

Commando

A BOER JOURNAL OF THE ANGLO-BOER WAR



Deneys Reitz

In 1899, seventeen-year-old Deneys Reitz enlisted in the Boer army to fight the British. He had learnt to ride, shoot and swim almost as soon as he could walk. The skills and endurance he had acquired were more than put to the test during the war. *Commando* is his classic account of guerrilla warfare during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), during which Reitz served in a Boer commando consisting mainly of farmers on horseback using their own guns. Written while in exile in Madagascar and originally published in 1929, the book covers the early engagements in Natal, the battle of Spion Kop and General Smuts' audacious guerrilla campaign deep into the Cape Colony. The straightforward narrative of his experiences is both a classic of true-life adventure, and an unforgettable picture of mobile guerrilla warfare. The book contains a Preface by South African statesman J.C. Smuts and an Introduction by the historian Thomas Pakenham.

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Deneys Reitz

*'A lamentable tale of things done
long ago – and ill done.'*

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Preface

When Colonel Reitz asked me to write a preface to his book of Boer War memories, I at first hesitated, as I feared that I might be introducing a book in which I myself figured in some degree. However, on reading the manuscript, I find that I am only casually mentioned here and there, and have therefore no reason not to comply with his request.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to introduce this book to the reading public. To me it is a wonderful book – wonderful in its simplicity and realism, its calm intensity and absorbing human interest. Here is the book of the Boer War for which I have been waiting for the last twenty-five years and more. Many military books have been written on the Boer War – books full of interest and of valuable material for the future historian; but something else was wanted. The Boer War was other than most wars. It was a vast tragedy in the life of a people, whose human interest far surpassed its military value. A book was wanted which would give us some insight into the human side of this epic struggle between the smallest and the greatest of peoples. Here we have it at last. There is no strategy and little tactics in this plain unvarnished tale. Wars pass, but the human soul endures; the interest is not so much in the war as in the human experience behind it. This book tells the simple straightforward story of what the Boer War meant to one participant in it. Colonel Reitz entered the war as a stripling of seventeen years, fought right through it to the end, and immediately after its conclusion wrote down these memories. Of military adventures there is of course full measure. He passed through as varied a record of exciting experiences as have ever fallen to the lot of a young man. Indeed much of what is written in this book with such boyish simplicity may appear to the reader well-nigh incredible. But it is a true story, and the facts are often understated rather than exaggerated. The exciting incidents, the hairbreadth escapes, the daredevilry are literally true, and the dangers he passed through and courted are such as to make his unvar-

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nished record read like one of pure romance. But there is here more than a record of war adventure. We have not only an unforgettable picture of mobile guerilla warfare, but also an accurate description of life among the Boer forces. It is given, not in an abstract generalized form, but as the actual experience of one particular individual. As we read, we follow a true personal story which is often stranger than fiction. The interest of the story deepens as it moves on from the heavy fighting in the Natal campaign under Botha, through the guerilla warfare under Delarey in the Western Transvaal, to the climax of marching and privation under me in the Cape Colony. The intimate picture gives us the inner truth of the war. We see how human beings react under the most terrible stresses to the passion of patriotism. We see how, under the influence of an ideal – in this case the ideal of freedom – the most ordinary human material rings true and rises superior to all danger and suffering and privation. And the effect is all the more striking because the story is so simple and unadorned and objective.

This book gives a wonderful personal record. But its wonder does not end with the book. The Boer boy who wrote this book was in the Wordsworthian sense the father of the man of after years. Let me add a few details to bring the account up to date. The boy left the country as an irreconcilable after the conclusion of the Boer War, as he and his family chose not to live under the British flag. He drifted to Madagascar, where these memories were written in the intervals of malaria and transport riding. There a letter from my wife found him, urged him to return and pointed out to him that he was no better than her husband, and if the latter could afford to serve his people under the Union Jack surely his young friend could do the same. The shaft went home; Reitz returned and was nursed back by her to health and peace of mind. He learnt to see Botha's great vision of a united South African people to whom the memories of the Boer War would mean no longer bitterness but only the richness and the inspiration of a spiritual experience. The loyalty of the Boer boy ripened into the broader loyalty of the South African. And I remember a night on the outbreak of the rebellion in 1914, when Reitz once more appeared before me, this time a fugitive, not from the British, but from his own people in the Free State who had gone into rebellion. Such tricks does high fate play upon us poor humans. He did his duty in helping to suppress the rebellion, and thereafter he served on my staff in the German West campaign, just as he had done in the Boer War; in the German East campaign he rose to command a mounted regiment, and in the later stages

of the Great War he commanded the First Royal Scots Fusiliers, one of the oldest regiments in the British Army. He was severely wounded early in 1918, but returned to France in time to lead his battalion in the fierce battles that closed the great drama and after the Armistice he led his men to the Rhine.

