

The first Anglo-Boer War was the only war lost by the British Empire during the 19th Century. In each of the four battles of this First War of Independence for the Transvaal, the Boers decisively defeated the British Army: at Bronkhorstspuit 20 December 1880, Laing's Nek 28 January 1881, Ingogo (Skuinshoofte), 8 February 1881 and Majuba 27 February 1881.

Annexation

Sir Ryder Haggard (author of such best selling novels as *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*) was one of a small contingent of Natal Mounted Police who boldly rode into the Transvaal Republic, They took down the *Vierkleur* and ran up the Union Jack in Pretoria declaring the South African Republic of the Transvaal annexed by Great Britain. This was done on 12 April 1877 by order of Sir Theophilus Shepstone, the Governor of Natal.

This was in violation of the Sand River Convention of 1852, wherein Great Britain had recognised the independence of the people North of the Vaal River and their right to manage their own affairs without any interference on the part of the British government.

Because of the unpopularity of the Transvaal President, T.F. Burgers, who had dared to mint a coin with his own image on it, and had begun to tax the Transvaal farmers, no one responded to his call for the commandos to resist the British.

Resistance

However, when the British began to tax the Boers, resistance developed. Paul Kruger, who as a young boy of 11 years old had taken part in the Battle of Vegkop against the Matebele, was the dynamic force behind the struggle for the independence of the Transvaal. Numerous protest meetings and diplomatic attempts by the Boers were ignored by the British. When an ex-president of the Transvaal, M.W. Pretorius, approached the British High Commissioner, Sir Garnet Wolseley, in Pretoria, he was immediately jailed.

Wolseley declared: *So long as the sun shines the Transvaal will remain British territory!* He also declared: *The Vaal River would flow backwards through the Drakensberg sooner than the British would be withdrawn from the Transvaal!*

The spark that began the first Anglo-Boer War was over taxation. A farmer, Pieter Bezuidenhout, was summoned to pay ?14 tax. When he refused to pay, the magistrate ordered the seizure and sale of his wagon by public auction. On 11 November 1880 a party of 100 Boers stopped the auction and forcibly returned the wagon to its owner.

Paardenkraal

On 8 December 1880 ten thousand Boers assembled at the Paardekraal Farm (what is today Krugersdorp).

At this gathering, which lasted until 16 December, the Boers decided to re-establish the Transvaal Republic. Commandant Paul Kruger was elected vice president and Heidelberg was appointed as an interim capital. The first action of the new Transvaal government was to besiege the British garrisons at Pretoria, Potchefstroom, Rustenburg, Lydenburg, Wakkerstroom, Standerton and Marabastad.

With their lines of communication cut and with the threat of food shortages, it became imperative for the British government to relieve these garrisons. Colonel Phillip Anstruther, Commander of the 94th Regiment, was sent to reinforce the British garrison in Pretoria. General Joubert sent a message warning Colonel Anstruther to halt his convoy. If he would not it would taken as an act of war. Anstruther's reply was: *I have orders to march to Pretoria, and to Pretoria I will go!*

The Battle of Bronkhorstspuit

At the Battle of Bronkhorstspuit the Boers ambushed the British column and in a matter of minutes killed 57 men and wounded another 100. On the Boer side 2 were killed and 5 wounded. Before he died of his wounds, Colonel Anstruther declared of Boer General Frans Joubert: *All he did against me was honest.*

In

Pietermaritzburg, the Governor of Natal and Commander-in-Chief of all British forces in South Africa, General George Pomeroy Colley, received the news of the Bronkhorstspuit disaster with shock. He described it as *a sort of Isandlawana on a smaller scale.*

General Pomeroy Colley

At 45 years old General Pomeroy Colley was one of Britain's most brilliant men. By age 6 he could already speak French and German fluently. He had began his military career at age 13 at Sandhurst Military Academy. His family was related to the Duke of Wellington, of whom he was a cousin. At 19 years old, as a Lieutenant, George Colley had been involved in the wars against the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape. In 1860 he had taken part in the war in China.

