

Lord Methuen left Vryburg on 2nd March with the column under Major Paris and other troops drawn from the western district, intending to effect a junction at Rooirantjesfontein (20 miles to the south of Lichtenburg), with a force consisting of 1,600 mounted men, under Lieutenant-Colonel Grenfell, which had been detached to meet him by Colonel Kekewich. He hoped that, having joined hands with Colonel Grenfell, he would be able to intercept the enemy's line of retreat to the Marico Valley, in which direction it was anticipated that the Boers would seek to withdraw the guns captured with Lieutenant-Colonel Von Donop's convoy.

At the close of the first day's march the column, owing to the heavy state of the roads, had only reached O'Reill's Pan, a distance of 13 miles, and Lord Methuen therefore despatched a message the same evening to Colonel Kekewich, saying that he might be a day or two later than anticipated in reaching Rooirantjesfontein.

On the 3rd March the force arrived at Bester's farm; and on the 4th it moved to Mooiplaats (244). At the first-named place Lord Methuen heard that Van Zyl's commando was at Doornbult (197), on the Brak Spruit, to the east of his line of march. On the 5th the column pushed on to Barber's Pan, a distance of 21 miles, and on the morning of the 6th the march was continued towards Leeuwspuit (232). During the day there was a good deal of sniping at the rearguard, and Van Zyl's commando was found at Tweebosch (247) on the Klein Hart's River in a position which was evacuated on the approach of Lord Methuen's advanced guard.

Our troops halted at Tweebosch for the night, and at 3 A.M. on the morning of the 7th the march was resumed, the ox convoy of the column moving off at that hour with an escort of 300 infantry, 200 mounted men, a section of the 4th Battery, Royal Field Artillery, and one pompom, whilst the remainder of the force, under Lord Methuen, with the mule wagons, followed an hour later.

At daybreak (about 5 A.M.) a heavy fire was opened upon the rearguard, and orders were given for its reinforcement from the front by two guns of the 38th Battery, a pompom, Ashburner's Light Horse, and a detachment of the 5th Imperial Yeomanry, the enemy also showed a disposition to gallop round from the rear and assail the flanks of the column as well.

At 5.30 A.M. the ox convoy, then about a mile in advance, was ordered to halt, and the escort was disposed round it ready to repel attack; the mule wagons at this time were rapidly closing up towards the ox convoy.

The Boers upon our right rear flank then developed a heavy attack which caused the sudden retirement and ultimate stampede of the mounted men, most of whom galloped past the left flank of the convoy in complete confusion. The section of the 38th Battery was thus left unprotected, but the detachment gallantly continued to serve the guns until every man, except Lieutenant Nesham, was killed or wounded. This young Officer, so Lord Methuen is informed, was then summoned to surrender, and on his refusing to do so was also shot down.

As the mounted screen was driven off the field the enemy advanced rapidly, intermingled with the fugitives, and pressed home a vigorous and determined attack upon the convoy, the defence of which was maintained for some time by the Infantry, under Lord Methuen himself, supported by the two guns of the 4th Battery. Orders had, in the meantime, been sent for the mounted men to be rallied upon a commanding ridge 2,000 yards away, along the road to

Leeuwkuil, and though few of them could be induced to hold their ground, a party of some 40 men, under Major Paris, established themselves in an isolated kraal about 800 yards from the convoy, from which they endeavoured to support the Infantry to the best of their ability.

The defence made by the Infantry and guns lasted until 9 A.M., by which time Lord Methuen had been seriously wounded, and Lieutenant Venuing, Royal Artillery, and all the men at the guns shot down.

Further resistance became useless and surrender inevitable. Those in the kraal held out until two guns and a pompom rendered their position untenable, when they, too, surrendered, having lost nine of their number killed and wounded in its defence.

The Boer Commanders present were General Delarey, Kemp, Vermaas, and Celliers, and Commandants Van Zyl, D. Botha, and Lemmer, who apparently had some 1,500 men under their orders. General Delarey treated Lord Methuen with kindness and consideration, and on the 13th March sent him into Klerksdorp for better medical treatment.

Our casualties in this unfortunate engagement were 4 Officers and 64 other ranks killed, and 10 Officers and 111 other ranks wounded, the number of unwounded prisoners remaining in the enemy's hands being 205. What the Boer losses were I am unable to say, but 20 of their number are known to have been killed, and they probably had other casualties.

The cause of the reverse is, I am afraid, to be found in the behaviour of the bulk of the mounted troops who offered a very feeble and ineffectual resistance, and then left the Infantry and guns to struggle against superior numbers. I do not, however, intend this criticism to apply to the whole of the mounted men, for several parties held out to the last, notably the one at the kraal, commanded by Major Paris.

Lieutenant-Colonel Grenfell who arrived at Rooirantjesfontein at the appointed time, was, unfortunately, too far off to render any assistance to Lord Methuen. He only heard of the reverse the day after its occurrence, and it was then too late for him to afford support. When he did hear of it he promptly took steps to reinforce the garrison of Lichtenburg, in case the Boers should attempt to follow up their success in that direction, and he then moved upon Vaalbank (116) on the Lichtenburg-Schoonspruit block-house line.

The growing aggressiveness of General Delarey's commandos, as evidenced by his attack on Von Donop's convoy, had already caused me to concentrate troops at Klerksdorp. The arrival of these reinforcements necessitated some redistribution of command. To Colonel Kekewich were assigned the columns under Lieutenant-Colonels Grenfell and Von Donop; and to Major-General W. Kitchener others formed under Colonels Lowe and Cookson and Lieutenant-Colonel Keir. Colonel Sir Henry Rawlinson's troops were brought up from the Orange River Colony, and Colonel Rochfort's columns, reinforced by that under Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Basing, were disposed on the line of the Vaal River to the North of Hoopstad. The 2nd Battalion Seaforth Highlanders, 1st Battalion Cameron Highlanders, and 1st Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were also moved to Klerksdorp to strengthen the mobile columns.

With the arrival of these troops, preparations were made for an attempt to surround several of the Boer commandos which, after the attack on Lord Methuen, had moved east towards Hartebeestfontein (624).