Since the War, he has taken an active part in the public life of his country. He has been a Cabinet Minister and still is a Member of Parliament in which capacity he is serving under me as loyally as he did in the sterner days of which he writes.

This book is a romance of truth; but behind it is a greater personal romance, and behind that again is the even more wonderful romance of South Africa, to whom much should be forgiven for the splendour of her record during a period as difficult as any young nation has ever passed through.

J. C. SMUTS

Pretoria

16th August, 1929.

Introduction

Reitz wrote the original Afrikaans draft of *Commando*, his journal of the Boer War of 1899-1902, while working as a transport driver in Madagascar a year after the war ended. It was not published till October 1929. This edited version, translated by Reitz into English,¹ proved one of the bright features of the year of the great slump. General Smuts described it in the preface as 'the book of the Boer War for which I have [waited] twenty-five years and more'. That seemed to be many people's view that Christmas, both in Britain and in South Africa. Since then *Commando* has cantered on through more than a dozen impressions, has passed into the French, Dutch and German languages and has overtaken in sales almost all other Boer War books combined. It is now recognized as one of the minor classics of war.

How to explain the runaway success of a war diary written by an unknown 21-year-old, serving in an obscure Boer Commando, and not published till the war seemed almost forgotten?

One should say, first, that Reitz's personal experiences of the war were, by any standard, quite extraordinary. Others in the two opposing armies rode and tramped along the veld with their rifles, Mauser or Lee-Netford, every day of the three years' war. Their experiences tended to lack form and pace: a battle there, a skirmish here, moments of triumph or horror alternating with months of boredom. Reitz had the uncanny knack of living through the war as though leafing through the pages of an adventure story.

He was 17, the son of the Transvaal State Secretary, when war broke out in 1899.

His Mauser was personally handed to him by President Kruger. He fired this gun beside General Maroola in the Boers' first victory of the war, near Talana, when Colonel Moller and the 5th Dragoons were forced to surrender to the Pretoria Commando. He rode with General Smuts to

the great tent at Vereeniging when the war finally came to its bitter end. In the years between he fought in or witnessed most of the grimmest battles of the formal war: Nicholson's Nek, Surprise Hill, Platrand, Spion Kop, Pieters Hill, Diamond Hill, Belfast.

During the guerrilla war that followed, he fought with General Smuts at Nooitgedacht and then joined Smuts's band of daredevils who invaded the Cape Colony in 1901. The story of that march by 200 men from the Orange River to O'Okiep seems, as Smuts put it (borrowing the phrase from the *Boy's Own Paper*), 'stranger than fiction'. In fact there's no reason to doubt the accuracy of Reitz's account, apart from minor slips of dating or geography. (By the end of the guerrilla war, his dating was, understandably, a few days out of true.)

For two months Smuts's tiny commando was chased by 2,000 British troops in five elite columns led by Douglas Haig, then a young colonel. Reitz describes at least a dozen hair's-breadth escapes. At one point the commando smashed its way through a squadron of the 17th Lancers, killing twenty-four men and wounding forty-one. Reitz captured a Lee-Metford from a British officer, Lord Vivian, whom he had wounded. His own Mauser, the gun Kruger had given him, was left behind, useless for want of ammunition.

During these terrible months most of Reitz's friends died violently: some perished in battle; others were executed for wearing captured British uniforms. Reitz recalls his astonishment when he heard that Kitchener, the British Commander-in-Chief, had announced that, following the conventions of war, any prisoner found wearing British uniform would be summarily shot. The Boers wore it simply because their own clothes were in rags.

That he lived through these harrowing experiences and yet could still describe them, after the bitterness, of defeat, with a kind of boyish innocence – this is, I think, the secret of Reitz's success in *Commando*. One is astonished by his fair-mindedness. He does not romanticize the war. Nor did the war brutalize him.

At first, as he says, he was appalled by the sights and sounds. 'These were the first men I had seen killed in anger, and their ashen faces and staring eyeballs came as a great shock, for I had pictured the dignity of death in battle, but I now saw that it was horrible to look at.' This was after Talana, the first battle. 'Dead and wounded soldiers lay all around,' he wrote after the next action, 'and the cries and groans of agony, and the dreadful sights, haunted me for many a day ...' Gradually he became less

sensitive. Yet the war, through his eyes, remains a vast tragedy – and not just for his compatriots in the twin Boer republics. The keynote for Reitz was the sense of waste: young men dead or crippled, farms burnt, thousands of civilians dying of typhoid. And all for causes on either side that Reitz later came to believe were almost equally wrong-headed: aggressive imperialism and aggressive republicanism. Under the apparent simplicity of the published narrative is a sophisticated detachment.

