

# *From the very beginning to the very end*

*John Bertram Nicholson's Natal Carbineer  
Anglo-Boer War Diary and Letters:  
September 1899–July 1902*

*John Bertram Nicholson: The man and his family*



*The Nicholson clan arrayed at Illovo Mills, Richmond, c. 1903*

*John Bertram Nicholson's diary of one man's service through the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902 is noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, there is the living connection with the history of the war, now over a century in the past, in the form of James Mervyn (Skonk) Nicholson, John Bertram's son. Skonk, now over 80 years of age, is a living legend in KwaZulu-Natal educational circles because of his involvement in school rugby circles during his 39 years on the staff of Maritzburg College (1944 to 1982) and authorship of geography textbooks. He can recall his father clearly.*

*Perhaps his most unusual tale relates how the diaries, written in compact script into six notebooks, came into his possession. It would appear that John Bertram (known widely as Jack), despite the obvious meticulous detail of his record, never wished to draw attention to its existence, nor perhaps, to his own role in the war. He was, perhaps, genuinely diffident about that, but he was possibly also mindful of the forthright candour of his observations, where the British forces, the Natal colonial government, and officers from British and Natal regiments all came in for sometimes caustic criticism.*

*Whatever the case, he never even mentioned the existence of the diaries to his son, despite chatting about his war service on numerous occasions. As fate and fortune would have it, the nondescript notebooks were discovered almost by chance in 1973, many years after John Bertram's death, at the bottom of a cardboard carton on the Nicholson's Underberg family farm. For reasons possibly related to the social conventions of the time, the diaries remained hidden until long after his death, but for the historian this was surely a preferable option to the self-censorship that would probably have coloured his record had it been intended for contemporary public scrutiny.*

*At the time of the Anglo-Boer War, John Bertram's Yorkshire family roots were planted firmly in the Richmond district, in one of the pioneer English settler communities in Natal which originated from the Byrne immigration initiative of the 1850s. Although his own family migrated to the Underberg district, the wider Nicholson clan remained well represented in Richmond. One of the longest enduring names is that of Ravenor Nicholson, whose family farm, Beaulieu, part of the Byrne allotments, was sold in March 2003 after 153 years in that family. The Ravenor Nicholsons were the last Byrne family to part with this historic heritage.*

*John was born on the farm Thedden Grange on 22 October 1879, the eldest son of Robert and Kate Nicholson, who had no fewer than 12 children, of whom three died in infancy. He was educated in Richmond, and at the age of 16 took up farming at Beaconsfield, now known as Poldhu. In March 1899 he moved to the farm Highlands in the Underberg district, but his periods of leave during his wartime service were spent in the Richmond district.*

*After the war he returned to Highlands, but served a further stint with the Carbin-eers during the Natal (or Bham-batha) Uprising of 1906. He remained at Highlands until his death on 27 August 1957, farming in partnership with his brother, Robert. He became a leading figure in the religious, social and political life of the area.*

*In September 1907 he married Clarice Hackland, daughter of James Hackland, thereby joining by marriage two notable Natal Carbineer families.*



*Nicholson and his future wife, Clarice Hackland, at Illovo Mills, 1903*

James Mervyn (Skonk) Nicholson was one of four sons and a daughter born to the couple, arriving on 6 February 1917. He was the only son not to take up farming, and instead had a distinguished career in teaching.

Providentia dei (By the providence of God)

*The motto of the Nicholson family. On several occasions during his Anglo-Boer War service, Jack Nicholson had reason to be grateful for its protection.*

**Nicholson, Trooper JB (John Bertram): A brief Natal Carbineer CV**

Regimental number: 438

Enrolment: 26 July 1897 ('E' Troop), aged 17

Vital statistics: 5'9", chest 31"

Address and occupation: 'Illovo Mills', Richmond, farmer

Promotion: Corporal (8 April 1904)

Resignation: 25 February 1907

**Saturday 30 September 1899**

Left Goshen [*Highlands Farm, Underberg, where Nicholson had been farming since March 1899*] 7 a.m. [*on horseback*] for Richmond on our way to the Transvaal border. Wet and beastly. [*The Natal Volunteer force had been mobilised on 29 September, and the Natal Carbineers, under the overall command of Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Mackenzie Greene, was instructed to muster on the Market Square, Pietermaritzburg at 6 a.m. on Sunday 1 October. Certain country members, such as Nicholson, had to travel considerable distances. Nicholson's squadron, No. 4 (Richmond, Richmond Road and Boston), was officered by Captain FE Foxon, and Lieutenants E Lucas and W Comrie.*]