He graduated from the Staff College at Sandhurst with the highest marks yet attained to that point. He also distinguished himself during the Ashanti War in West Africa, as well as in campaigns in India and Afghanistan. General Sir Evelyn Wood described General Colley as *the best instructed soldier I had ever met.* One London magazine described Colley as *a pillar of the Empire.* Sir Garnet Wolseley described Colley as *the most loyal, warm hearted of comrades, the most lovable of true men.*

The Battle of Laing's Nek

On 26 January 1881 General Colley marched a force of 1,200 men to Mount Prospect. On 28 January 1881 General Colley initiated the British attack on the Boer positions at Laing's Nek. With 180 cavalry, 870 infantry, 6 canon and a naval attachment with rocket tubes, they bombarded the Boer position at Laing's Nek for 20 minutes before storming the hill.

The British attack was repulsed by the Boers with a fierce fusillade. Within minutes nearly all the officers, including Colonel Dean, who was leading the assault, had fallen. British casualties were 7 officers and 76 men dead and another 111 wounded. On the Boer side 14 men had been killed and 27 wounded. General Colley requested a truce with General Joubert so that they could care for the wounded and bury the dead. This was then done.

The Battle of Skuinshoogte

On 8 February 1881 General Colley determined to frighten off the raiding Boers with a show of force near Skuinshoogte (Ingongo).

As the British artillery opened fire on the Boer commando, the Boers made a direct charge sustaining an extremely accurate rifle fire from the saddle, causing the death of all the gunners. Military authors at the time commented with amazement that the Battle of Skuinshoogte had overturned conventional 19th Century military wisdom by showing that cavalry can overpower artillery! 6 Officers and 70 men were killed and 63 wounded in this action, against the Boer losses of 8 men killed and 6 wounded.

Majuba

With this third military disaster in the Anglo-Boer conflict, General Colley determined to redeem British military honour with a bold strike to seize the heights overlooking Laing's Nek: Mount Majuba. On 23 February the British garrison at Mount Prospect was reinforced by 2,000 men from the 92nd Regiment of Gordon Highlanders. Wearing their khaki jackets and tartan kilts, they arrived fresh from a successful Afghanistan campaign.

Standing at 2,150 metres above sea level Mount Majuba is clearly visible from a great distance. The Zulus had called it *Amajuba the Mountain of Doves*. This strategic triangular shaped mountain dominated the critical point where three states met: Transvaal, the Orange Free State and Natal.

Early on Saturday evening 26 February, 1881 whistles were blown and commands were shouted at the British military base at Mount Prospect. Three companies of the 92nd Gordon Highlanders, two companies of the 58th Regiment, 2 companies of the 60th Rifles and 1 detachment of the Naval Brigade were to get ready to march within the hour. Each was to carry food rations for three days, full water

bottles, a Martini-Henry rifle, complete with bayonet and 70 rounds, a military greatcoat, blanket and oilskin sheet. In addition each company was to transport 6 picks, 4 shovels, axes, hammers and pliers. Dr. Mahon and his 50 medical assistants were to transport everything necessary for a field hospital.

The humiliating defeats of Bronkhorstspuit, Laing's Nek and Skuinshoogte were to be avenged. Mount Majuba was to be occupied that night. Incredibly, General Pomeroy Colley, the highest commander of all British forces in South Africa, was to personally lead the assault. The 8 kilometres march from Mount Prospect to the foot of Mount Majuba was undertaken in complete darkness. It was a moonless night.

At the foot of Majuba two companies of the 60th Rifle were detached to cover the communications links with Mount Prospect. The ascent up the southern slope of Majuba was described by some of the officers as *a terrible climb.* At one point the Zulu guides lost their way, but by about 3:30am on Sunday morning 27 February the flat summit of Majuba was attained. The 365 men with General Colley were deployed around the triangular edge of Majuba. General Colley and his staff walked the 1,200 metre perimeter of the edge of the summit.

General Colley positioned about 110 men from all units as reserves in the southern hollow of the Summit. In this area the hospital and commissariat was erected. A water well was dug and General Colley exclaimed: *We could stay here forever.*

The morale amongst the British was very high and was described by several as a festival atmosphere.