Reitz himself, as he is first to admit, was a rather unusual kind of Boer. He tells the story of how he met two captured British officers after the Battle of Nooitgedacht, one of them with a broken arm, the other with his thumb shot away. As Reitz came up, he heard one remark (no doubt seeing his bandolier and his ragged clothes and unshaven face), ‘Here comes a typical young Boer for you.’ The man without the thumb said: ‘Then will you tell me why you fellows are continuing the war, because you are bound to lose?’ Reitz replied, ‘Oh, well, you see we’re like Mr Micawber, we are waiting for something to turn up.’ The officers burst out laughing, and one said, ‘Didn’t I tell you this is a funny country, and now here’s your typical young Boer quoting Dickens.’

The Reitzs belonged to the group of families that were beginning to form a kind of intellectual aristocracy at the Cape. They were of mixed Dutch, German and Huguenot stock, like most Afrikaners. They were also proud to claim cultural roots in Scotland. Deneys Reitz’s grandfather had been sent there to study agriculture. His father, Francis Reitz, had read law in Edinburgh. Deneys Reitz recalled how hardly an evening of his childhood passed without his father reading from Burns or Scott. His mother was Norwegian, daughter of an adventurous shipowner who had sailed to South Africa on his way to settle in New Zealand, had been shipwrecked off the east coast and settled at Knysna. As an ambitious young lawyer, Francis Reitz had trekked up to the Orange Free State, where he became Chief Justice and, in due course, State President. In 1897 President Kruger appointed him State Secretary of the Transvaal republic. Other members of the family prospered in the Cape. Deneys Reitz’s paternal aunt was the wife of William Schreiner, Prime Minister of Cape Colony. So there was a family link with Olive Schreiner, the first South African writer to become famous in Europe. Francis Reitz himself indulged his passion for literature by publishing several books of verse, including Afrikaans translations of Burns and comic verse lampooning the British.

As State Secretary of the Transvaal, it was Francis Reitz who, in

October 1899, handed the British Agent in Pretoria the Boer Ultimatum ('I tipped him the Black Spot,' as he himself characteristically described it) and so precipitated the war. In May 1902 Francis Reitz was one of the signatories of the terms of surrender at Pretoria that abruptly ended the war. However, he had personally voted against the peace terms. Quixotically he then decided to go into exile rather than submit to the oath of allegiance to the Crown. Deneys Reitz had no such strong convictions. But out of loyalty to his father he, too, refused the oath. Francis Reitz settled temporarily in Holland. Deneys, with his youngest brother, emigrated to Madagascar, among the exotic Horas, whose own war of independence against the French had recently ended as disastrously as the Boers' one.

His life in Madagascar was hardly less daredevil than life on commando. The chief dangers, apart from bankruptcy, were crocodiles and malaria. Between bouts of fever, he ran a jungle transport business, hiring bullock wagons to hump goods like wine and rice the 200 miles from coast to interior. His main backer was a Boer ex-general called Maritz, who was himself sponsored by a half-deranged French millionaire.

Unfortunately Maritz was, Reitz confesses, 'cruel and illiterate'. (In fact he was responsible for some of the worst atrocities against Africans during the Boer War.) The bullock venture slipped and fell. But in the long evenings, as the tropical rain battered the tin roofs, Reitz wrote the first draft of *Commando*.

In 1906 Reitz staggered home to South Africa half dead from malaria. He had been persuaded to return by Isie Smuts, wife of the ex-general. If South Africa under the Union Jack was good enough for her husband, it was surely good enough for him. Already Reitz had had second thoughts about his father's quixotic self-exile. Early one morning he arrived by train at Belfast, then collapsed, penniless and delirious. A kind-hearted African milkman carried him on his back two miles to a hotel. Later he was brought unconscious to the Smuts' home in Irene, near Pretoria, with his own meagre possessions, including the precious manuscript of *Commando*.

At this time the draft manuscript consisted of a number of small notebooks written in a Dutch dialect, the forerunner of modern Afrikaans. Today, in 1983, these treasures are preserved in Cape Town in the library of his surviving son, Jan Deneys Reitz. It is through Jan Reitz's kindness that I have been able to compare parts of this original text with the version published years later in English. The *Commando* of 1903 (actually

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entitled *Of Horses and Men*) is a callow work by comparison with the *Commando* of 1929. It is a 'bitter-enders' book, though perhaps not quite as bitter and partisan as one might have expected a young man to write after the ordeal he had suffered. Wisely, Reitz put the manuscript aside till the blood cooled. Smuts, too, had written a partisan account of his Boer War experiences which was carefully left unpublished.

Reitz's own circumstances now changed rapidly for the better, and dramatically altered his own views of the British. Jan Smuts and his wife, as he later acknowledged, were the two people to whom he owed most in the world. For three years at Irene they nursed him back to health in mind and body. Smuts taught him his own – and Louis Botha's – post-war catechism: no one should expect a future for Briton or Boer in South Africa unless they reconciled their differences under the Commonwealth flag. In 1910 the Boers recovered the substance of independence. Out of the two ex-republics, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, and the two British colonies, the Cape and Natal, Britain had forged a single dominion. It was a union of states. A union of hearts proved harder to arrange. But for the rest of his life Deney's Reitz stayed true to Smuts's and Botha's creed. In 1914 he followed Smuts into German West Africa (now South-West Africa-Namibia). Later he fought against the Germans with Botha's and Smuts's army in East Africa. Later still he enlisted in the British army on the western front, where he was twice wounded, and rose to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel of the 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers. After the Great War Smuts made him Minister of Lands in his first government, a post he held until Herzog and the Nationalists took over in 1924.