**Monday 2 October 1899**

Left home at 3 a.m. for Pietermaritzburg. Rode up and got there at 8 a.m.. Had breakfast and dinner at the Plough [*Hotel, in Longmarket Street facing the Market Square, on the site of the later Ken Collins House (now demolished and replaced by a shop)*]. Entrained horse with Harding troop BMR [*Border Mounted Rifles*] at 3:30 p.m.. Left Pietermaritzburg at 6 p.m. in an open [*railway*] truck. Travelled all night and got to Ladysmith at sunrise. [*It was only at Pietermaritzburg that the Carbineers learned that their destination was Ladysmith, much to their relief as there had been talk of the volunteers languishing on guard duty along the Natal Government Railway line. Nicholson's stated schedule seems to run a day behind the official one which has the regiment arriving in Ladysmith on the 1st.*]

Sept 30. Left Goshen at 7 a.m. for Richmond on our way to the Transvaal border. Slept at Percy with my rifle and beastly.

Oct 1. Left Pietermaritzburg at 6 o'clock a.m. & got to Richmond at 10.30 a.m. Had breakfast at 11.15 & then went to home to get hit & ready.

Oct 2nd. Left Pietermaritzburg at 6 a.m. for P. M. Burg. rode up & got there at 11 a.m. Had breakfast & dinner at the Plough. on board horse with Harding troop B.M.R. at 3.30 p.m. Left P.M. Burg. at 6 p.m. in an open truck & travelled all night & got to Ladysmith at sunrise. no food from dinner at

The first page of the first notebook of Nicholson's epic story

**Wednesday 4 October 1899**

Still in Ladysmith. Dust and wind, awful. On guard at night [and] slept on the hard ground. [*Facilities for the Carbineers, billeted on the town's showground, were spartan at the outset, with two-man patrol tents, for example, sufficing for shelter.*]

**Sunday 8 October 1899**

Horse-guard four hours today and horse-guard at night for four hours. Scare at 1.30 a.m. that Boers were coming. Turned out and slept right away from our usual place. Scouting and holding position all night, turned out [to be a] false alarm.

**Thursday 12 October 1899**

Patrols out towards the Berg all day. Signs of the Dutch near Van Reenen [*Van Reenen's Pass in the Drakensberg range northwest of Ladysmith*]. Two squadrons of BMR arrived about 4 p.m. and off-saddled near us. Tom and I on outpost at night – had a miserable night, wet through in the pouring rain.

**Friday 13 October 1899**

Patrols out towards the Berg came in at dusk and reported guns etc. [*The role of the Natal Volunteers in this initial phase of the war was to scour the foothills of the Drakensberg for signs of Boer incursions.*] Night alarm after a heavy shower. Hayes's picquet reported Boers who had surrounded the two on guard. It turned out to be Harrismith Uitlanders on their way down [*probably from Johannesburg to Pietermaritzburg, where the Imperial Light Horse, which included many Uitlanders in its ranks, was in the process of recruitment*].

**Saturday 14 October 1899**

Patrols out in every direction towards the Berg. Came in at dusk and reported hardly anything new. Outposts out all day. During all this time ... our horses were saddled at nights, [and] we generally slept away from camp, leaving after dark as a precaution.

**Monday 16 October 1899**

Patrols out in every direction again. More signs of the Boers on the Berg. Two squadrons of Hussars passed us towards the Berg early in the morning. Horse-guard for myself part of day.

**Letter, 16 October 1899**

*Dear Mother,*

*I received your welcome letter by yesterday's post. Yes, I have received the cake etc alright, and have already had some of it. We have also had some butter and it is very good. We retired yesterday afternoon about four miles this side of where we were before, and the place has no name and also it is not advisable to send the name of the place as there are too many spies.*

*Your aff son, Jack*

**Tuesday 17 October 1899**

Lieutenant Lucas and others went on patrol towards the Berg. Came in and reported large bodies of the enemy coming down the Berg with wagons.