At the sun rose several of the Highlanders shouted down at the Boer camp waving their fists and shouting: *Come up here, you beggar! ha ha! Got you this time!*

Even before the sun rose, Mrs De Jaager, in the Orange Free State, saw the flare that the British lit on the Summit, to alert their base at Mount Prospect that they had attained their objective. She immediately realised that the British were on Majuba and mounting her horse galloped off to alert the Boer camp.

At Laing's Nek, Mrs Hendrina Joubert, the wife of the Commandant General of the Transvaal, noticed the British on the mountain and alerted her husband. General Piet Joubert galloped off to inform his generals, Nicolaas Smit and Frans Joubert: *There are Englishmen now on the mountain; you must bring them down!*

Assault

General Smit took responsibility dividing his 150 men into three sections, each to scale the mountain from a different direction. Another commando of 50 men were positioned halfway up the plateau to cover the assault with a barrage of rifle fire. The Boers made use of dead ground and cross fire. The three storming parties methodically moved upwards making use of the cover of rocks and concealment of shrubs with skill.

In twos and threes they dashed across the open spaces covered by intense rifle fire. With this fast-moving fire and movement they rapidly advanced up the slopes. During this assault General Colley seemed unaware of his predicament. He sent off a triumphant flag and heliograph signal to Mount Prospect: *All comfortable, Boers wasting ammunition.*

At about 10:30 am General Colley and his officers were strolling across the south-western corner of Majuba consulting with Commander Romilly, from HMS Boadicea. As a bullet flew across them they saw a Boer almost a kilometer away *I wonder what the distance is?* asked Colley. Stuart looking through his binoculars estimated the man at about 900 yards.

At that moment the Boer fired again and Commander Romilly was killed. With his second-in-command lying dead at his feet, General Colley should have realised the dramatic reversal in fortunes. Field Coronet Stephanus Roos led his men to assault the hill where the Gordon Highlanders under Lieutenant Ian Hamilton were positioned. (This was the same Ian

Hamilton who, later as a general, would lead allied forces in the Battle of Gallipoli during the First World War).

The Highlanders on Gordon's Knoll were subjected to extremely heavy and accurate fire, which pinned them down. On the eastern ridge near Hay's Koppie the Boers under Field Coronet Danie Malan began pouring steady fire into the 58th Regiment. The right flank of the British crumbled before the assault of this commando which included Christiaan De Wet (later to become the world famous General De Wet of the Second Anglo Boer War).

On the western side of Majuba the men under Commandant Joachim Ferreira reached the southern slope of McDonald's Koppie. On the whole one and a quarter kilometer perimeter the British soldiers were being pinned down by the accurate fire of the Boers. Lieutenant Ian Hamilton, realizing the imminent danger, ran through the enemy fire to alert General Colley to the threat. He found General Colley sleeping. In response to the request for advice, Colley responded: *Just hold the place three days.*

On Gordon's Knoll Hamilton ordered his men to stand up, bend over the ridge and shoot at their assailants. As they did so a deadly fusillade hit 28 of the 30 Highlanders. Carter, the reporter, wrote: *It was such a fire as had not been heard as yet.*

At that point the Boers stormed up from the ledge and took possession of the hill. From Gordon's Knoll they could dominate the northern part of the Summit of Majuba.

For the second time Hamilton ran across the Summit, dodging enemy fire, to alert the General to the situation. Colley responded: *We will wait until the Boers advance on us and then give them a volley and charge.*

At this point McDonald's Koppie was occupied by the Boers. Colley called up his reserves, many of whom had been sleeping. Malan and his commando came up over the ridge and the reserves began to give way. General Colley was described as: *As cool as on parade* as he attempted to steady his men. Ian Hamilton remembered him holding his revolver high over his head and shouting *steady and hold by the ridge.* And as his men began to break and flee his last words were: *Oh my men, do not run.* He was then shot through the head.