For twenty years the manuscript of *Commando* had been gathering dust. A new version was now prepared with the active encouragement of Smuts. One can understand Smuts's interest. Presumably he helped Reitz rework *Commando*, purging it of all bitterness. In its new form it was indeed the book he had been waiting for: the first Afrikaner book to express how deep a tragedy the war was for both sides.

After *Commando* Reitz published two more volumes of autobiography, *Trekking On* and *No Outspan*. They are slighter works, though delightfully written. His political career continued to prosper under Smuts's patronage. He served in the Hertzog-Smuts coalition government of 1933-9. Smuts appointed him Deputy Prime Minister in 1939. The severe illness of his days in Madagascar had, however, left its mark. After nearly four years of exhausting work, and a consequent heart attack, he came to London as High Commissioner, probably the best loved South African

to hold that post.

He died suddenly in 1944. Shortly before his death he had an unexpected meeting with Lord Vivian, the officer of the 17th Lancers, whose Lee-Metford he had taken in 1901, leaving him his own useless Mauser. Let Jan Reitz tell the story as his father told it him:

During the fight which my father graphically describes in Chapter Twenty-one it was he himself who shot and wounded Lord Vivian. When the Boers were hastily engaged in looting the camp he heard a man say to him, 'Young man, can you speak English?' Father looked up and recognized Lord Vivian sitting on the ground propped against a rock – wearing his tunic over his pyjamas. He had his hand over the wound in his body which both he (and father) thought would eventually prove fatal. He saw how ill and ragged my father looked and told my father to have a look in his tent which was pitched behind some rocks, telling him also that there were a few things there for which he (Vivian) would in all likelihood have no further need. My father thanked him but said he did not feel justified in taking them.

When Vivian asked why not, my father with some hesitation explained that he was the man responsible for wounding him.

Father said that Lord Vivian looked at him with a remote but infinite kindness and said, 'It's the fortunes of war, boy – just the fortunes of war – you cannot worry about such things – they just happen – if you don't take them somebody else will – besides, if I give them to you they will be a gift – which is better than loot.'

My father, who was ravenously hungry, spent no more time in arguing. He grabbed everything in sight and got going.

He left his old Mauser rifle (personally given to him by Paul Kruger) and picked up a British Lee-Metford and a couple of bandoliers. He also asked for (and got) a button from Lord Vivian's tunic (I have it still).

Late in 1943 my father was sitting at his desk in South Africa House when his private secretary put his head around the door and said, 'Colonel – there is a Lord Vivian to see you – he says he knows you.' My father thought for a moment about the many people he had met since his arrival in England – then, shaking his head doubtfully, he said, 'I don't remember anyone called Vivian – but bring him in anyhow.' So in came Lord Vivian carrying a long brown paper par-

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cel. He smiled as they shook hands and said, 'We have actually met before, Colonel – but under rather less auspicious circumstances – perhaps you will recognize this.' He unwrapped the parcel and there on the desk lay father's old Mauser rifle with his name carved on the butt – and all the scratches and cuts made by his knife where he had cut his 'biltong' (dried meat).

Father looked at Vivian absolutely speechless.

The Mauser, carefully cleaned and oiled, still shoots as well as ever today.

THOMAS PAKENHAM

1983

'Mem'ry's Tower'

We lived in the Orange Free State.

My father was Chief Justice in Sir John Brand's time and subsequently, in 1887, was himself elected President of the Republic.

Our home was at Bloemfontein, the State capital, and here my brothers and I grew up. There were five of us, two older and two younger than myself, and we led a pleasant Tom-Sawyerlike existence such as falls to the lot of few boys nowadays. We learned to ride, shoot, and swim almost as soon as we could walk, and there was a string of hardy Basuto ponies in the stables, on which we were often away for weeks at a time, riding over the game-covered plains by day, and sleeping under the stars at night, hunting, fishing and camping to our heart's content, and clattering home again when we had had our fill.

Sometimes my father took us with him on his long tours into the remoter districts, where there was more hunting and more camping, and great wapinshaws, held by the Boer commandos to do him honour. Our small country was a model one. There were no political parties, nor, until after the Jameson Raid of 1895, was there any bad blood between the Dutch and the English. We had no railways, and the noise of the outside world reached us but faintly, so that in our quiet way we were a contented community, isolated hundreds of miles from the seaboard.