**Wednesday 18 October 1899**

Rode back into our camp from the donga, got back about 4 o'clock. We then prepared breakfast which two patrols of four men each had as soon as possible and then went on patrol. We then had ours and were resting, at least those of us who were off duty, when the enemy was reported by one of our picquets. [*Nicholson proceeds to recount his knowledge of the skirmish with the Boers in the vicinity of Bester's Station, west of Ladysmith. In this, the first substantial skirmish of the war for the Natal volunteers, the Carbineers were compelled to abandon their equipment and retire on Ladysmith.*] Our camp was at once struck. This [was] about 11 o'clock and everything possible was put on the half dozen pack-horses we had but we had to leave about 15 tents, pots, kettles, and our dinner (which happened to be a very good one), a lot of private hampers, kits etc behind.

We at once left by a short cut past a kopje on the left of it (the camp) and then halted after we had gone a couple of miles and waited for the main body which had taken up a position on the kopje before mentioned to cover the retreat of the patrols and also the packs [*pack-horses*]. After a time the patrols came in (one of them had been fired on), and then we all retired to a kopje about 3 miles [*4,8 km*] nearer Ladysmith where we had a bit of dinner. After sentries and all were set we got [the] order to fall back on Ladysmith which we reached about 1 a.m., very tired. There had been a skirmish up at Bester's with the Boers and two squadrons of Carbineers, in which the latter had to retire leaving Lieutenant Gallwey a prisoner. [*The capture of Lieutenant WJ Gallwey, son of the chief justice of the Colony, Sir Michael Gallwey, attracted considerable interest in settler circles.*]

**Friday 20 October 1899**

Went on a patrol soon after breakfast towards Elandslaagte. Some of the Ladysmith Troop caught two Dutch prisoners and they were handed over to a guard of BMR whom they met on the road and they took them to Ladysmith. We halted about two miles [*3,2 km*] off Modder River Station [*northeast of Ladysmith in the vicinity of Rietfontein/Tinta Inyoni*] and waited till the Carbineers, Lancers, BMR etc came up about 1 o'clock, and then we had a bit of food while the officers discussed what was to be done as the enemy had been seen about five miles [*8 km*] away. While here we heard of the battle of Talana Hill, Dundee, by tapping the wires. [*A British column at Dundee had repulsed a Boer assault, but at heavy cost, and the battle was followed by a withdrawal to Ladysmith.*] All further movement for the day was stopped by a pouring rain in which we had to ride back to Ladysmith.

**Saturday 21 October 1899**

Stood to arms very early, and were dismissed about 7 a.m.. 12 we suddenly got [the] order to saddle up and a great rush was made for the horses across the river where they were grazing. We then saddled up and remained so all that afternoon in case we were wanted out at Elandslaagte where very heavy firing was going on.

**Sunday 22 October 1899**

My birthday. Had a bit of cake which came from home. After dinner Lancers came in from Elandslaagte and of course spun the most terrible yarns of what they had done. Each

Lancer had killed bags of men. [*Nicholson is referring to the charge of the 5th Lancers that constituted a gruesome, and controversial, finale to the battle.*] The Gordons [*the Gordon Highlanders*] and other regiments also came in. They got most of the loot from the Boers and had also killed bags of 'em.

### **Monday 23 October 1899**

Our squadron and some of the ILH went out scouting towards W Pepworth's [*the farm of Walter Pepworth MLA, part of the site of the battle of Rietfontein/Tinta Inyoni the following day*]. We came in touch of the enemy who were in force on Tintwa Inyoni, a hill behind Rietfontein a bit to the right. Having found the enemy and they being too strong for us to tackle, we retired to Ladysmith to report matters to the General [*Lieutenant-General Sir George White*].

### **Tuesday 24 October 1899**

Tintwa Inyoni fight. We left Ladysmith at a very early hour and formed up on the road to Newcastle till the regulars and artillery had come out and then we started. Scouts were thrown out on every side and the enemy was found to be in a strong position on Rietfontein and Tintwa Inyoni. The Lancers quickly advanced under a long-range rifle fire till they got under cover of a small kopje. The volunteers under Colonel Royston [*Colonel William Royston, the Commandant of Volunteers*] were sent on to guard the right along the railway line just across the Modder Spruit. The Boers were firing at us from some kopjes on the right of Tintwa Inyoni but the distance was too great and no damage was done. The infantry advanced under a heavy fire and the big guns also came into action. After about an hour we were recalled and had a small gallop right back to Pepworth's where we got under fire, and I must say the bullets did not sound very pleasant as they whistled and struck about us.

