CHAPTER III

THE OPERATIONS OF GENERAL FRENCH IN THE EASTERN TRANSVAAL, FROM 27TH JANUARY TO 16TH APRIL 1901.

It may be remembered that at the close of 1900 the Boer chiefs, De Wet and Botha, had invented a concerted scheme of some magnitude. They had arranged that Hertzog should enter Cape Colony and proceed to Lambart's Bay to meet a ship which was said to be bringing from Europe mercenaries, guns, and ammunition. De Wet was to follow south via De Aar, join hands with Hertzog, and together, with renewed munitions of war and a tail of rebels at their heels, attack Cape Town. General Botha at the same time was to keep the British occupied in the Eastern Transvaal and prevent them drawing off troops to the south, and, so soon as the plans of De Wet and Hertzog were being carried out, he was to enter Natal with a picked force of 5000 mounted men and make for Durban.

Having seen how the parent scheme, the invasion of the Cape Colony, was frustrated, it is necessary to turn to scheme two, and follow General French in the remarkable operations which defeated Botha's designs. A considerable concentration of Boers, under the Commandants Louis Botha, Smuts, Spruyt, and Christian Botha, had taken place in Ermelo, Carolina, and Bethel, which districts constituted depôts for the supply of the enemy's forces. The Commander-in-chief therefore decided to sweep the country between the Delagoa and Natal Railway lines, from Johannesburg to the Swazi and Zulu frontiers, and to clear it of supplies and families. With this object in view, on the 28th of January the following columns were concentrated from the meridian of Springs: Major-General Paget, Brigadier Alderson, Colonel E. Knox (18th Hussars), Lieutenant-Colonel Allenby (6th Dragoons), Lieutenant-Colonel Pulteney (Scots Guards), and Brigadier-General Dartnell (Commandant of Volunteers, Natal).

The troops—the southern columns under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir John French—were to form a north and south line between the railway, and thus drive the enemy before them to Ermelo. They were commanded from north to south in the order shown above. While this line was advancing, Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell and Lieutenant-Colonel Spens, moving a march south from Middelburg and Wonderfontein, were to act as side
The Transvaal War

stops, while Major-General Smith-Dorrien, with a force 3000 strong, was to advance from Belfast via Carolina to Lake Chrissie, for the purpose of preventing the Boers from breaking northeast. A weak column, under Lieutenant-Colonel Colville (Rifle Brigade), was to work south of Colonel Dartnell to cover the movement of supplies, first from Greylingstad to the north, and then from Standerton to Ermelo.

Eventually, owing to the movements of De Wet, General Paget was recalled from this sphere of action, and his place was taken by Colonel Campbell. General Alderson's and Knox's lines of advance were slightly diverted to the north, and the line between them was filled by Lieutenant-Colonel Pulteney, who originally was to have been held in reserve.

The first two marches took the western troops to a line north
General French in Eastern Transvaal

of Greylingstad to Vangatfontein, in the valley of the Wilge River, where there was a two days' halt till the 31st. The march was not without excitement, for Beyers was found to be ensconced in a strong and extended position stretching north and south, and covering the approach to the valley of the Wilge River. Bushman's Kop, fourteen miles east of Springs, was strongly held, and the advanced troops of Knox and Allenby were assailed with fierce artillery from the surrounding heights. But when Allenby's mounted men had wheeled round the south of the position, the Boers thought it high time to retreat, leaving behind them two dead. This was on the 29th. Two days were spent in receiving supplies from Greylingstad and sending the emptied waggons full of Boer families to the rail and clearing the country of supplies.

The Boers, holding a chain of sloping hills some twenty-three miles west of Bethal, were again encountered on the 1st of February. While Colonel Rimington (commanding Colonel Pulteney's mounted troops) worked round the north of the position, Colonel Allenby and the rest of Pulteney's troops held them in front. But the wily Dutchmen, now rapidly becoming demoralised, instantly they found their flank threatened, were off to the east before they could be cut off. The commanders on the right had also met with slight opposition.