In 1894, when I was twelve years old, we were taken to Europe. It was a wonderful experience for inland-bred boys to journey to the Coast, to cross the ocean in a ship, and to see the great crowds and cities of the old world. We went first of all to England, where we stayed for a while in London, marvelling at the things we saw. Thence to Amsterdam to visit the senior branch of our family, that had remained in Holland when our ancestors emigrated to South Africa long ago. The head of the old stock lived in a house on the Heerengracht; a wealthy man apparently, for he kept many servants and had fine paintings on his walls.

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As our republic had taken its name from the House of Orange, my father was well received by the little Queen of the Netherlands, and the Court and people made much of us. Next, we travelled to Paris to meet Casimir-Perrier, the newly-elected President of the French. He took us to lay a wreath on the grave of Sadi Carnot, his predecessor, lately assassinated by an anarchist at Lyons. From there we went to Brussels to see Monsieur Jesslein, our Consul. His house stood in the rue de la Blanchisserie, and he told us it was the one in which the Duchess of Richmond had given her famous ball on the eve of Waterloo. We were presented to King Leopold, an old man with a hooked nose and a long white beard, who extended only his little finger in greeting, perhaps because we belonged to a republic.

From Belgium we went to Hamburg to take ship across the North Sea to Edinburgh, and from there to visit the Cathcarts at Auchindrayne on the River Doon. My father had studied law in Scotland and my grandfather before him had studied agriculture, and they had both spent much time at Auchindrayne, so my father wished his sons in turn to carry on the tradition of friendship which for nearly a hundred years linked the two families.

My grandfather first went to Scotland in 1816. He met Sir Walter Scott, to whom he took a lion skin which the poet Thomas Pringle had sent from Capetown, and he became intimate with the great writer. In later days in South Africa, he loved to tell of their meetings and of the banquet at which he was present when Scott for the first time admitted that he was the author of the Waverley Novels. Both my grandfather and my father had returned to South Africa with a deep love of Scotland and Scotch literature, and at our home scarcely a night passed without a reading from Burns or Scott, so that we felt as if we were among our own people.

From Auchindrayne we went to London to meet Sir George Grey, who, as Governor of the Cape, had been a friend of my father many years before. My father used to say that if the English had sent more men like him to South Africa our history would have been a happier one, and although I was only a boy, and Sir George Grey a very old man, he made a deep impression upon me – a something of inward beauty not easily described, but which I have not yet forgotten.

From London we sailed for South Africa.

On our return my brothers and I were received by our less fortunate play-fellows like pilgrims safely returned from Mecca, so hazardous an undertaking did our journey seem to them in those days.

We took up our old care-free life once more, all unaware of the storm that was brewing between the white races in the Transvaal.

The Jameson Raid had not yet brought matters to a head, but there was trouble in the air. President Kruger and the Commandant-General, Piet Joubert, came frequently to Bloemfontein on official visits to my father, and we eagerly questioned them and listened to their stories of hunting and of the wars against the natives and the British of long ago.

Sir Henry Loch, Governor of the Cape, also visited us, as did Cecil Rhodes, a big florid man who cracked jokes with us boys, but on whose political aims my father looked askance. These two tried to prevent the Free State from entering into an alliance with the Transvaal, but they did not succeed, and a treaty was made with President Kruger wherein we agreed to stand by the Transvaal in case of war with England, a promise which the Free State loyally fulfilled.

My brothers and I did not understand the import of all this coming and going of noted men, and life ran on pleasantly enough, until in 1895 my father's health failed and he had to resign. We went to live at Claremont, a cramped suburb of Capetown, greatly missing our horses and the freedom of our wide Northern uplands.

When my father recovered from his long illness we settled in the Transvaal where he soon became Secretary of State under President Paul Kruger.

My eldest brother, aged nineteen, was now sent to Europe to study law, and after awhile the rest of us were put back to school at Bloemfontein until the middle of 1899.

During our absence at the Cape the ill-fated Jameson Raid had taken place, and we found on our return that feeling was running high between the English and the Dutch, and even in the Free State, where differences of this kind had hitherto been unknown, there was so much ill will that people openly talked of driving the English into the sea, whereas previously we had not given these matters a thought.

By July (1899) the situation had become so serious that my father ordered us up to Pretoria, as war with England seemed inevitable. We said good-bye to Bloemfontein, the town where we had been born and bred and where we had spent such happy days, and journeyed north, leaving behind us the peace of boyhood, to face years of hardship, danger, and ultimate exile.

On the Brink

When we reached Pretoria, affairs were moving to a climax. Peremptory notes had been exchanged between the Transvaal and the British Governments, and excitement was rising as each cable and its reply was published. Already the Transvaal capital was an armed camp. Batteries of artillery paraded the streets, commandos from the country districts rode through the town almost daily, bound for the Natal border, and the crack of rifles echoed from the surrounding hills where hundreds of men were having target practice. Crowded trains left for the coast with refugees flying from the coming storm, and business was at a standstill.

