CHAPTER V

COMBINED MOVEMENT FOR THE CLEARANCE OF THE NORTHERN TRANSVAAL.—MARCH AND APRIL

Lord Kitchener now engaged himself in preparing a new and immense combined movement for the clearance of the country to the north of Pretoria. The so-called seat of government of the Boers had been removed from Pietersburg to Roos Senekal, and its presence there naturally attracted all the Boers who, in consequence of General French's clearance of the Swaziland border, had been forced into the difficult country of the Tautesberg and Bothaberg. In planning a movement against these bands from the line of Middelburg-Belfast-Lydenburg, precautions had to be taken to prevent the escape of the enemy into the Zoutpansberg and Waterberg districts. It therefore became necessary to hold Pietersburg and the drifts over Olifant's River, and to chase the Boers from their snug retreats in the vicinity.

Accordingly, General Plumer was moved from Orange River Colony and directed to hold Pietersburg, and prepare to cooperate in the combined movement just described.

At this time, 26th March, Pienaars River was the most advanced garrison on the Pietersburg line. For this place General Plumer started, there to be joined by the 2nd Battalion Gordon Highlanders and "C" Section Pom-Poms.

Beyond Pienaars River repairs to the line had to be effected, which caused delay, then the troops advanced from Warmbad, Nylstroom, to Piet Potgietersrust over a clear line. Here the enemy meant mischief, for they had blown up one of the smaller railway bridges, but this was soon repaired, and on the 8th of April the advanced troops reached Pietersburg, the average distance covered being fifteen miles a day. The town had been evacuated in the night. Here provisions, supplies, and remounts had to be collected, in order that the attack, once begun, might be carried on without a hitch, and that the Boers, chased from one quarter, might not be sent trekking into Rhodesia, but be enveloped and swept up en masse as they had been at Paardeberg and at Fouriesburg. The projected advance was full of difficulties and the preliminaries were endless. It was impossible to begin till men, horses, and supplies had been deposited at Pietersburg by rail from Cape Town, Port
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Elizabeth, Durban, or Delagoa Bay. It must be remembered that the columns were preparing to march some 150 miles across the veldt, where the greatest of all enemies, the tsetse fly, harassed every inch of the road. In addition to this deadly foe to horses, there were now the wintry nights, following grilling days, to be encountered, and chilly shocks which bring enteric and other diseases in their train.

At Pietersburg forty-six Boers voluntarily surrendered, and the following captures were made:—one Krupp gun, thirty rifles, 1000 rounds 7-pounder ammunition, 210,000 small-arm ammunition, 8,500 lbs. gunpowder, 480 lbs. dynamite. Two truck-loads of ammunition had been blown up by the Boers on their departure. The occupation of the place now made the scheme for the opening of railway communication from the Cape to Cairo (hitherto thought to be a visionary's dream) perfectly feasible. The line from Warmbaths to Pietersburg was now placed in charge of Colonel Hall, the posts being occupied by the Northamptonshire and Wiltshire Regiments, together with the 12th Battalion Mounted Infantry. This left General Plumer's mounted troops free to hold the line of the Olifant's River. Having established an adequate garrison at Pietersburg, General Plumer proceeded to post Major Colvin's column to secure the drift at Bathfontein, while to Colonel Jeffreys was assigned the task of occupying a lower drift at Blauwbloemje's Kloof. General Plumer himself was at Commissie Drift. Schalk Burger at this time was said to have deposited himself at Tolesburg, west of Middelburg, where he still endeavoured to carry on the parody of government.

Colonel Jeffreys on the 18th, while operating with his mobile column along the Olifant, came on a party of Boers east of Drucloek. He captured eleven and seized their ammunition. Soon after, Lieutenant Reid (Imperial Bushmen) with some twenty Australians, who had been detached from General Plumer's post at Commissie Drift, performed a valiant act. While in charge of his patrol he located a Boer laager some fifteen miles east of the drift. Under cover of night he and his handful of Colonials crept towards the camp, surrounded it, and at dawn on the 24th boldly attacked it. The enemy, doubtless imagining that young Reid's hardihood was backed by a large reserve at his elbow, promptly surrendered, and the gallant British band had the honour of recording a haul of forty-one prisoners, including the commandant, Schroeder, and one excellent Maxim, together with horses, mules, waggons, and ammunition. The Boers, on their side, scored slightly elsewhere. On the day following this brilliant episode, while Major Twyford, with a small escort, was moving from Machadodorp to Lydenburg, there to join the Royal Scots, the enemy lay in ambush.
DEFEAT OF A NIGHT ATTEMPT TO CROSS THE RAILWAY

Drawing by Allan Stewart
Operations North of Middelburg

near Badfontein, a valley on the Crocodile River. Their plans were successful, for it was not difficult in this shelving and dipping region to surprise a small party moving over a vast tract of difficult country. The tussle that followed was a tough one, the men fighting desperately and refusing to surrender. At last Major Twyford was killed and his band overpowered.

The results of General Plumer's operations between the 14th and 28th of April were ninety-one prisoners, twenty surrendered, one Maxim, 20,360 rounds ammunition, twenty-six waggons and carts, and forty-six mules.