The operations of the 2nd of February much resembled those of the previous day, for some 2000 Boers, who had planted themselves about ten miles west of Bethal, ceased their opposition to Colonel Allenby, when they found Pulteney's cavalry sweeping round to their north, and they made such haste to depart that they left behind them an English 15-pounder gun, with damaged breech. The village of Bethal was reached by General French on the 4th, all Boers, save a few women and children, having fled. The troops were now hurriedly pushing forward with a view to surrounding Ermelo. Their position was as follows: Allenby on the south-east; Dartnell on the south and south-west; Pulteney on the west; Knox on the north-west; Anderson and Campbell on the north; and Smith-Dorrien on the north-east and east. The enemy, seeing security at this place thus threatened, split into two factions. Louis Botha, with a following of some 3000 men, scurried to the north toward Komati without impediment, in the form of families and stock, while the rest, protecting their waggons, retreated toward Piet Retief. Botha, while scurrying as aforesaid, discovered on the 5th that Smith-Dorrien's force, about 3000 strong (with a big convoy for his own, Campbell's, and Alderson's columns), had reached Bothwell, north of Lake Chrissie. Here was a fine chance! and the Boer leader speedily availed
The Transvaal War

himself of it. He determined to attack the British column before the troops of Campbell and Alderson, moving from the west, could get in touch with it. Accordingly, dividing his force into three, and rising betimes, in the thick mists of daybreak, on the 6th, he delivered a vigorous semicircular attack upon the camp. This was successfully repulsed.

The Boers lost heavily, General Spruyt and several field-cornets being among the slain. The British had one officer and twenty-three men killed, three officers and fifty-two men wounded. Some 300 horses were killed or stampeded during the surprise. The Boers, owing to the heavy fog of the morning, got away to the north. At the moment Botha was making his attack on the camp, the officer bearing orders from General French for General Smith-Dorrien, after an exciting and hazardous ride, reached Bothwell. Owing to the fight these orders—to move on the 6th to a position E.N.E. of Ermelo—could then not be executed. General Smith-Dorrien therefore remained at Bothwell.

Meanwhile, in the south, fighting went forward. Colonel Allenby, who had been rapidly pushing east, came on the enemy's rearguard, which was occupying a ridge south of Ermelo. With infantry and artillery, and supported by Dartnell's Brigade, he engaged them, holding them on the west while the mounted troops endeavoured to wheel round the southern flank and surround them. But the Boers, who had had a long start, nimbly made good their escape over the Vaal at Witpunt before Allenby's troops could possibly reach that point, and consequently the brilliant attempt to cut off their retreat proved a failure. Ermelo was occupied on the 6th, and thus the first phase of the operations was accomplished.

It was now necessary to sweep the country from Ermelo to the Swazi frontier, which movement occupied from the 9th to the 16th of February. To this end the flanks were immediately opened out again, and the line Bothwell-Ermelo-Amersfoort taken. From this line the force wheeled half-right, the left flank (rationed on reduced scale up to the 20th) beginning to extend east towards Swaziland on the 9th.

The whole force was now so ordered as to form a complete cordon for the purpose of hemming in the enemy and their belongings in the south-eastern corner of the Transvaal. The troops were here to converge on Amsterdam and Piet Retief from north and south-west, and, with the escort to the convoy from Utrecht, were to form a line from Utrecht and the Natal frontier to the Swazi frontier north of Piet Retief. On the 9th General Smith-Dorrien, moving east-north-east, encountered the Boers, and Colonel Mackenzie and his gallant men, with the assistance of
General French in Eastern Transvaal

the 2nd Imperial Light Horse, succeeded in capturing a convoy and putting twenty-one Boers *hors de combat* by a brilliant charge.

Affairs were somewhat hampered by lack of supplies, but at last (on the 10th) a convoy from Standerton having come in, the right wing (Dartnell and Allenby) were provided for. On the following day General French moved on, while Colville's emptied wagons started back with a pathetic load of Boer families and prisoners and British sick.

On the 12th, the Boers offered some opposition to the advancing troops of Pultency and Allenby, and near Klipfontein they, for a wonder, made a stand, and gave Colonel Rimington and the Inniskilling Dragoons an opportunity for smart work. A dashing charge, magnificently led, cleared the ground, and five dead Boers and some wounded were left to tell the tale of the encounter.