Looking back, I think that war was inevitable. I have no doubt that the British Government had made up its mind to force the issue, and was the chief culprit, but the Transvaalers were also spoiling for a fight, and, from what I saw in Pretoria during the few weeks that preceded the ultimatum, I feel sure that the Boers would in any case have insisted on a rupture.

I myself had no hatred of the British people; from my father's side I come of Dutch and French Huguenot blood, whilst my mother (dead for many years) was a pure-bred Norwegian from the North Cape, so one race was much like another to me. Yet, as a South African, one had to fight for one's country, and for the rest I did not concern myself overmuch with the merits or demerits of the quarrel. I looked on the prospect of war and adventure with the eyes of youth, seeing only the glamour, but knowing nothing of the horror and the misery.

I was seventeen years old and thus too young to be enrolled as a burgher. President Kruger himself solved this difficulty for me. One morning when I was at the Government buildings, I met him and my father in the corridor and I told the President that the Field-Cornet's office had refused to enrol me for active service. The old man looked me up and down for a moment and growled, 'Piet Joubert says the English are three to one – *Sal jij mij drie rooi-nekke lever?*' (Will you stand me good for

three of them?) I answered boldly, 'President, if I get close enough I'm good for three with one shot.' He gave a hoarse chuckle at my youthful conceit and, turning to my father, asked how old I was. When he heard my age he said, 'Well then, Mr. State Secretary, the boy must go – I started fighting earlier than that', and he took me straight to the Commandant-General's room close by, where Piet Joubert in person handed me a new Mauser carbine, and a bandolier of ammunition, with which I returned home pleased and proud.

I saw a good deal of the President in these days as I used to go with my father to his house on the outskirts of the town, where they discussed State matters while I sat listening. The President had an uncouth, surly manner, and he was the ugliest man I have ever seen, but he had a strong rugged personality which impressed all with whom he came in contact. He was religious to a degree, and on Sundays he preached in the queer little Dopper church he had built across the street, where I sometimes heard him.

There was Mrs. Kruger too, whom I often saw with her pails in the yard, for she kept dairy cows and sold milk to the neighbours. Once she brought us coffee while we were looking at a picture of the statue of her husband that was being set up on Church Square. The President was shown dressed like an elder of the Church in a top hat, and the old lady suggested that the hat should be hollowed out and filled with water, to serve as a drinking-fountain for the birds. My father and I laughed heartily on our way home at her simplicity, but we agreed that it was decent of her to have thought of such a thing.

I also knew Piet Joubert, the Commandant-General, for, apart from his visits to Bloemfontein, his son Jan and I were friends, and I sometimes went home with him to talk about the coming war, and his father was generally there. He was a kindly, well-meaning old man who had done useful service in the smaller campaigns of the past, but he gave me the impression of being bewildered at the heavy responsibility now resting upon him and I felt that he was unequal to the burden.

One afternoon he showed me a cable which he had received from a Russian society offering to equip an ambulance in case of war, and when I expressed my pleasure I was astonished to hear him say that he had refused the gift. He said, 'You see, my boy, we Boers don't hold with these new-fangled ideas; our herbal remedies (*bossie-middels*) are good enough.' Another time, when describing the festivities at the opening of the Delagoa Bay railway line, which he had attended as Commander-in-

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Chief, he told me that when the Portuguese paraded a thousand troops in his honour, he had gone down the ranks shaking hands with every one of the soldiers. I liked him very much personally, and to me he was always kind and fatherly, but I felt that he was unfit to lead armies, and it is a great pity that a younger man was not appointed in his place on the outbreak of the War.

And now the days were speeding by and in September of 1899 matters had come to such a pass that British troops were moving up to the western borders of the Transvaal and Free State, and other troops were on the water, while large Boer forces were mobilizing on the various fronts. Committees and deputations from the Cape travelled up to make eleventh-hour attempts to avert the catastrophe of war, but it was clear that the die was cast and that neither side was in a mood for further parleying.

My eldest brother (named Hjalmar, after a Norwegian uncle) was away in Europe studying law, and my father had already cabled to him to return. My next brother, Joubert, named after the Commandant-General, was a year older than myself, and although he, too, was ineligible for burgher-rights, he intended volunteering for service, but the two younger ones were put back to school.

Joubert and I had made our preparations long before. Our horses were in good fettle and our saddlebags packed. My brother had a fine upstanding chestnut, and I had a strong little Basuto pony, and we were eager to be off. Many of the country districts had been called up, but thus far no Pretoria men had gone forward. At last, on September 29th, the first batch from the town was ordered to entrain for the Natal border. The moment we heard of this we took our rifles, fetched our horses from the stable, and within ten minutes had saddled up and mounted.