Suddenly the Boers opened fire on us with a field-piece and just missed us as we were standing with the horses in a large mass. The second shot came much closer and we got the order to get under cover a bit to the left. [*As was to become common practice in the war, the volunteers were deployed as a scouting screen on the left flank of the British attack, but did become heavily engaged, incurring several casualties in the process.*] After about four hours the whole force withdrew having driven the Boers off one kopje and silenced his artillery, but not defeated them as they still held the ridge. We then covered the retreat from a small kopje and then retired into Ladysmith amidst pouring rain and thunder. I think this fight checked the Boers from molesting the Dundee column next day. [*He was correct, it did.*]

### **Wednesday 25 October 1899**

Saddled up early and rode out on the Helpmekaar Road to meet the Dundee Column ... rode on about 3 miles [*4,8 km*] and then took up positions on both sides of [the] road and held them till [the] head of [the] column came in sight. Then we met them and led the way in pouring rain and very dark. Camped out for [the] night here. Colonel Greene sent those who had no coats in to Ladysmith. Got there about 2 a.m. and found our tents swimming in water. Slept in [the] shed in [the] showground.

### **Sunday 29 October 1899**

Sent to hold Lombard's Kop, about 55 of us. Rest sent to Umbulwana. [*Bulwana*

*Mountain lay east of Ladysmith. This is important in the light of the criticism directed at the British for the almost immediate abandonment of the position and its subsequent occupation by the Boers who used it as a prime site for their siege artillery.] Heavy climb. Built laagers till 10 p.m. at night all round the hill. Guarding all night. Plenty of false alarms, shooting etc.*

### **Monday 30 October 1899 (Battle of Lombard's Kop)**

Our horses being sent home, here we were on a high kopje with only our legs if it came to a retreat. Early in the morning we heard artillery moving and also musketry. The firing was out at Nicholson's Nek and we heard afterwards of the surrender of fully 800 men and guns. The Boers started by shelling us in the morning but in a few minutes they turned their attention to the Royal Artillery etc. The battle began in earnest and shells began to be very thick. Meanwhile the volunteers had advanced to our right and took up [position on] a ridge. Firing at once became general. Some regular horse and foot drove the enemy back away on the left front, but heavy reinforcements coming just about 10 a.m. turned the battle in the favour of the Dutch, and owing to the surrender away on our left, we were obliged to retreat under a heavy shell-fire. *[The volunteers had been held in readiness in the vicinity of Lombard's Kop for an anticipated British cavalry charge on the Boer left flank that did not materialise.]*

### **Thursday 2 November 1899:**

Line cut and siege commenced. Shelling pretty heavy. Came home under shell-fire. We shifted our tents towards Tatham's this afternoon from showground as the shellfire was getting warm.

### **Letter, 2 November 1899**

*Dear Haco,*

*Thank May for the cakes. I consider the Boers had far away the better of the battle last Monday [30 October]. It was simply an artillery duel, Germany vs England. The artillery never stopped for seven hours.*

*Last Sunday we (60 men), our squadron, were sent to hold Lombard's Kop, the highest peak near Ladysmith. We held it until we got orders to retire on the Monday after the battle, and had a magnificent view of the whole engagement, it was simply grand watching the different manoeuvres. I can tell you our soldiers are plucky, they do anything, shells fly about and they don't even move.. They [the Boers] took about 800 of our infantry prisoners. When we got the order to retire, we were on this peak and had to walk six miles back to camp with about 30 pounds on our backs. It is hard to get information, the military keep things dark.*

