

Potgieter's,
Chief of Staff, 30th January, 1900.

Forwarded. The Commander-in-Chief saw as much of this gallant action as I did.

N. G. LYTTELTON, Major-General,
Commanding 4th Infantry Brigade.

No. 6.

From Field-Marshal Lord Roberts to the
Secretary of State for War.

Army Head-quarters, South Africa,
My Lord, Pretoria, 3rd July, 1900.

I have the honour to forward, for your Lordship's information, a despatch No. Mil. Sec. 565, dated 24th May, 1900, from the General Officer Commanding in Natal, describing the operations of the force under his command from the 3rd March to its concentration at Newcastle on the 18th May, 1900.

2. I consider that the advance from Ladysmith to Newcastle was ably directed by Sir Redvers Buller, while the behaviour of the troops was all that could have been desired, and I support the recommendations of the General Commanding on behalf of the Officers mentioned in paragraphs 19 and 20 of the despatch.

I have, &c.,

ROBERTS, Field-Marshal,
Commanding-in-Chief, South Africa.

From the General Officer Commanding, Natal,
to the Secretary of State for War.

(Through the Field-Marshal Commanding the
Forces in South Africa.)

Newcastle, Natal,

SIR, 24th May, 1900.

I have the honour to report that, having on the 3rd March received orders from Field-Marshal Lord Roberts to act strictly on the defensive, the force under my command took up positions on the line Tugela River—Sundays River—Elandslaagte—Surprise Hill—Smith's Crossing—Acton Homes, and, except for a few affairs of outposts, remained inactive. On the 2nd May, I received instructions from the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief to occupy the attention of the enemy in the Biggarsberg.

2. During our period of inaction the enemy had entrenched himself strongly in all the principal passes of the Biggarsberg and Drakensberg. About the middle of March I calculate that we had about 12,000 men in front of us. These gradually decreased, and on the 3rd May my calculation was that I was opposed by about 7,000 men, and I may here remark that, from information I have since obtained from the inhabitants of Dundee and Newcastle, I find that this calculation was an accurate one, but that the actual number was 8,000, as there were about 1,000 at Normandien of whom I had no knowledge.

3. Difficulties with lung sickness and want of grass and water had forced me to send most of my transport oxen south of Ennersdale, and it was 4 days before I could collect my transport. On the 7th May we commenced moving, but partly to deceive the enemy, and partly to meet an attack upon my right which he was then threatening, I advanced at first upon Elandslaagte.

4. On the 9th May the columns changed direction, and on the evening of the 10th, the following force was concentrated at Sundays River Drift on the Ladysmith—Helpmakaar road:—

3rd Mounted Brigade.

"A" Battery, Royal Horse Artillery.

2nd Division (complete) with two squadrons,
Divisional Cavalry.

Two 4.7-inch guns, No. 6 Company, Western
Division, Royal Garrison Artillery.

Four 12-pr. guns, No. 2 Company, Western
Division, Royal Garrison Artillery.

61st Howitzer Battery.

Three Vickers-Maxim.

No. 4 Mountain Battery; and a

Supply Column of 10 days' supply.

5. On the 11th May the force marched from Sundays River Drift to Waschbank River. The first 6 miles the road was extremely bad through a mountainous country; for the last 3 miles the road was open, and descended by easy slopes to the wide valley of the Waschbank. Marching continuously, 22 hours were occupied in the passage of the whole force over the 9 miles between Sundays River and the Waschbank. On this day, General Hildyard moved a battalion of the 5th Division from Elandslaagte to the summit of the Indodo Mountain, thus covering the left flank of our advance.

6. On the 12th May a post was formed at Waschbank, and the 2nd Bn. Scottish Rifles; two field guns, Royal Field Artillery; two naval 12-prs., Royal Garrison Artillery; a detachment of the 3rd Mounted Brigade, and the whole of the Supply Park was left there; the remainder of the column turned in a southerly direction, and marched across country to Vermaak's Kraal. This diversion from the road was necessary in order to avoid coming under fire from the enemy's guns on the high ridges of the Biggarsberg, parallel to which we were marching.

7. At Vermaak's Kraal we were within 7,300 yards of the crest line of the Berg, but it was the only place at which we could obtain water, and, as it was, we had to send our oxen 3 miles further, as there was not sufficient there for us all. During the afternoon the enemy was seen mounting a gun on the top of the spur nearest to our bivouac.

8. During the night, 12—13th May, I placed two 4.7-inch guns in epaulements fronting the enemy's gun. On the 13th, at daylight, we marched off in the direction furthest away from the line of fire of the enemy's gun, which, at 8 a.m., opened on the tail of the column, and two men of the Durham Light Infantry were slightly wounded. Our 4.7-inch guns replied, and by the 5th round the gun was silenced, having, as we afterwards ascertained, been badly damaged. The detachment of No. 6 Company, Western Division, Royal Garrison Artillery, deserve much credit for the work done during the night, and for the accuracy of their fire, as this was the first occasion on which they had used these guns. Striking the Helpmakaar road at the entrance of the defile, the baggage and supply columns were parked under a guard of one battalion, one battery, Royal Field Artillery, and the two divisional squadrons.

9. We were here opposite the left flank of the enemy's position and just under Uithoek Mountain, a lofty outlier of the south-west corner of the Biggarsberg, which commands the Helpmakaar plateau, but is separated from it by a narrow nek. It was declared to be unclimbable, but a few of Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry rode up half-way, and then scrambled to the top. It was found unoccupied, and I directed General Hamilton, with three battalions of the 2nd Brigade, to scale the mountain and assault the south-western crest of the main plateau.