We said good-bye to our step-mother and her children, for my father had remarried years before, and rode up through the town to the Raadzaal to take leave of him. We found him closeted with the President and members of the Executive Council, but we went in and, when we explained why we had come, all rose to shake us by the hand. The old President gave us a solemn blessing, and my father, who had not expected this sudden departure, bade us good-bye in a husky voice and said he knew we would do our best.

From the Government buildings we galloped to the station, where we found a great stir. Hundreds of friends and relatives had come to see the contingent leave, but, in spite of the crowd on the platform and the load-

ing of baggage and batteries, we were able to truck our animals, after which we lent a hand with the stowing of the ammunition and other work.

When all was ready the train pulled out to the sound of the Transvaal National Anthem. There were enthusiastic cheers and the waving of hats and umbrellas by those remaining behind, and we were off to the front in good earnest.

As for my brother and myself, we were not Transvaal burghers, nor had we been called out for service, but we automatically became soldiers of the Boer Army by virtue of having thrown our belongings through a carriage window and clambering aboard, little knowing on how long and difficult a trail this light-hearted enlistment was starting us.

CHAPTER THREE

To the Frontier

Our officer, or Field-Cornet, as he was called, was Mr. Zeederberg, a coach contractor, and the rank and file were mostly young fellows from the Civil Service and the legal offices and shops in the town. Few of them had ever seen war, or undergone military training, but they were full of ardour, and in spite of cramped quarters, and rough fare, we were like schoolboys as we clanked along.

After a monotonous journey of three days, often broken by interminable halts, we reached Sandspruit, a small station about ten miles from the Natal border, where we detrained. There were great numbers of burghers from the country districts already encamped on the plain, on either side of the railway line, and the veld on all sides was dotted with tents and wagon-laagers. On the left of the track stood a large marquee over which floated the vier-kleur flag of the Transvaal, indicating General Joubert's headquarters. Both he and his wife were thus early on the scene, it being her invariable custom to accompany her husband in the field.

When we had detrained our horses, and helped to ground the guns, we moved away to where a halting-ground was assigned us. We off-saddled in the tall grass, and after building fires, and preparing supper, spent our first night in the open. For the next ten days we lay here enjoying the novelty of our surroundings, as if we were on a pleasure jaunt, rather than seriously awaiting the coming of war. One evening my brother and I received a pleasant surprise, for there arrived in camp an old native servant of ours, grinning from ear to ear at having found us. His name was Charley, a grandson of the famous Basuto chief, Moshesh. He had been a family retainer ever since I can remember, first in the Free State, and then in the Transvaal, whither he had followed us. Latterly he had been on a visit to Umbandine, King of the Swazis, but, learning that there was to be a war, he returned at once to Pretoria, and my father sent him on to us. He was more than welcome for we could now turn over to him our cooking

and the care of the horses, duties which we had been performing ourselves up to then; moreover, he had brought me a splendid roan which my father had sent me, as he feared that the Basuto pony would not be up to my weight.

Every morning my brother and I had our horses fetched from the grazing ground and rode out to visit neighbouring camps and laagers, eager to see all that we could. We saw the stream of fresh contingents arriving daily by rail, or riding in from the adjacent country-side, and watched with never-ending interest the long columns of shaggy men on shaggy horses passing by.

At the end of the week there must have been nearly 15,000 horsemen collected here, ready to invade Natal, and we told ourselves that nothing could stop us from reaching the sea.

Our military organization was a rough one. Each commando was divided into two or more field-cornetcies, and these again were sub-divided into corporalships. A field-cornetcy was supposed to contain 150 to 200 men, and a corporalship nominally consisted of 25, but there was no fixed rule about this, and a popular field-cornet or corporal might have twice as many men as an unpopular one, for a burgher could elect which officer he wished to serve under, and could even choose his own commando, although generally he would belong to one representing the town or district from which he came.

In the Pretoria Commando, we divided ourselves into corporalships by a kind of selective process, friends from the same Government department or from the same part of the town pooling their resources in the way of cooking utensils, &c., and in this manner creating separate little groups that in course of time came to be recognized as military units. One of the number would be elected corporal, to act as the channel through which orders were transmitted from above, and much the same system held in all the other commandos. The commissariat arrangements were equally simple. Our Field-Cornet would know the approximate number of men under his command, and in order to maintain supplies all he needed to do was to send a party to the food depot, stacked beside the railway line, where they would break out as many bags of meal, sugar, and coffee as they considered necessary, load them on a wagon, and dump them in the middle of the camp for each corporalship to satisfy its requirements. The meat supply consisted of an immense herd of cattle on the hoof, from which every commando drew as many animals as it wanted for slaughter purposes. This system, though somewhat wasteful, worked fairly well;

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the men were plainly but adequately fed on much the same diet as they were accustomed to at home, and there was little grumbling. Officers and men had to supply their own horses, rifles, clothing, and equipment, and nobody received any pay.

