumed the chief command.

3. As regards the withdrawal of the troops from the Spion Kop position, which, though occupied almost without opposition in the early morning of the 24th January, had to be held throughout the day under an extremely heavy fire, and the retention of which had become essential to the relief of Ladysmith, I regret that I am unable to concur with Sir Redvers Buller in thinking that Lieut.-Colonel Thorneycroft exercised a wise discretion in ordering the troops to retire. Even admitting that due preparations may not have been made for strengthening the position during the night, reorganizing the defence, and bringing up artillery—in regard to which Sir Charles Warren's report does not altogether bear out Sir Redvers Buller's contention—admitting also that the senior Officers on the summit of the hill might have been more promptly informed of the measures taken by Sir

Charles Warren to support and reinforce them, I am of opinion that Lieut.-Colonel Thorneycroft's assumption of responsibility and authority was wholly inexcusable. During the night the enemy's fire, if it did not cease altogether, could not have been formidable, and, though lamp signalling was not possible at the time, owing to the supply of oil having failed, it would not have taken more than two or three hours at most for Lieut.-Colonel Thorneycroft to communicate by messenger with Major-General Coke or Sir Charles Warren, and to receive a reply. Major-General Coke appears to have left Spion Kop, at 9.30 p.m., for the purpose of consulting with Sir Charles Warren, and up to that hour the idea of a withdrawal had not been entertained. Yet almost immediately after Major-General Coke's departure Lieut.-Colonel Thorneycroft issued an order, without reference to superior authority, which upset the whole plan of operations, and rendered unavailing the sacrifices which had already been made to carry it into effect.

On the other hand, it is only right to state that Lieut.-Colonel Thorneycroft appears to have behaved in a very gallant manner throughout the day, and it was doubtless due, in a great measure, to his exertions and example that the troops continued to hold the summit of the hill until directed to retire.

4. The conduct of Captain Phillips, Brigade-Major of the 10th Brigade, on the occasion in question, is deserving of high commendation. He did his best to rectify the mistake which was being made, but it was too late. Signalling communication was not re-established until 2.30 a.m. on the 25th January, and by that time the Naval guns could not have reached the summit of the hill before daybreak. Major-General Coke did not return, and Lieut.-Colonel Thorneycroft had gone away. Moreover, most of the troops had begun to leave the hill, and the working parties, with the half company of Royal Engineers, had also withdrawn.

5. It is to be regretted that Sir Charles Warren did not himself visit Spion Kop during the afternoon or evening, knowing as he did that the state of affairs there was very critical, and that the loss of the position would involve the failure of the operations. He was, consequently, obliged to summon Major-General Coke to his head-quarters in the evening in order that he might ascertain how matters were going on, and the command on Spion Kop thus devolved on Lieut.-Colonel Thorneycroft; but Major-General Coke was not aware of this. About midday, under instructions from Sir Redvers Buller, Sir Charles Warren had directed Lieut.-Colonel Thorneycroft to assume command on the summit of the hill, with the temporary rank of Brigadier-General, but this order was not communicated to Major-General Coke, who, until he left the position at 9.30 p.m., was under the impression that the command had devolved on Colonel Hill, as senior officer, after Colonel Crofton had been wounded. Omissions or mistakes of this nature may be trivial in themselves, yet may exercise an important influence on the course of events; and I think that Sir Redvers Buller is justified in remarking that "there was a want of organization and system which acted most unfavourably on the defence."

6. The attempt to relieve Ladysmith, described in these despatches, was well devised, and I agree with Sir Redvers Buller in thinking that it ought to have succeeded. That it failed may, in some measure, be due to the difficulties of the ground and the commanding positions held