On the 13th Dartnell, who had taken up a position at Amersfoort, moved from thence steadily in line with the whole force, which proceeded with insignificant opposition to clear away stock and destroy supplies.
The Transvaal War

Amsterdam was occupied by Smith-Dorrien on the 14th, and on the 16th General French, with the troops of Knox and Pulteney, made his entry into Piet Retief, where the landdrost at once surrendered. Rains had now made the already almost impassable country into one mighty morass, and the mists, fogs, and torrents rendered the position of the troops a critical one. Great consternation prevailed as to the fate of Colonel Burn-Murdoch, on whom all hopes were set. He had been charged by the General Officer Commanding in Natal with the duty of conveying, from Utrecht, food to the force, and had apparently got lost in the mists and bog, for not a sign of his anxiously awaited convoy could be discovered. This convoy had left Newcastle on the 12th, but it was not till the 27th that its welcome supplies reached the famishing troops, who, from the 20th, had had to subsist entirely on the country, while the horses ate grass only. The rivers had by this time become raging torrents, and the roads, quagmires. The Boer farms had already been cleared out, and only by offering a sovereign for a 200-lb. bag of mealies could the natives be prevailed upon to unearth their buried treasure. The ration during this lean period sounds distinctly unpleasing: three-quarters of a pound of mealie meal (ground in the steam mill at Piet Retief), and an ounce of mealie coffee (an infusion of the same meal roasted and ground), made the sole variation to a diet of saltless meat. The men nevertheless maintained their health and cheeriness, their constant hauls conducing much to their enlivenment, and the number in hospital was abnormally low. Still there was vast annoyance in the fact that they were unable to be up and doing.

A new line of supply was opened on the 28th, when Colonel Bullock started from Volkrust to Piet Retief with a convoy of ninety-one waggons. Though this reached its destination in safety on the 5th of March, it was not till he returned with a second load, on the 21st of March, that sufficient oats could reach Piet Retief to enable the force to move. Despite the inconvenience of delay a tremendous amount of work was carried on, the troops pushing continually into Swaziland and tackling Boers who struggled to slip through the British line, and many captures were made both north and south of the border. The surrounding country was thoroughly cleared, and many guns and much ammunition were brought to light. The Engineers also worked like Trojans, improving the roads and bridging the numerous, now swollen, rivers and spruits that abounded in the district. As an instance of the force of the unceasing floods between the 6th and 13th of March, it may be mentioned that the Assegai, which is normally fordable, averaged 12 feet in depth, and on the 12th rose to 18 feet.
A NIGHT ATTACK: DEFENDING A TRAIN DERAILED BY THE BOERS

Drawing by Frank Dodd, R.I.
General French in Eastern Transvaal

The position of the forces on the 1st of March stood thus:—

General Smith-Dorrien (who had moved south from Amsterdam on the 25th of February) was now eight miles north of Piet Retief, while his mounted troops, under Colonel Henry, had penetrated into Swaziland. At Piet Retief was General French, with Colonels Knox and Pulteney, some of whose mounted troops, under Colonel Rimington, were covering the road south-west of Luneberg as far as Schihoek, whence Colonel Burn-Murdoch carried on the line to Utrecht. Colonels Campbell and Allenby were twelve and seventeen miles south-east of Piet Retief respectively, Colonel Alderson was at Marienthal, and General Dartnell at Intombi River. Colonel Bullock was at Wakkerstroom.

Soon the Utrecht-Luneberg line was abandoned as a line of supply, and the troops were based on Utrecht. On the 18th of March General Dartnell occupied the village of Paul Pietersburg, and Colonel Rimington seized the stone bridge over the Pivaan River running south of it, while Colonel Alderson built a pontoon bridge over the Pongola River at Yagd Drift.

On the 21st General French, with Colonels Knox and Pulteney, moved on, leaving General Smith-Dorrien in command north of the Pongola. Here the latter, with the columns of Colonels Campbell and Allenby, held a line from Langdraai Drift, in the Lower Pongolo, by Platnek, Mahamba, Zaudbauk, and Piet Retief, to Yagd Drift, so as to prevent Boers from breaking north and north-west.

Colonel Knox now set about clearing the country to the east, between the Pivaan and Pongola Rivers, to prevent the Boers breaking back south of the Pongola, while General French, continuing his march with the columns of General Dartnell and Colonel Pulteney, moved on Vryheid, where he established his headquarters on the 25th of March. Here General Hildyard had accumulated a large reserve of supplies for the whole force, thus materially facilitating the progress of further operations.