Ever since the Jameson Raid the Transvaal Government had been importing large quantities of Mauser rifles from Germany which were sold to the burghers at a nominal figure, and as great stores of ammunition had likewise been accumulated, the commandos were very efficiently equipped. The two republics had mobilized between 60,000 and 70,000 horsemen, at this moment distributed west and east, ready to invade the Cape Colony and Natal at the given word. This great force, armed with modern weapons, was a formidable fighting machine which, had it been better led, might have made far other history than it did.

How many troops the British had in South Africa I do not know, but they were pouring reinforcements into the country, and I think our leaders underestimated the magnitude of the task on which they were embarked.

So far as our information went in regard to Natal, the nearest British troops lay at the town of Dundee, some 50 miles away. This force we subsequently found to be about 7,000 strong, and still further south at Ladysmith they had another 6,000 or 7,000 men, but with fresh troops being landed every day it was difficult to say how soon the scales would dip against us.

On the 10th of October a great parade was held in honour of President Kruger's birthday. We mustered what was then probably the largest body of mounted men ever seen in South Africa. It was magnificent to see commando after commando file past the Commandant-General, each man brandishing hat or rifle according to his individual idea of a military salute. After the march-past we formed in mass, and galloped cheering up the slope, where Piet Joubert sat his horse beneath an embroidered banner. When we came to a halt he addressed us from the saddle. I was jammed among the horsemen, so could not get close enough to hear what he was saying, but soon word was passed that an ultimatum (written and signed by my father) had been sent to the British, giving them twenty-four hours in which to withdraw their troops from the borders of the Republic, failing which there was to be war.

The excitement that followed was immense. The great throng stood in its stirrups and shouted itself hoarse, and it was not until long after the Commandant-General and his retinue had fought their way through the

crowd that the commandos began to disperse.

The jubilation continued far into the night, and as we sat around our fires discussing the coming struggle, we heard singing and shouting from the neighbouring camps until cock-crow.

Next day England accepted the challenge and the War began. Once more the excitement was unbounded. Fiery speeches were made, and General Joubert was received with tumultuous cheering as he rode through to address the men. Orders were issued for all commandos to be in readiness, and five days' rations of biltong and meal were issued. Flying columns were to invade Natal, and all transport was to be left behind, so my brother and I were obliged to send our native boy to the central laager, where the wagons were being parked until they could follow later.

My brother and I had joined hands with some friends from our Pretoria suburb of Sunnyside, and after a few days we had become merged in a larger body, of which five brothers, named Malherbe, were the leading spirits. We chose Isaac Malherbe, the eldest of them, to be our Corporal, and a better man I never met. We soon came to be known as 'Isaac Malherbe's Corporalship'. He was about thirty-five years old, dark complexioned, silent and moody, but we looked up to him because of the confidence which he inspired. His brothers were brave men too, but he stood head and shoulders above us all. After his death on the Tugela we found that he was a man of considerable means whose wife and two small daughters were left well provided for.

War was officially declared on October 11th. At dawn on the morning of the 12th, the assembled commandos moved off and we started on our first march.

As far as the eye could see the plain was alive with horsemen, guns, and cattle, all steadily going forward to the frontier. The scene was a stirring one, and I shall never forget riding to war with that great host.

It has all ended in disaster, and I am writing this in a strange country, but the memory of those first days will ever remain.

We Invade Natal

We reached the border village of Volksrust before noon, and here the entire force was halted for the day, the Pretoria men camping beside the monument erected to commemorate the Battle of Majuba, fought on the mountain near by in 1881.

The army was now split up to facilitate our passage through the mountainous country lying ahead. The Pretoria Commando, about 300 strong, was attached to a larger force of 1,500 men under General Erasmus, nicknamed 'Maroola', with his brother, Commandant Erasmus, nicknamed 'Swart Lawaai' (Black Noise) as second in command. They were tall, swarthy men, clad in black claw-hammer coats, and semi-top hats, trimmed with crêpe, a style of dress and headgear affected by so many Boer officers as virtually to amount to insignia of rank. General Maroola had got his name during a recent native campaign in the Northern Transvaal, in the course of which he was said to have directed operations from behind a maroola tree, while Swart Lawaai's was a tribute to his dark complexion and quarrelsome temper.

Several other forces, more or less equal to ours, were carved out of the main body, and in the afternoon each of these new commandos was assigned its route. We spent an unhappy night in the rain. We had neither tents nor overcoats, so we sat on ant-heaps, or lay in the mud, snatching what sleep we could. It was our first introduction to the real hardships of war, and our martial feelings were considerably damped by the time the downpour ceased at daybreak. When it was light we moved out, shivering and hungry, for it was too wet to build fires.

Our road lay between high mountains, and the rain came down again in torrents. Far away to our right and left we caught an occasional glimpse of other forces marching through the mist, also making slow progress over the heavy country. We did not cross the border, but kept to a parallel road, and by dark we halted at a dismal spot, soon trampled into a quag-