

The Battle of Talana Hill

*as described in the campaign journal of
Lt. R. Ernest Reade, DSO.*

Introduction

Robert Ernest Reade was born near Belfast, Northern Ireland, on 18 April 1879, the second in a family of five. After four years at Harrow, he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, for the purpose of qualifying for the Army. He passed the army examinations well, and in August 1898 was commissioned as a lieutenant in the 60th (King's Royal Rifle Corps). Almost immediately he embarked for South Africa, where war was imminent. In October he took part in the Battle of Talana Hill and the retreat from Dundee. During the siege of Ladysmith he was mentioned in dispatches 'for conspicuous gallantry', and was later awarded the DSO, though he did not live to hear of that honour. By the time the siege was raised, Reade was seriously ill with enteric fever. While convalescent, he travelled by invalid train to Durban, and was so weak that he had to be carried on board ship. By the end of the voyage to Southampton his health had improved, but he remained at home from May until November 1900 to recuperate fully. As soon as the medical board passed him as fit for active service, he sailed again for South Africa, eager to rejoin his regiment, then operating in the eastern Transvaal. On 2 February 1901, near Middelburg, he was seriously wounded in a skirmish with a small Boer force, and died two days later, two-and-a-half months before his 21st birthday.

After his death, a book was published as a tribute to this very personable young man. One who knew him well described him as 'one of the most perfect characters I have ever known — one who attracted affection and admiration wherever he moved. [He had] simplicity and pureness of mind, courage and honour, unselfishness quite uncommon, delightful industry, playfulness and a high capacity for enjoyment.' The book contained a Memoir and extracts from Reade's campaign journal. (Memoir of R. Ernest Reade, DSO. London, 1902. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd.)

The extract that follows describes the first engagement of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902. This soldier's account of the battle invites an interesting comparison with Mary Moore's letter on the same subject, elsewhere in this issue.

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Friday, October 20 — Yesterday evening I was permanently sent to A Company. Of which I was very glad, as E Company is not so seasoned as A, which is commanded by Major Boulton, and Marsden under him. Thus we had three officers to A Company.

We paraded under arms at 4.30 a.m. Our tea was late, but I just got a small cup swallowed, and choking down a Marie biscuit, rushed out. After standing under arms until 5 a.m., we were told to dismiss. We were a little longer seeing to some things than the other companies, and when we came to the mess-tent, found everybody looking with glasses at Talana Hill, distant about 3 500 yards from where we were standing. I got out my glasses and saw that the whole ridge, as well as a small hill to the east, was fairly lined with Boers, and also that guns were rapidly being got into position. Almost at the same moment I saw a flash, a few seconds' pause, then bang! closely followed by a long-drawn-out whiz-r-r-r over our heads; whack! As the bullet landed about 70 yards in a direct line in the stones just beyond our camp.

This was the first. All was then bustle and confusion for a few seconds, while we fell in again and opened out, awaiting orders to move. There we lay on the ground — to the inexperienced a terrible ordeal — as the shells fell amongst us. The shells did not burst in the air, but were percussion fuzed [*sic*]. No-one was killed, although the Boers made splendid practice at us. One man had the upper half of his helmet taken clean off. My nearest shell was about 7 yards off.

I think of all the events of that dreadful day I hated this part by far the worst. The waiting after that flash, then the bang! and the whir-r! coming right at one. The moral effect was terrible to the young and inexperienced.

Then *our* artillery set to work, and at the same moment we got orders to move. The Rifles were on the left. I having the left half of A Company was told to keep the left of B Company on my right. This I did and got separated from the rest of A for a time.

By this time we were about 1 500 yards from the top of Talana Hill. The Boer guns spoke no more, as our gunners, picking up the range in the most wonderful way almost at once, and far outnumbering the Boer artillery, burst shrapnel after shrapnel just over the brow of the hill, and there is no doubt the Boer loss at this point must have been very great.

Soon the bullets began to fizz around us. We had to get into a spruit — i.e., a stream with very steep sides. This was about 800 yards from the summit and 300 from a wood of gum trees, which stretched most of the way along the foot of the hill, and a little way up from the spruit to the wood was an absolutely open space, quite level. I don't think the Boers ever came down as far as the wood, but lined the hill face, which was covered with big stones and rocks.

The wood was about 200 yards deep, then there was about 150 yards to a stone wall, running all along the hill, along which, on the other side from us, the Boers were thick. Then 50 yards off, fairly steep ground. The last seventy yards to the top almost a precipice.