The movement to clear the angle between the Swazi and Zulu frontiers began on the 27th of March and terminated on the 15th of April. General Dartnell, with ten days' supplies, moved east from Vryheid, with Pulteney east-south-east on his right rear, and Alderson (who started two days later from some four miles south of the Pivaan Bridge) on his left rear. Colonel Pulteney speedily came in contact with Grobelaar's commando, drove it north, where it came in collision with General Dartnell, who, after some skirmishing, killed and wounded some twenty Boers. The General was now forced to push on with mounted troops and a few guns only, for the country was impassable for wheeled transport, and therefore it had to be left behind in charge of the infantry. He formed a depot
The Transvaal War

some thirty miles east-south-east of Vryheid, while Colonel Alderson formed his about twenty-five miles north-east of Vryheid.

More fighting took place on the 31st between the Boers and General Dartnell some twelve miles north of his depot, in which engagement four Boers were slain, ten taken prisoners, and waggon, cattle, and sheep were captured. Their pom-pom—previously destroyed to prevent it being of service to us—was thrown over a precipice by the flying foe. The troops moving on east through the low-lying bush veldt came on more Boers on the 2nd, engaged them, cleared the country, returned to Toovernsaarsrust on the 4th, and moved on the 5th and 6th to Vryheid, where General Dartnell for five days took a well-earned rest.

Colonel Alderson had meanwhile taken a prodigious share in the work. He had sped hot foot after a party of Boers that had broken northwards, caught them on the 3rd near the junction of the Pivaan and Pongola Rivers, and succeeded in effecting the capture of their cattle, waggon, and mules. On the following day he rested at Nooitgedacht, a place six miles east of Vryheid. He then (on the 6th) passed Vryheid, and proceeded, in three columns, to sweep the country south of that place, while General Dartnell acted as a stop on the line Vryheid-Toovernsaarsrust. By the 13th Colonel Alderson had fulfilled his mission, and "accomplished all that was feasible." He then returned to Vryheid, and the difficult and fatiguing operations were practically concluded.

The various columns now left from this part of the theatre of war in the following order: Colonel Pulteney, being urgently needed by the Commander-in-Chief for use in the north of Middelburg, left Vryheid on the 1st, and entrained from Glencoe on the 4th. General Dartnell on the 12th, from Vryheid, marched via Newcastle to Volkrust, there to rest and refit. General Alderson passed through Vryheid on the 13th, reaching the rail at Glencoe on the 16th, and General Smith-Dorrien with his own, Colonel Campbell's, and Colonel Allenby's columns, marched north from Piet Retief on the 14th towards the Delagoa Railway.

The results of the prodigious energy of General French's force during the two and a half months, from the 27th of January to the 16th of April, were amazing. These zealous and untiring warriors had entirely swept the country between the Delagoa and Natal railway lines, from Johannesburg to the Swazi and Zulu frontiers, travelling across the most difficult country, rendered doubly so by tempest and flood, and living almost on starvation fare.

Nevertheless 1332 Boers had been placed hors de combat (369 killed and wounded, 233 taken prisoners, 730 surrendered), while an incalculable amount of supplies had been removed or destroyed, including 11 guns, 1280 rifles, 218,249 rounds of ammunition,
General French in Eastern Transvaal

2,281 waggons and carts, and 272,752 head of stock (7,503 horses, 377 mules, 7,653 trek oxen, 42,328 cattle, and 215,089 sheep). How much farther the work might have proved successful had it not been for the negotiations between Botha and the Commander-in-Chief which took place during the movement, cannot be stated. Certain it is that General French was much hampered by the palaver which ended in air, for Botha’s ruse or so-called negotiations enabled the Boers to slip northwards unmolested. As the pacific nature of the negotiations has been the subject of much comment, it is as well to append the origin and substance of them.

On February 23 a telegram was received by Sir Alfred Milner from the Commander-in-Chief, Pretoria, which stated, under date of the 22nd February, that Mrs. Botha had come back from meeting her husband, bringing from him an answer to a verbal message from the Commander-in-Chief, that if he desired it, he (General Botha) would meet him as to the means of bringing the war to an end, but on the express understanding that the question of the independence of the Transvaal and Orange River Colony should not be discussed in any way. The meeting would probably take place at Middelburg.

