

No. 8.

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

Army Head-quarters, South Africa,  
Mr LORD, Pretoria, 10th July, 1900.

In continuation of my letter, dated 9th July, 1900, I have the honour to forward, for your Lordship's information, a despatch, dated 19th June, 1900, from the General Officer Commanding in Natal, describing the operations of the Force under his command from 5th June to 13th June, inclusive of the action of the 11th in front of Allemann's Nek and the occupation of Laing's Nek on the following day.

2. I consider that the turning movement over the Drakensberg, which resulted in the withdrawal of the Boers from their strong and carefully prepared position at Laing's Nek, was ably directed by Sir Redvers Buller, while as usual nothing could be more satisfactory than the behaviour of his troops.

3. I have much pleasure in supporting the recommendations put forward by Sir Redvers Buller on behalf of the Officers and petty officers of the Royal Navy, and the Officers, non-commissioned officers, and men of Her Majesty's military forces, whose services he has brought to special notice.

I have, &c.,  
ROBERTS, Field-Marshal,  
Commanding-in-Chief, South Africa.

From the General Officer Commanding in Natal  
to the Secretary of State for War.  
(Through the Field-Marshal Commanding the  
Forces in South Africa.)

Laing's Nek, Natal,  
Sir, 19th June, 1900.

The armistice that I reported in my letter of the 4th June ceased on the 5th, as Assistant Commandant-General Chris. Botha wrote on that day declining the terms I had offered.

The railway had been repaired to Newcastle by the 28th May, and trains had been running regularly since the 29th, and I had been, therefore, able to complete in Newcastle a reserve of 21 days' supply for the force to the north of it.

On the 5th, I moved to Schains Hoogte, and directed General Hildyard, who, with the 5th Division, was encamped at De Wet's Farm, to occupy, on the 6th, the height south of the Botha's Pass road, marked on the map as Van Wyk.

At this time I had reason to believe that Laing's Nek was occupied by from 4,500 to 5,000 men, that about 3,000 more were occupying the passes to the east of it, and that Botha's Pass was held by some 2,000 men, consisting chiefly of the Lydenberg and Carolina Commandos, with a few Free Staters; the remainder of the Free Staters who had been there, having, during the last few days, withdrawn to the westward.

On the 6th General Hildyard occupied Van Wyk with the South African Light Horse, the 13th Field Battery, and the 2nd Bn. Middlesex Regiment, the whole under the command of General Talbot Coke. The occupation was well carried out, the few enemy that held the hill retiring; but later in the day they were reinforced and made a rather resolute attack upon General Coke's force. Our positions were, however maintained, though under considerable discomfort to the troops, as the enemy fired the grass in all directions, and following up the fire so created, were able to get to rather close quarters unobserved under cover of the smoke.

Our casualties on this day were—South African Light Horse, four men wounded; 10th Brigade, one man killed, five wounded.

During the night of the 6th—7th the two remaining battalions of the 10th Brigade and two 4.7-inch guns and two 12-prs. of the Naval Brigade were sent to reinforce General Coke.

The ascent of the hill, for which a road was made as far as possible by the 37th Company, Royal Engineers, was very difficult, and it was due to the energy of Captain Jones, Royal Navy, and the Officers and men of the Naval Brigade, that one 12-pr. was in position on Van Wyk at daylight. The other 12-pr. lost a wheel in the bad ground, and it was found impossible to get the two 4.7-inch guns up that night. To support General Coke's right flank two 4.7-inch guns and two 12-prs. Royal Artillery, with one battalion of the 11th Brigade, took up a position near point 4,600 (1-inch map), about 1 mile to the west of the junction between Botha's Pass main road and the Newcastle high road.

A commencement was also made towards placing two 5-inch guns, Royal Artillery, on the south-western spur of the Inkweloane Mountain. On the 7th the following troops were concentrated at Yellowboom Farm:—

2nd Cavalry Brigade.  
South African Light Horse.  
11th Brigade.  
13th and 69th Batteries Royal Field Artillery.  
Two 4.7-inch guns and two 12-prs. Royal Artillery.

Divisional Troops, 5th Division.  
Divisional Head-quarters, 5th Division.

Orders were also issued for the 2nd Infantry Brigade, with two batteries Royal Field Artillery of that division, the 61st Howitzer Battery and two pompoms, to march on the morning of the 8th from their camp at Schains Hoogte Heights, and to report to the General Officer Commanding 5th Division for orders, and also for the 3rd Mounted Brigade under Lord Dundonald, with "A" Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, to march from Ingogo Drift, by De Wet's Farm, on Spitzkop. This force was also under the orders of the General Officer Commanding 5th Division.

On the 8th, General Hildyard assembled the Brigadiers and Artillery Commanders on Van Wyk at daylight, and explained the dispositions he intended to adopt in the assault on Botha's Pass. About 5 miles from the summit of Botha's Pass the Ingogo River runs in a gorge between Van Wyk and a hill marked Spitzkop, and through this gorge the road is carried in a heavy cutting. General Hildyard ordered the South African Light Horse to occupy Spitzkop, and so clear the way for the columns which, debouching from the gorge, would be able to extend in the more level ground between Van Wyk and the foot of the berg. Due west of Spitzkop there was a well-marked track down the berg, and this was selected as the dividing line between the attacks of the 2nd and 11th Brigades.

About 10 o'clock the South African Light Horse occupied Spitzkop without opposition, and then crossing the front of the advancing Infantry columns, they formed a screen in their front and covered the left of the advance.

About 10.45 a.m., the 11th Brigade advanced, covered by the fire of the 11th and 69th Batteries, the Naval guns on Van Wyk, the heavy Royal Artillery guns which had been brought forward to one of the spurs of Van Wyk and the two 5-inch guns on the spur of Inkweloane, the 3rd Mounted Brigade advancing at the same time on the right of the attack.