*Your affect brother, AJ Hackland*

### **Friday 3 November 1899**

Bester's fight. *[This skirmish does not refer to the same location as the clash of 18 October, but rather to a reconnaissance in force west of Ladysmith, that ended in another embarrassing withdrawal, with casualties.]* About eleven a.m. we suddenly got the order to saddle up and go out to Bester's which we did. On our way out we were shelled by the Dutch and I was as near as possible killed, a shell falling between me

and my half-section. Amid a shower of clods and earth we galloped on, shells falling very closely to us. When we got to [the] scene of [the] action the artillery was firing and we were ordered to go and support the ILH on Bester's Hill. After a long gallop we dismounted and the Carbineers, BMR etc went up the hill. They soon got into action and the firing became very warm. Major Taunton was killed and many others killed and wounded. [*Major Charles Taunton, a popular and respected colonial personality, was the most senior Natal Carbineer officer killed in action during the war. His death caused dismay in settler social circles.*] After a heavy shell fire on our right the Hussars were driven back in spite of our guns and we got the order to retreat. We were nearly caught by the Boers and only just got out of range before they came up. We were shelled all the way home.

### **Sunday 5 November 1899**

Civilians and hospitals being moved out to Intombi [*the neutral civilian camp and general hospital established beyond the Ladysmith perimeter in terms of an agreement reached between the British commander, Sir George White, and the Boer commandant-general, Piet Joubert, on the 4th*]. Dug trenches along the river bank for shelter in the afternoon.

### **Thursday 9 November 1899**

Prince of Wales's Birthday. Attack on Ladysmith by Zарps [*the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republikeinshe Polisie*] at Surprise Hill and also by Boers on Caesar's Hill [*Caesar's Camp*]. They were beaten off with heavy loss. Salute of shell fired in honour of the Prince, also cheers. [*It was thought to be the first occasion on which live rounds had been used in such a salute. The occasion was a considerable boost for morale, which had taken a knock when the Boer siege ring had closed.*]

### **Letter, Ladysmith, 10 November 1899**

*Dear Mother,*

*Just a line to let you know how I am getting on. Although the Boers have suffered a lot we must have come off second best as they captured 850 (about) of our men, also some guns. This lot fought for nine hours before surrendering. I do not know what the Dutch intend doing, they may try and cut the railway-line. My, this is a place for rumours. The box of fruit I had taken up to the kopje as we were supposed to be out there for four days.*

*Your aff son, Jack*

### **Letter, Ladysmith (probably 16 November 1899)**

*Dear Mother,*

*We have had three awful days here now, dust always in clouds, and a high Berg wind. Some of the volunteers are sick, it is simply awful what a dust is on. Everything we eat is nothing but dust. We are in small patrol tents, two in each, and sometimes they come down. Last night I was on guard with 17 others, in the Carbineer lines, and when each six relieved, we just had to put down an overcoat and waterproof sheet in the ground - no tent and dust something awful. I wish they would move us out somewhere, so does everyone.*

*Your aff son, Jack*

**Monday 20 November 1899**

Shells on and off. BMR played NC cricket. Latter won. *[Nicholson's passing reference to cricket belies the important part played by sport in the maintenance of morale during the siege. The British devotion to games defied the attentions of Boer artillery and was only dimmed, as the siege dragged on, by worsening conditions among the besieged.]* More firing with big guns at 12 p.m. at night.

**Wednesday 22 November 1899**

B Squadron played C Squadron NC cricket. Military built dummy fort. Dutch fired 15 shells at it. Ambulance sent out to collect 'dead'. Dutch thought they had done wonders. *[Apart from being misled by dummy British artillery emplacements, the Boers generally over-estimated the effectiveness of their artillery, which caused little damage and few casualties.]*

**Saturday 2 December 1899**

Roused at 2.30 a.m.. The Dutch fired about 30 shells today, most of them falling into the ILH camp but without hurting a man. They also went over our parade-ground where we held our sports and two burst right overhead and came down in showers of bullets, but burst too high up to do any damage. The volunteer sports came off very well today, there being quite 20 events on foot. The obstacle race and wrestling on horse-back were very amusing, also the wheelbarrow race etc. Generals White and Hunter *[Major-General Sir Archibald Hunter, White's chief-of-staff]* were present. In the evening we had a general saddle-up at 8.30 to test our readiness for action, every arm being paraded. Got back to bed at 12 o'clock.

**Sunday 3 December 1899**

Gun inspection at 9 a.m., after church-parade at which *[Archdeacon]* Barker preached. In the afternoon a Wesleyan minister preached an open air service to which I went. He gave a very good sermon. *[Nicholson appears to have been a devout Christian, often attending church services several times on a Sunday. However, his sentiments in this regard are articulated more prominently in his letters than in the diary entries.]*

**Tuesday 5 December 1899**

After breakfast I was sent out with others to let the horses graze as food for horses is short and they only have ¼ ration. Came back with horses from grazing at 3 p.m.. About half a dozen shells were fired at the Gordons and ILH in the afternoon and killed a mule.