This telegram was sent to Mr. Chamberlain, who replied, February 23:

“I am glad to hear of Botha’s desire to treat, and I hope that it is genuine. He will find us most anxious, in that case, to meet him on all points affecting individual position. We have already made clear the policy we intend to pursue as to future government.”

On March 1 Lord Kitchener telegraphed:

“I have had a long interview with Botha, who showed very good feeling, and seemed anxious to bring about peace. He asked for information on a number of subjects which he said that he should submit to his Government and people, and if they agreed he should visit Orange River Colony and get them to agree. They should all then hand in their arms and finish the war. He told me that they could go on for some time, and that he was not sure of being able to bring about peace without independence. He tried very hard for some kind of independence, but I declined to discuss such a point, and said that a modified form of independence would be most dangerous and likely to lead to war in the future.”

Lord Kitchener then detailed the points upon which Botha required information. These points were noted by the Commander-in-Chief, and his suggestions were embodied in a telegram of March 3 from Sir Alfred Milner to Mr. Chamberlain. The Colonial Secretary replied on March 6, suggesting modifications which his Majesty’s Government desired should be made in the letter to Botha. A telegram from Sir Alfred Milner of March 9 reported that he and Lord Kitchener were both opposed to the assistance to
The Transvaal War

burghers being limited to loans, but that the amended message was sent to the Commandant on March 7.

Lord Kitchener, in a telegram to Mr. Brodrick on March 20, detailed the terms of his letter to Commandant Botha:

"With reference to our conversation at Middelburg on 28th February, I have the honour to inform you that in the event of a general and complete cessation of hostilities and the surrender of all rifles, ammunition, cannon, and other munitions of war in the hands of the burghers or in Government depôts or elsewhere, his Majesty's Government is prepared to adopt the following measures:

"His Majesty's Government will at once grant an amnesty in the Transvaal and Orange River Colonies for all bona fide acts of war committed during the recent hostilities. British subjects belonging to Natal and Cape Colony, while they will not be compelled to return to those colonies, will, if they do so, be liable to be dealt with by the law of those colonies, specially passed to meet the circumstances arising out of the present war. As you are doubtless aware, the special law in the Cape Colony has greatly mitigated the ordinary penalties for high treason in the present cases.

"All prisoners of war now in St. Helena, Ceylon, or elsewhere will, on the completion of the surrender, be brought back to their country as quickly as arrangements can be made for their transport.

"At the earliest practicable date military administration will cease and will be replaced by civil administration in the form of Crown Colony Government. There will therefore be, in the first instance, in each of the new Colonies a Governor and an Executive Council, consisting of a certain number of official members, to whom a nominated unofficial element will be added. But it is the desire of his Majesty's Government, as soon as circumstances permit, to introduce a representative element, and ultimately to concede to the new Colonies the privilege of self-government. Moreover, on the cessation of hostilities a High Court will be established in each of the new Colonies to administer the law of the land, and this court will be independent of the Executive.

"Church property, public trusts, and orphans' funds will be respected. Both the English and Dutch languages will be used and taught in public schools where parents of the children desire it, and allowed in Courts of Law.

"As regards the debts of the late Republican Governments, his Majesty's Government cannot undertake any liability. It is, however, prepared, as an act of grace, to set aside a sum not exceeding £1,000,000 to repay inhabitants of the Transvaal and Orange River Colonies for goods requisitioned from them by the late Republican Governments or, subsequent to annexation, by Commandants in the field being in a position to enforce such requisitions. But such claims will have to be established to the satisfaction of a Judge or Judicial Commission appointed by the Government to investigate and assess them, and if exceeding in the aggregate £1,000,000, they will be liable to reduction pro rata.

"I also beg to inform your Honour that the new Government will take into immediate consideration the possibility of assisting by loan the occupants of farms who will take the oath of allegiance to repair any injury sustained by destruction of buildings or loss of stock during the war, and that no special war tax will be imposed on farmers to defray the expense of the war.

"When burghers require the protection of firearms such will be allowed to
General French in Eastern Transvaal

them by licence and on due registration, provided they take the oath of allegiance. Licences also will be issued for sporting rifles, guns, &c., but military firearms will only be allowed for means of protection.