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To get into that spruit was the first thing to be done. Long-range bullets whizzed around us, and once, as I and my half company were crossing a particularly open

space, a quick-firing Hotchkiss opened on us, and turned the clay up amongst us, but most curiously, there was scarcely a dead man among the whole force when we reached the shelter of the spruit. Here we were joined by the rest of A Company, who having been rather more to the left had taken longer to come round to the spruit, which was pretty well below the centre of the hill and behind the wood.

We soon heard the orders. For those lucky Dublin Fusiliers was reserved the honour of attacking, as they were the first of our regiments to come under Symonds' [*sic*] command. We were to support and the Irish Fusiliers in reserve. The Leicesters had been left behind in camp to guard against the possibility, or rather probability, of an attack from the Imparti [*sic*]. This came next day, a mistake that cost the Boers dear; but more of this hereafter.

The Dublins got across the open space and lay down behind the ditch on this side of the wood. Then came our turn to do exactly the same thing. This we did at a slow double. The bullets were as thick as an ordinary hailstorm, and it seems to me almost incredible that we only dropped about thirty men on the way. We were, of course, extended. I was told to keep the left half of A steady, and not let them rush for the wood, and this so engrossed my whole attention that I scarcely noticed the bullets at all. Only I was dimly conscious of many bullets passing over my head, and, in particular, a succession of bullet after bullet just behind the nape of my neck, and am inclined to think that, as my equipment was still rather bright, some old veteran Boer had singled me out as being an officer, and was using his magazine; in vain, however, as it happened. Once I thought I had 'got it' in the leg, but it was only the blow from a stone which a bullet pitching about two feet in front of me threw up.

We reached the ditch, and soon advanced to help the Dublins. I suppose we must have waited lying down on the damp ground in the wood for a good hour and a half before we advanced right up the hill. The bullets were nipping off the branches above us all the time, but only a few seemed to come below a height of about ten feet.

We were on the extreme left, and so were the last to move round to the right. While waiting here I must tell a little incident, which, though small in itself, I shall always remember. Poor Colonel Gunning, who was with us, came up to me, and taking my arm most kindly, pointed out to the left, and told me to keep a good look-out in that direction, for fear of being outflanked.

It was bitterly cold in the wood. The whole week till now had been very hot and dry, but this morning was foggy, damp and raw, and I, personally, had been up to the waist in mud and water, chiefly the former, while crossing the spruit.

On the order for us to move being given, we moved along the Boer edge of the wood, only sheltered by a very low bank, over which the bullets fizzed. We remained for about five minutes near a farmhouse towards the right before we got the order to advance up the hill by the side of a stone wall running up the hill. While sitting behind the bank, two poor 'Tommies' on either side of me were shot, as the bank was really no shelter — the men were falling thick all round, and the groans of the poor fellows were terrible. We were glad to be told to advance, and after about one hundred and fifty yards more or less in shelter, on account of the exceeding steepness of the hill, we reached the wall about one hundred and fifty yards from the summit.

As we had come up rather late, we were sent round to the left to guard against flank attack from that quarter. We were round a little spur, and here there was a sort of small corner in the wall going into the hill.

This was the hottest spot of the whole length of the wall, as some Boers must have got a cross-fire on us here.

I had already made one expedition to the Colonel to ask if we might move round as far as this, and received an answer in the affirmative, and had just come back when I saw Peechell [*sic*] standing up near this corner looking out to see if it would be advisable to move further to the left — the bullets were coming thick all over the wall, which was only about three feet high, and the next moment he was down. Boulton and I, who were near, ran down to support him, but it was almost all over with him. I shall never forget that minute — it was about the worst in my life. While we were holding him up, one on each side, Boulton suddenly put his hand to his side — he was wounded, and badly, too. By this time it was all over with poor Pechell, so we had to get Boulton as comfortable as possible. By the way, I ought to say I made another journey to the centre to try and get a surgeon for Pechell before Boulton was wounded. I mention this, because it was then I saw the last of Colonel Gunning, for he was killed about half an hour afterwards.

The fire was now hotter than ever; all that I could do was to try and get the remaining men of my left half-company, and looking over the wall to try and see Boers, to fire volleys now and then. The Boers, however, were so well posted behind rocks that it was almost impossible to see any part of their bodies. Still, we had to fire at something, but I am sure many a round was wasted. On one occasion, as I was looking over the wall with my helmet off, there was a rather near fizz, a sort of spatter in front of me, and then I felt a little dazed, but did not realise what had occurred until two or three ‘Tommyes’ on either side of me said, ‘That was a close shave, sir, through your ‘air,’ and so it was.

It was a most curious fact, but true all the same, that just before looking over that time I felt a very strong disinclination to do so. However, as it never does to let this sort of feeling get hold of one, I did look over, but took the precaution to take off my helmet and not look so high as usual. I was further helped by the bullet hitting the top of the wall, and so glancing off higher than my poor nut.