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL SIR BINDON BLOOD'S OPERATIONS NORTH OF THE LINE MIDDELBURG—BELFAST—LYDENBURG

On the day (14th April) that General Plumer, having garrisoned Pietersburg, left there to seize the drifts on the Olifant River, and thus close the avenues of escape leading towards the north-west, Sir Bindon Blood disposed his force in the following manner. The columns of Colonel Park and General Kitchener occupied Lydenburg, with those of Colonel Douglas at Witklip (south of them). Colonel Pulteney was stationed at Belfast, while at Middelburg were Colonel Benson and General Beatson. The columns of Colonels Pulteney and Benson were commanded by General Fetherstonhaugh.

These columns, admirably placed for the work in hand, now began to move, so that the enemy in this difficult region might no longer plume himself on being secure from attack.

Column One, under Colonel Park, moving round into the Waterval Valley, joined hands with Column Two under General W. Kitchener near Rietfontein. In this region Colonel Park remained, so as to check any attempt on the part of the Boers to move north from Roosenekal, while General Kitchener continued his advance across the Steelport River to Fort Weber, which was reached on the 18th of April.

Column Three, under Colonel Douglas, moved to Dullstroom (via Zwagershoek and Palmietfontein), which was reached on the 17th of April. On the following day Colonel Pulteney, with Column Four, arrived there from Belfast, but pushed on via Witpoort to occupy Roosenekal. On his approach Mr. Schalk Burger and his Government, in hot haste, bolted to Leydsdorp, leaving papers of the South African Republic and many bank-notes behind. Some of the documents captured at Roosenekal by the forces under Sir Bindon Blood consisted of (1) a circular issued by the Boer Commandant-General as to the treatment ofburghers who have surrendered; (2) a letter of representatives of the Central
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Peace Committee, Pretoria, urging surrender; and (3) a certificate of the execution of M. de Kock, a member of that committee. In the letter from the Central Peace Committee, one of the signatories of which was M. de Kock, there occurred, after a reference to the strong position of Lord Kitchener, the following words:—

"What is submitted to you is a well-meant offer from a powerful man, who is sure of his case, and a person who is willing to do everything to restore peace and prevent further bloodshed and destruction of our dear country, and to remove the sufferings of our wives and children; and when I submit this verbally to you, you will be convinced that this is truly the act of a strong man, who knows his own strength and might, and can thus hold out the olive branch. Oh, I trust that you and your fellow-burghers will accept it as such, and not do as we Afrikanders generally do, when such representations are made to us, to consider it a sign of weakness, because the Lord knows that he (Lord Kitchener) is doing so from pure nobility of soul, and the wish of the British people to prevent further bloodshed."

The foregoing was evidently issued after M. de Kock had met Lord Kitchener in Pretoria. Then followed a circular by Commandant C. R. de Wet denouncing Lord Kitchener's terms, and a circular issued by Commandant Botha giving his account of the negotiations. De Wet stated:—

"Finally, I wish to observe that if I and our Government were so foolish as to accept the proposals of Lord Kitchener, I am convinced that the great majority of our people, if not all, who are now fighting, would not agree, for to accept those proposals means nothing less than the complete subjection of the Afrikander people, and the subjection of a people is more bitter to think of than the death of every single burgher."

To Roosenekal Colonel Benson, with Column Five, also directed his steps, marching by Bankfontein and Klupspruit and Blinkwater, clearing the surrounding country as he went. He and Colonel Pulteney having come in touch with each other, they now scoured the valley around Steelpoort, unearthing Boers and capturing burghers innumerable.

General Beatson, with Column Six, was engaged in a prodigious task. Besides sweeping the country—Avontuur, Laatste Drift—through which he marched, to Brakfontein, he was instructed to hold both Wagon and Crocodile Drifts on the Olifant River, and to push out patrols to connect with General Plumer's troops on the lower reaches of the river.

Later, General W. Kitchener, from Fort Weber, moved south to Paardeplaats, in the vicinity of which place he operated for some days making captures of prisoners and stock, and then proceeding farther south to clear the Bothaberg before going to Middelburg.

To Middelburg and Blinkwater also went Colonel Pulteney from
Operations North of Middelburg

Roosenekal, while Colonels Benson and Douglas (who for some time co-operated at Dullstroom) marched to Belfast.

Thus the country was completely weeded of the enemy, and though some few effected their escape through the rugged region east of the Steelpoort Valley, 1081 Boers surrendered. Other captures included a 1-pounder quick-firing Krupp gun complete, with one hundred rounds of ammunition, one pom-pom, 540 rifles, 204,450 rounds of ammunition, 247 horses, 611 wagons and carts. One Long Tom, one 4.7-inch gun (captured at Helvetia), one 15-pounder gun, one 12-pounder Krupp gun, two pom-poms, and two Maxims were blown up by the enemy to avoid capture. Unfortunately a gallant Victorian, Lieutenant Beatty, lost his life.