"As regards the extension of the franchise to Kaffirs in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony, it is not the intention of his Majesty's Government to give such franchise before representative government is granted to these Colonies, and if then given, it will be so limited as to secure the just predominance of the white races. The legal position of coloured persons will, however, be similar to that which they hold in Cape Colony.

"In conclusion, I must inform your Honour that if the terms now offered are not accepted after a reasonable delay for consideration, they must be regarded as cancelled."

To this Botha replied:—

"I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of your Excellency's letter stating what steps your Excellency's Government is prepared to take in the event of a general and total cessation of hostilities. I have advised my Government of your Excellency's said letter; but, after the mutual exchange of views at our interview at Middelburg on 28th February last, it will certainly not surprise your Excellency to know that I do not feel disposed to recommend that the terms of the said letter shall have the earnest consideration of my Government. I may add, also, that my Government and my chief officers here entirely agree with my views."

Botha's private opinions are to be found in an address to the burghers, which was subsequently discovered among papers captured by Sir Bindon Blood at Roos Senekal. He said:—

"The spirit of Lord Kitchener's letter makes it very plain to you all that the British Government desires nothing else but the destruction of our Afrikaans people, and acceptance of the terms contained therein is absolutely out of the question. Virtually, the letter contains nothing more, but rather less, than what the British Government will be obliged to do should our cause go wrong. Notice that they will give us a Legislative Council consisting of their own officials and members nominated by themselves. The voice of the people is thus totally unrecognised. . . . The more we are aggrieved by the enemy the more steadfastly we ought to stand for our good and lawful rights. Let us, as Daniel in the lions' den, place our trust in God alone, for in His time and in His way He will certainly give us deliverance."

On April 19th Mr. Chamberlain telegraphed to the High Commissioner as follows:—

"As our terms have been refused by Botha, they are of course withdrawn, and his Majesty's Government do not think it advisable that you or Kitchener should reopen negotiations. Should Botha or other leaders make any further suggestions of their own accord Kitchener will, of course, forward them to us without expressing any opinion upon them to those who make them. But neither Mrs. Botha nor any one else should be led to suppose that we could consider terms more favourable to the Boers than those which have been rejected. The Secretary of State for War will send a copy of this to Kitchener."
The Transvaal War

That the negotiations were looked upon with disfavour by all parties concerned is undoubted. A letter written by one of Reuter's correspondents expresses the very general view taken by the British in the field:—

"The Parliamentary paper giving particulars of the peace negotiations has been eagerly read by all ranks of the Army. It is impossible to shut one's eyes to the fact that the British forces now operating in South Africa are profoundly dissatisfied with them. On all hands, and from all ranks, the same complaint is heard, that they are too lenient, and are not calculated to bring permanent peace to South Africa. There is no bitterness against the Boers; that feeling has long ago died out, but when the men came to read the terms of peace proposed by the British Government, they remembered their dead comrades whose graves mark the line of march, and asked themselves: 'Is it for this that they have died?' The Army, which has undergone countless hardships and dangers, is less articulate than a municipal body in England, but surely it should have its say. The regular Army, perhaps, is expected not to think or to express its thought about politics, but to fight, and only to fight; but the South Africans, the Canadians, and the Australians will give expression to their sentiments. They declare that in the terms of peace offered by the British Government there are all the elements of future rebellion and unrest. 'Give the Boers,' they say, 'even more than we have promised them, but let it be as a free gift after surrender, and not as a condition of surrender.' Curiously enough, these sentiments are shared entirely by the Burghers who have surrendered, and who are only waiting for the end of hostilities to take their places as British subjects, determined to do their utmost for the peaceful development of a country which, under British rule, will be as much theirs as anybody else's. One of them, speaking to me the other day, put forward his view of the case. 'If the British grant terms to those burghers now under arms,' he said, 'they at once establish for all time a confession of weakness. We shall tell each other and our children that we have never been beaten, and, as we increase in numbers, the tales of former prowess and invincibility will perpetuate a national feeling. If you allow burghers to carry rifles after surrender you will have petty revolts for the next ten years. There is no need of a Mauser or a Lee-Metford to defend the burgher against the native. Give him a shot-gun or a revolver, and no native will molest him. The demand for the retention of arms is nothing more nor less than the result of a determination on the part of the Boers to use them against you at the very slightest provocation. To give them rifles is suicidal.'"