The artillery all this time was playing on the crest above, and it certainly speaks volumes for the pluck of the Boers that so many of them stood their ground.

Then the guns ceased, and the charge began. I have already said that I was on the extreme left. The charge was made on the right centre, and so we were not even aware of its being made until it was over. In company with about three brother officers, I missed this, which is a great grief to me. The Dublins by this time were nearly all passed by our men. Up the steep face our fellows went, mixed with Irish Fusiliers, who backed us well. When almost at the top we caught sight of them, and at the same moment out rushed about twenty old Boers, who, standing on the skylines, took shots from only about ten yards’ distance at our leaders, all of whom they either killed or wounded, until they themselves, by the hail of bullets sent from below, were every one despatched. Thus died our Colonel and many of our officers and men. This stopped our charge for the time. On seeing the charge I ran round to the centre to try and get into it, but when I got there the artillery had already begun to play on the

brow again. By a dreadful mistake they showered some of their shrapnel on the brow near the top where our poor wounded fellows were lying. They were stopped at once, but the mischief was then done for at least two of our poor officers. Then we charged again. There were so few officers left that Marsden, Stirling and myself found ourselves at the head of about seventy Riflemen and a very few Irish Fusiliers.

Up and down we went — revolvers on our right, swords on our left. We had all the moral feeling of a charge; we passed our dead and lacerated comrades, and momentarily expecting the brow to be again lined with Boers, but alas! when we reached the top no Boer was to be seen at close quarters, but out in the plain, at a distance of about 800 yards was a long, black, huddled mass of flying Boers. Oh, what a glorious feeling of victory! In half a minute we had the rifles down, and at 'the present', to fire on the flying Boers, when up came a galloping staff officer yelling out 'Stop firing! there is a flag of truce.' I can absolutely state that neither I nor any of us saw a flag of truce, and am inclined to think this was a fable. There was, however, a Red Cross flag coming out to get leave to bring in the wounded. On this, of course, we would not and did not fire, but neither Marsden, Stirling nor myself, who were in the end first up (there is no glory in this, as there were no Boers) saw any flag of truce. Even if there had been, a flag of truce should never for a moment be respected while the enemy continues to scuttle out of range as fast as they can. The guns were up, and all in readiness to plough long lanes in the closely packed masses. A hard-won fight might have been turned into a complete victory but for this. We then set to work to gather in the spoils. We made some prisoners, took two flags (both were dropped by flying Boers), and gathered a good score of Mausers and ammunition.

The Boers took away nearly all their dead, but left their wounded. Their loss has been estimated at about 500, and their original force at about 7 000. The fighting lasted nine hours, and was just about as stubborn as could be. While I was near the Boer hospital seeing about the gathering in of the spoils I was told there was a mounted infantry officer of ours lying a mile or so out, as well a poor wounded 'Tommy' half-way. I at once got ten riflemen, and a Boer fellow had a mule cart, which we made come along. Assisted by a doctor, we found our way to the first wounded 'Tommy'. He was about two miles out. I sent him back with eight men to carry him and pushed on with the waggon, the doctor and colour-sergeant Davis to try and find Crum, this being our mounted infantry officer's name.

Never shall I forget that walk. It was three good miles more from the last wounded man. We now began to feel the effects of hunger, which excitement had hitherto kept away. It was raining in deluges, and the walking was like ploughing the whole way. The doctor was mounted and at last found the farmhouse where poor Crum was with a wounded trooper of the 18th. Crum had his right arm shattered at the shoulder, but his only inquiries were how the day had gone. He also said, 'I do hope this arm won't have to come off, as then I shan't see any more of the fighting.' He also insisted on the trooper being cared for first, and this was the third instance that day of one of our officers getting the doctors to attend to a soldier first; the other two were Major Boulton and Captain Nugent. This I can vouch for myself. We dared not leave Crum there, as, although the women folk in the house were very kind, Crum said that he suspected that the man, who had left the house and was a rank Dutchman, had gone to get some Boers to make himself and the trooper prisoners.

We got a little to eat in the farm, and putting the wounded into the cart to be jolted to the Boer hospital set off for this place. By the time we reached it darkness had completely set in, and then taking a Mauser extra each we set off on our trudge to camp. Lucky that we had skirmished over that hill, as Colour-Sergeant Davis and three 'Tommies' whom we had picked up were quite lost; my only gift, that of remembering a place nearly always when having once seen it, got us home at last. There were only six at mess that night; they were just finishing when I came in. Had a ghost appeared they could scarcely have been more astonished.