The combined operations thus satisfactorily concluded, General Plumer concentrated his troops and marched by the line of Elands and Kameel Rivers to Eerste Fabrieken. General Blood, still co-operating, directed General Beatson to move his force from Wagon Drift along the left bank of the Wilge River to Bronker's Spruit Station. Colonel Allenby (who had returned from assisting General French's operations) moved from Middelburg to Witbank, and thence, in conjunction with General Beatson, began to clear the angle of the Wilge and Olifant Rivers. The enemy was now dispersing in every direction. Only one party driven westward by
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General Beatson was caught. This, in full flight, was overtaken by a detachment from General Plumer’s force. Major Vialls and the 3rd Victorian Bushmen, after an exciting chase over the rugged wilds, brought in twenty-seven prisoners, eighteen rifles, thirty wagons, and 1000 head of cattle. General Plumer reached his destination (Eerste Fabrieken) on the 4th of May.

COLONEL GRENFELL AT PIETERSBURG

Concurrently with the activities of General Plumer and Sir Bindon Blood, events of some importance took place near Pietersburg. No sooner had General Plumer turned his back on the place than the Boers, some fifteen miles to the north, began to collect. A reconnaissance conducted by Mounted Infantry scented out a big commando, said to be under the command of Van Rensburg, at Klipdam. Accordingly Colonel Grenfell, with his column (Kitchener’s Fighting Scouts), was sent by rail to Pietersburg “to clear up the situation.” The clearing up process was highly effective. Moving by night (on the 26th of April), the troops came on the laager at Klipdam a little before dawn, and with the first streak of day delivered their attack. The fight was short, sharp, and brilliant. Seven Boers were killed. Only one of our men was wounded. Forty-one Dutchmen were captured, together with their camp, twenty-six horses, ten mules, wagons multifarious, and 76,000 rounds of ammunition.

This dashing exploit was soon followed by another, less showy but decidedly practical. Report having declared that the last Long Tom of the enemy was ensconced somewhere twenty miles east of Pietersburg, Colonel Grenfell directed his energies towards its capture. He marched hot foot via Doornhoek—which he reached on the 30th—to Berg Plaats. But the enemy was on the qui vive. They determined that Long Tom should show fight till his last gasp, and opened fire at over 10,000 yards range. Still Colonel Grenfell’s men pushed on and on, determined to capture their prize, while the horrible weapon snorted derisively. At last, after firing sixteen rounds, and while Kitchener’s Fighting Scouts were steadily bearing down on them, the Boers blew it up and scudded to the north-east to save their skins. The great object, therefore, of the splendid rush was defeated, but ten prisoners were secured, together with thirty-five rounds of ammunition for the defunct Long Tom. Two of the British party were wounded. While proceeding to search for further spoil, 100,000 rounds of Martini-Henry ammunition were unearthed at a neighbouring farm and destroyed. Kitchener’s Fighting Scouts, under Colonels Colenbrander and
Colonel Grenfell at Pietersburg

Wilson, were now ever on the move, and, working from Bergvlei as a centre, were continually bringing in wandering Boers. A detachment of the 12th Mounted Infantry under Major Thomson, too, did splendid work, and succeeded, in the midst of a dense fog, in capturing Commandant Marais and forty of his followers.

Beyers, who had fled from Pietersburg on the approach of the British, was still at large, however, and in the Waterberg district was doing his best to intercept such commandos as were on the way to surrender. Munnik, a former landdrost of Pietersburg, and somewhat of a firebrand, together with his son, an ex-state mining engineer, had been captured during General Plumer's march, by Major Kirkwood and the Wiltshire Regiment.

The total "bag" made by Colonel Grenfell, during his move from Pietersburg till his return there on the 6th of May, was 129 prisoners, fifty voluntary surrenders, and 240,000 rounds of ammunition, which were destroyed. Seven Boers were killed.

On 10th May Botha forwarded to Lord Kitchener another letter:—

"As I have already assured your Excellency, I am very desirous of terminating this war and its sad consequences. It is, however, necessary, in order to comply with the Grondwet of this Republic and otherwise, that, before any steps are taken in that direction, the condition of our country and our cause be brought to the notice of his Honour State President Kruger in Europe; and I therefore wish to send two persons to him in order to acquaint him fully with that condition. As speed in this matter is of great consequence to both contending parties, and as such despatch without your Excellency's assistance would take a considerable time, I should like to hear from your Excellency whether your Excellency is prepared to assist me in expediting this matter by allowing such person or persons to journey there and back unhindered, if necessary by the traffic medium within your Excellency's control."

On 16th May Lord Kitchener replied to the application as follows:—

"I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your Honour's letter of the 10th instant, and, in reply, beg to state that I can only deal with you and your superior officers in the field in regard to the cessation of hostilities, and that I do not recognise the official status of any other persons in the late Republics of the Orange River and Transvaal. If, however, your Honour desires, with the object of bringing hostilities to a close, to consult with any person in Europe I will forward any telegram your Honour desires on the subject and let you have the reply. Should, however, your Honour still desire to send messengers, and will inform me of their names and status, I will refer the matter to his Majesty's Government for decision."