**Wednesday 6 December 1899**

While exercising we met six men leading a captive *[reconnaissance]* balloon down from [the] Station to where the balloon rises. This balloon was emptied of gas a few days ago owing to the Dutch fire and was refilled today. As soon as sunrise broke the Dutch opened fire on it but failed to hit it and the balloon has been up to reconnoitre. *[The British commenced operations with observation balloons on 28 October. Two were lost to Boer shellfire, one to a thunderstorm, and by mid-December a shortage of gas effectively grounded the apparatus. The balloons nevertheless served some intelligence function, not to mention a psychological one.]* Dutch trying to stop searchlight and signalling going on between us and the column at Colenso. *[Since the cutting of telegraph*

*links on 2 November, the garrison and town was dependent upon the heliograph and searchlight beams bounced off clouds at night. The Boers sought to intercept both.] An open air concert was held in the evening which came off well. Sickness increasing among the garrison and also the volunteers.*

**Thursday 7 December 1899**

Out with the horses for grazing till 3 p.m.. Dutch fired at some horses grazing to our right and also into the town. After tea, just as we were off to bed, an order came round for every available man to parade on foot with rifle, revolver, water-bottle and bandolier and as light as possible in the boot line. When we were ready a hundred of us were told off, being men out of No. 3, 4 and 5 Squadrons. After this our wire-cutters were sent for. The rest of the Carbineers, BMR etc, also fell in and we all marched out towards Lombard's Kop. *[Nicholson proceeds to recount his impressions of the celebrated attack by colonial troops, including the Natal Carbineers, on the Boer artillery position at Gun Hill on the night of 7-8 December.]*



*Nicholson, mounted and in uniform, in a post-Anglo-Boer War photograph, c. 1903*

About 2 a.m. we came to the foot of a kopje called Helpmekaar Kop, after many halts and having marched for more than four hours over very rough ground and expecting to meet the Dutch picquets and also to be fired on every minute. We then formed up in a long skirmishing line and advanced up the hill. When we got halfway there a sentry challenged us about five times and we halted to confuse him as he was below us on the flat. A forward move was then made and he then fired on us and the Dutch above us woke and started firing on us. Some of our side then lost their heads and started firing behind us and nearly hit us. After a lot of shouting they stopped and then we advanced again, the Dutch still firing on us. We then gave a cheer, and cheering like madmen, we went on. After a few yards the General gave the order to fix bayonets which we did not have with us. This was passed along the line and with another cheer completed the scare and the Dutch ran for their lives, and when we reached the top they were nowhere to be seen.

We then advanced behind the big guns and the engineers etc came on and started their preparations to blow up the guns. The ILH fired volleys into the bush below to prevent any *[Boer]* advance. When all was ready we retired and when half way down the hill three guns were blown to pieces and also some ammunition. I think there were three guns blown up and one Maxim carried off by the ILH. We then marched home and got in about half-past six in the morning feeling very tired and foot sore. We were received by our own fellows with cheers galore.

**Friday 8 December 1899**

We had a quiet day as we were very tired. At 12 o'clock all who went out the day before to the guns were paraded and General White came down and expressed his thanks to all of us in a few well-said words as he said we were tired and he would not keep us too long. We then gave three cheers for the General who lead [*sic*] us and also for our Queen.

**Sunday 10 December 1899**

Out on picquet all day. The Dutch fired six shells in and around the town, quite an unusual thing for the Dutch to do as they do not generally fire on Sunday. [*This is a reference to the informal Sabbath Day armistice that was generally observed on both sides, enabling besieged residents at least one day of relative normality a week.*] Came in from picquet in the evening. As it was late when I got settled down I did not go to service.

