

The Battle of Elandslaagte 21 October 1899

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Background

Even before the Boers attacked Dundee, some of their forces were moving south to seize and destroy the railway line at Elandslaagte. The aim was to prevent supplies or reinforcements from reaching Dundee and to establish contact with the Free State commandos.

Two Boer forward patrols, under the command of field-cornets Potgieter and Pienaar, were the first to reach Elandslaagte on 19 October 1899. They were able to harass, but could not stop, a train travelling north with supplies. The stationmaster at Elandslaagte described what happened:

“Pick up the mails and go for all your worth; I said to the driver. There was hardly time, however. Loud cries, rattling hoofs, cracking reports of Mauser rifles, and the pattering of bullets all round. The Boers were upon us. Driver Cutbush did not wait. He put on full steam, and amid a shower of bullets went ahead. At the moment the van passed me several Boers rode on the platform and fired over our heads at the train. Two shot from the train killed a horse and wounded his rider, but the train got off with no injury other than broken glass.”

That was the last British train heading north to Dundee to pass through the station until after the relief of Ladysmith in February 1900.

Before the battle

News of the Elandsplaagte attack soon reached Ladysmith. Lieutenant-General Sir George White dispatched Major-General JDP French at 11:00 with the Fifth Lancers, Natal Mounted Rifles, Natal Carbineers and a battery of Royal Field Artillery to ascertain the situation at Elandsplaagte. An infantry brigade under Colonel Ian Hamilton moved out in support.

Later, when information on the battle of Talana and the position of the Boer forces in the northern Natal was received, Elandsplaagte's strategic importance became evident. It was an essential part of the retreat route from Dundee to Ladysmith. The Boer forces occupying the area would have to be dislodged.

The morning of the battle

On Saturday morning, 21 October, French was ordered by White to leave Ladysmith. Five squadrons of the Imperial Light Horse (ILH), under Colonel Scott-Chisholme; the Natal Field Battery (NFA); half a battalion of the Manchester Regiment, and railway and telegraph companies of the Royal Engineers were sent to reinforce French's original reconnaissance party. There were also a small number of colonial forces with the group. The mounted men departed at 04:00 and were followed two hours later by the unmounted troops by train. They were accompanied by an armoured train and a maxim gun escort.

At 07:00, French took up a position South-West of the station. As the mist lifted, the Boers were seen at the station. The Natal battery was called into action and shelled the station at 08:00 from a ridge that overlooked the Elandsplaagte mine from the main road.

Although surprised, the Boers responded swiftly with very accurate artillery fire. The Natal Battery tried to respond, but their seven-pound muzzle loading gun was unable to match the superior calibre and range of the Boer artillery.

French assessed the Boers' strength and position in the hills. He estimated that the Boer force consisted of approximately 1000 men and realised that he would not be able to occupy Elandslaagte with his smaller force and keep them out of range. He concluded that his force was inadequate to deal with Kock's commando. By means of tapping the telegraph wire, he contacted White in Ladysmith and requested reinforcements.

By 15:00, all the British reinforcements had arrived, namely seven companies of the 1st Devonshire regiment, under the Major Park; five companies of the 2nd Gordon Highlanders, under Lieutenant-Colonel Dick Cunyngham, and the 1st Manchester Regiment. They joined the troops already on scene, a squadron each of the 5th Lancers and one of the 5th Dragoon Guards. These troops were supported by the 21st and 42nd Batteries of the Royal Field Artillery. There were approximately 3 500 men under French's command.

Although there were only a few hours of daylight left, French decided to press on with the attack.

On the ridge, the Boers who were lying in wait watched the British forces massing and spreading out into their attack formation. Viljoen pleaded with Kock to open fire with their artillery, but he refused. Ben Viljoen commented later:

“Possibly if we younger commandos had had more authority in the earlier stages of the war, and had less to deal with arrogant and stupid old men, we would have reached Durban and Cape Town”.

The British artillery, from 3 600 metres, bombarded the Boer position and fire was returned by the Boer artillery. After half an hour, the Devons moved forward in open order. There was an unusual form of advance – an idea Hamilton had that saved many lives that day.

As the Devons advanced, so did the Manchesters and Gordons on the right. The Manchesters moved past the artillery, which advanced straight ahead towards its objective. As the Manchesters rounded the

bend of the horseshoe formation of the ridge and faced north, they were greeted by fierce fire from Pienaar's men, who had already given the artillery such trouble. Faced now by superior numbers, Pienaar's men were forced to retire to the main Boer position at 16:30.

A letter written by an officer of the Manchester Regiment, published in the London Times, recorded his feelings and impressions during the initial stages of the attack:

“At about 15:30 we came under fire of the Boer guns and the rifle fire from the first infantry position. When this happened we were crossing an open grass slope where there was no cover. We were in three lines at the time. We were ordered to lie down, and our firing line opened fire. The first volley made the Boers open a tremendous fire on us: then ensued the worst seventeen minutes of the day. We were lying in the open under a terrific fire and could do nothing but lie still. The bullets simply whistled over our heads and struck the ground all around us. One struck the ground between my legs and several threw the earth over me. A man quite close to me was shot through the stomach, the poor chap made the most pitiful noises. I am bound to acknowledge I was very glad when I saw the Boers beginning to retire, and I dashed up to the firing line to tell them to advance...”