The Boer who got Colley in the sight of his Westley-Richards rifle could not have possibly realised that he was the most important Englishman in South Africa, a veteran of China, Afghanistan, India and West Africa, High Commissioner of Britain in South Africa, Commander-in-Chief of all British forces in Southern African and Governor of the Natal colony. He was only the third British General to be killed in action since the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

Overwhelmed

Thomas Carter (1855-1945) was a reporter of the Times, London. Carter provided an eyewitness report of the battle. *I saw His Excellency standing within ten paces directing some men to extend to the right. It was the last time I saw him alive. A sudden piercing cry of terror, which will ring in my ears for many a long day, rose from the line of infantry parties of men were moving rapidly in twos and threes towards our only line of retreat in the direction of Mount Prospect five, six, seven, eight men broke from the ranks in front of us and fled. The rest wavered, and before Cameron and myself could rise to our feet, the whole lot went rushing wildly over us jumping over the bodies of the wounded a terrible volley from the stone ridge we had just left, let us know that the Boers were already there. It told horribly on the fugitives, for I saw several in front and right and left of me stopped in their flight. After delivering this first volley, the Boers kept up a terrible fire, and every moment their number increased as they swarmed up the hill our poor fellows dropped by the score.*

On what became known as McDonald's Koppie, Lieutenant Hector McDonald and 19 men held this crest to the end. A vertical rock of 15 metres on the western side of this

hill made it impossible to be scaled. As they were isolated from the rest of the British force they ask the officer *what shall we do?* **McDonald's** reply came back: *Just stand firm.* Only once the entire British line had collapsed and fled did McDonald order his men to escape as best they could.

Honourable Enemies

Lieutenant McDonald was captured. General Joubert read the inscription on his sword mentioning the bravery of this officer in the War in Afghanistan. General Joubert walked over to the prisoners and asked for Lieutenant McDonald. As McDonald saluted, Joubert offered him his hand and returned to him his sword declared: *A man who has won such a sword should not be separated from it.*

For the rest of his life Hector McDonald defended the Boers against all negative criticism declaring: *These men are gentlemen.* Lieutenant McDonald wrote that as soon as the fighting was over the Boers sang Psalms for over an hour and gave all the glory for the victory to Almighty God.

When the journalist Thomas Carter was captured, General Nicolaas Smit issued him with a War Correspondent Permit and safe conduct to return to the military base at Mount Prospect.

One of the soldiers on the Boer side was James Murray, a younger brother of the famous Reverend Andrew Murray. It was James Murray who placed a large white handkerchief over the face of General Colley as he lay slain.

The British losses in the Battle of Majuba were 92 killed and 134 wounded. The Boers lost 2 men killed and 4 wounded.

When Lieutenant Ian Hamilton was thanking the Boer Commander for their help with his wounded, he added: *This is a bad day for us.* General Joubert responded: *What can you expect from fighting on a Sunday?*

Ian Hamilton

Lieutenant Ian Hamilton had bullet holes through his kilt and coat in several places. He had also been hit in the wrist. It was Lieutenant Hamilton who was brought up by General Smit to identify the body of General Colley.

Hamilton had stumbled and fallen down the mountain and lain exhausted and wounded until his little dog, a fox terrier named Patch had found him, and revived him by licking his face. Hamilton survived to live another 66 years afterwards, dying in 1947 at age 94. He was the Commander of the Allied Forces at the Battle of Gallipoli in the First World War. He also was an on observer of the Russian-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Hamilton wrote: *Neither the Russians nor the Japanese could hold a candle to the Boer when it comes to instinctive, deadly, panther-like quickness. a good Boer would have had an enemy on the ground for each of ten cartridges in his magazine within some 20 seconds!* Ian Hamilton was involved in the Second Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) as a general of the British forces.

Honour Guard for General Colley

General Piet Joubert requested a detachment of Highlanders to form an honour guard to carry the body of General Colley to the Boer camp and to keep watch over their General while the best carpenters in the Boer camp were ordered to make decent coffins. On 1st March the Boers handed the body of General Colley to the British to transport of Mount Prospect for a suitable military funeral.

Independence Won

On 21 March 1881 peace was signed at ONeil's Cottage within sight of Majuba. Transvaal's independence was recognised. It was the only war that Great Britain lost in two centuries. One British officer described it as: *A miserable ending of a miserable war.*

A Turning Point

Next to the Battle of Blood River in 1838, the Battle of Majuba is, for the Afrikaners, the most important turning point in their history. By this very battle, Ian Hamilton wrote: *The future of a huge continent was to be very perceptibly swayed.*