It was just going to be telegraphed home that I was dead; both legs having been shot off. Such was the rumour that had got about. Naturally I was joyfully welcomed. After eating as much as I could, I took off my wet things, went to my bed in my tent, and got a sound sleep, which was to be my last for many days.

Thus ended this terrible day. I suppose it was very nearly as hard a fight as there ever has been. It just came within my first week. Twenty-two officers were at mess on Thursday evening. On Friday there were only eleven fit for duty, and two of these were slightly wounded. Five of them were dead — among them the Colonel; one was missing; six were wounded; two very badly. One's feelings that evening were a mixture: first came the great joy of victory, then a sort of great sorrow for the dead, mixed with feeling that it was all untrue. Also, I must confess, I am sure none could help it, a feeling of relief at having got off, and a sort of dull carelessness for the morrow.

We were, in fact, in a terrible plight. On the Imparti Mountains there was now known to be a large commando with heavy guns easily able to reach the camp. The force we had defeated was expected to return perhaps before the morning, especially as our guns had completely failed to follow the enemy in any way.

Saturday, October 21 — We paraded this morning at 4.30 a.m. and awaited orders, or an attack. Soon after breakfast we struck our tents; that is, we laid the tent poles down inside, but left everything exactly as it was.

The morning passed in this way — we doing nothing. I have been sent to D Company to command it. Imagine a subaltern of a week's service commanding a company! About four o'clock in the afternoon, Major Campbell, who is now commanding us, told us that the Boers had got two siege guns posted on Imparti, and that as the camp was easily commanded by them, it had been decided to move further away up the slopes near the 'Colliery'. We were only to take great coats, waterproof sheets, and blankets. As we started a most miserable thunderstorm came on, and choked everything.

Marsden, Stirling and myself got a pony each, and finding holsters, went to the mess to try and take away what we could. We were rather behind the rest, who were only just in time, for several shells burst in the camp while we were still in it. But the guns of the Boers were 40-pounders, and they followed our troops right up the slopes. That evening, as we waited for darkness to set in, was very miserable. The 40-pounders continued to fire, going over our head close every time. They made some wonderful shots at the Colliery, in the buildings of which the mounted infantry was gathered. One shot took Hannah's head clean off. He was a subaltern in the Leicestershire Regiment, and was about three years in the Grove with me at Harrow.

Our own field guns were powerless against such heavy metal. To add to it all it continued to rain in buckets. The ground was sopped, and all Davidson (who used also to be at Harrow), Stirling and myself could do was to sit back to back, with a waterproof sheet over our heads and another under us. This is unpleasant, as besides being hard to sleep, pools gather round the edge of the sheet and the water often runs down one's neck. We had to be up and ready to move still higher up the slopes at 2 a.m. It was quite dark, and the men were all rather 'down on their luck'. To make matters worse, the mess-cart having stuck in the mud, I ran back with ten men to help it out. Having done this we tried to rejoin the column, lost our way for a time, and, after falling about over stones, at last regained it, pretty fagged out, high in the hills. We lined the crests among the rocks and waited, feeling most wretchedly. If the Talana force were to return we were indeed done, and perhaps without even this.

Sunday, October 22 — Soon after lining the crests we heard great cheering. It was because the result of the battle of Elandslaagte had become known. This put new heart into the men, and soon after having eaten bully beef and bread, we set off in the direction of the big guns. It was like walking through a ploughed field, only a good deal more slippery. The day was wet and very foggy, so that the mist was round the Imparti Hill and the Boers could not see us.

All at once the fog lifted, and 'Long Tom' (as the men at once christened the Boer gun) spoke out, sending the shells rattling among the artillery and over our heads. We lay down in a small hollow while the shells went whistling over, and I for one went fast asleep, and many others did the same, we were so done out. There were no casualties, though some were very near. General Yule now decided to retire to our old position up the slopes, as we could not well afford to lose any more men; so back we went, the mud clinging to our boots all round, making walking terrible. That afternoon we lay down, trying to get a little rest. We were told we were going to start at 8 p.m., but to where we did not know. At 7.45 the officers were told by Major Campbell that it had been decided to try and reach Ladysmith, as our present position was untenable. With wonderful skill (mainly due to Major Campbell), in the pitch darkness, the whole column was got together. We were the advance guard. We went back through Dundee three miles, and then out on the Biech Road twelve miles, the men all carrying their things. It was a wonderful march, and completely out-did Joubert who was in command of the Imparti force. No one knew anything of it in Dundee till the next morning. We got through a very awkward defile on the way, which happily was not guarded. We were, of course, 'dog done'. Personally, I threw myself down in my coat on the ground, put my helmet under my head, and when I awoke it was bright daylight, about 6 a.m. We had started the march at 9 p.m., and ended about 4 a.m.