The Final Assault

The British advance by the Manchesters, ILH and Gordons up the last slope continued owing to the sheer courage of this soldier.

The situation favoured the Boers at this stage. The Manchesters, ILH and Gordons had to advance over about 800 meters of rough, rock-strewn slope. The far summit commanded it from end to end. Although no Boers were visible, the air was alive with the hum of Mauser bullets.

It was hard going. Many a time the men faltered and there are many accounts of the officers encouraging their men time and time again. Colonel Ian Hamilton rode up to the firing line and ordered the men to “Fix bayonets. Charge!” Lieutenant-Colonel Chisholme led his men into the Boer positions with his red scarf tied to a walking stick which

acted as a flag to lead and encourage the troops. Despite being severely wounded he shouted, “My fellows are doing extremely well.”

The Boers had, however, retired to a position 150 meters away. The Boer resistance was strong. Ben Viljoen, who faced this attack with his men, wrote:

“The Gordon Highlanders and the infantry detachments commenced to storm our positions. We got them well within the range of our rifle, and made our presence felt; but they kept pushing on with splendid determination and indomitable pluck, though their ranks were being decimated before our very eyes. About half an hour before sunset, the enemy had come up close to our positions and on all sides a terrible battle raged. To keep them back now was out of the question. They had forced their way between a kloof, and while rushing up with my men towards them my rifle was smashed by a bullet. A wounded Burgher handed me his and I joined Field-Cornet Pieter Joubert who, with seven other burghers, was defending the kloof. We poured a heavy fire into the British, but they were not to be shaken off. Again and again they rushed up in irresistible strength, gallantly encouraged by their brave officers. Poor Field-Cornet Joubert perished at this point.”

Sometime after 17:00 Hamilton observed a white flag in the Boer line and ordered a ‘cease fire’. At the captured Boer guns British troops shouted, “God save the queen”. Dr Coster rejected the raising of the white flag and ripped it down crying, ‘liever sterven!’ (Rather die!).

Kock, Field-Cornet Pretorius and about 40 to 50 men led a furious counter attack. The British were taken by surprise and in the confusion the line began to buckle and some men started to move back down the hill. But the confusion was short-lived and with encouragement from the officers the British line surged forward again. By about 18:30, the Boer resistance was finally broken. By now Coster lay dead on the battlefield and Kock was severely wounded.

Under cover of darkness, the Boers moved down the back slopes of the hill to mount their horses and prepare for an escape from the battle terrain. Many of the original force made their way north to Newcastle. French's force was in full control of the Boer position.

The cavalry charge

The infantry had taken the hills, but the battle was not quite over. At about 17:45, the Dragoon Guards and Fifth Lancers on the extreme left, under Major St JC Gore, were ordered to attack. They had, during the course of the afternoon, advanced to a position to the right-rear of the Boers and then waited behind a mine dump. In the gathering darkness they thundered across the plains and caught the retreating Boers broadside on, with their lances and sabres. This the Boers were not expecting and many of them threw their hands up in surrender and begged for mercy. Although many Boers tried to flee, they could not pick up enough speed to get away from the momentum of the charge, which was unstoppable.

After the battle

By 18:30 it was dark. The stretcher bearers moved over the battlefield collecting the wounded, both Briton and Boer. Not all the British troops or wounded made it back to the railway station and many of the wounded were carried to the captured Boer camp.

White had made a rapid return to Ladysmith, as he feared an attack on the town by the Free State commandos. By 03:00 the next morning, the cavalry and guns were already on their way back to Ladysmith. He believed that the small force of Boers at Elandsplaagte was about to be reinforced with the main Transvaal force. Although neither of these reports was true, it made him decide to abandon Elandsplaagte. A battle hardly won, became a sheer waste of toil and life. The effect of the battle was nullified by the abandonment of the area as soon as the British forces from Dundee had passed through. An advance guard of the Free State commandos soon reoccupied Elandsplaagte.

Forces Engaged

Boer forces

General Kock

German Corps (Colonel Schiel 300 men)

Hollander Corps (Commandant Lombard 250 men)

Johannesburg Commando (Commandant Ben Viljoen 200 men)

Vrede Commando (Portion – Field-Cornet de Jager – 100 men)

Two 75mm Guns

One Maxim gun

Total: 850 men

British Forces and commanding officers

Major-General French

Colonel Ian Hamilton in command of infantry

1st Devonshire Regiment 7 companies (Major Park)

2nd Gordon Highlanders 5 Companies (Colonel Dick-Cunyngham)

1st Manchester Regiment (half battalion that is 4 companies)

21st Battery Royal Field Artillery

42nd Battery Royal Field Artillery

5th Lancers (1 squadron)

5th Dragoon Guards (1 Squadron) Major St JC Gore

Imperial Light Horse (4 Squadrons, Approximately 270 men)

Natal Mounted Rifles

Natal Field Artillery one Battery

Total: 3500 men

18 guns

6 machine guns

During the bombardment, the twelve 15-pound guns fired 423 rounds and the six 7-pounders fired 74 rounds.

Over 61 000 rounds of ammunition were used.

Casualties

Boer

Killed	45
Wounded	110
Prisoners	188 (of whom four were African servants)

British

Killed	50 (including 4 officers)
Wounded	213 (including 31 officers)