**Tuesday 12 December 1899**

Yesterday morning the KRR [*King's Royal Rifles*] turned out and took a big gun, losing 11 killed, 43 wounded and 6 missing. Dutch very wild about losing the gun [*Gun Hill on the 8th*] and also about the bayonet as they themselves acknowledge losing 28 men as our men got among them with the bayonet [*British regulars at Surprise Hill on the 11th*]. Turned out at 9 p.m. and marched with rest of [the] flying column in a westerly direction across the bridge. [*This was the flying column that White envisaged joining forces with Buller's relief force, then on the Thukela.*] This is to prepare us to go out at any moment to meet the flying column.

**Wednesday 13 December 1899**

Dutch firing shells at the town and tents now and then. Heavy firing from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. with heavy guns in the Tugela River direction. Supposed to be the column advancing.

**Friday 15 December 1899**

Firing at Colenso and also at the town. Came in from picquet feeling bad. Reported myself to Dr Buntine [*RA Buntine, one of the Natal Carbineer medical staff*] in [the] morning and again in the evening when I was sent to the convalescent home. Temperature 102°. [*The day of the famous battle of Colenso held a different significance for Nicholson, the beginning of a long struggle against illness. He was one of many to suffer this misfortune. He was sent out to the volunteer hospital at Intombi, and was consequently 'out of the loop' for several weeks as far as Ladysmith events were concerned.*]

**Monday 18 December 1899:**

Came out to Intombi Spruit Hospital. Four Carbineers killed and a lot of horses by a shell from Slim Piet. [*This single shell inflicted the single most severe batch of casualties suffered by the Natal Carbineers during the siege, when it struck the 'B' Squadron horse-lines early that morning.*]

**Monday 25 December 1899:**

Christmas Day. A very quiet day for the convalescents. Orderlies and nurses had a very jolly time in Ladysmith.

**Saturday 6 January 1900:**

Very heavy night attack on Caesar's Hill [*Caesar's Camp*]. Dutch and our heavy guns firing all day, also musketry. Dutch retired having lost very heavily. Also on Bester's side [*referring to Wagon Hill*] they were beaten back with heavy loss. Our losses pretty heavy, BMR lost four men. [*The Natal volunteers in Ladysmith were only involved on the periphery of this best-known of the siege's military engagements. Nicholson, still languishing in Intombi, would have enjoyed a fairly close range armchair view of the Boers' assault on the eastern extremity of Caesar's Camp.*]

**Tuesday 16 January 1900:**

Slim Piet and another big gun and our guns fired a few shots. Distant firing towards Potgieter's [*Drift*] and Colenso with big guns. [*Nicholson's observations here represent early indications that Buller's relief column was commencing a new 'push', this time along the upper Thukela towards Spioenkop.*]

**Letter, Intombi Spruit, Ladysmith, 19 January 1900**

Dear [Mother],

*I am writing a line to see if it will get through. I wrote one a few days ago and sent it to Johnnie Flett in Ladysmith, and asked him to send it to you if he got a chance, but perhaps this will get through sooner. I am still out at the Hospital, but hope to be going back to Ladysmith as soon as the doctor thinks I am strong enough. I weighed myself the other day and found that I had lost 30 pounds in weight, and that was after I had been on food for a week. Of course, we are not allowed meat yet as our stomachs are too weak yet.*

Jack

**Monday 22 January 1900**

Some heavy guns firing down at Potgieter's and Colenso on and off all day. A few shots fired into town. Wrote to mother again today and sent it to Colin Wilson to try and get through. [*Wilson would have been in Ladysmith itself, where he would probably have secured the services of a black mail-runner to smuggle the letter through the Boer lines.*]

**Letter, Intombi Spruit, Ladysmith, 22 January 1900**

Dear Mother,

*Just a line on chance that it will get through, so that you must get one as this is the fourth one. I am going on well so far, and all the Richmond patients are doing well, and those in camp also. How are you all keeping up your spirits? I think it will soon be all open again [i.e., the siege over], please God, and then we will be able to write oftener than now. Our diet now is porridge or bread and milk (= water and sugar) for breakfast, soup, rice and gravy for dinner, no meat. B and milk or cornflour for tea, and of course we can toast our own bread.*

Your own loving son, Jack

**Friday 26 January 1900**

Cold dull day. Firing at Colenso and also Potgieter's and towards Colenso at intervals. Heard good news that the Dutch had cleared. Hope it is true. *[Initial reports and observations from Ladysmith suggested that the Boers had been successfully driven off Spioenkop.]* Quiet day here round Ladysmith.

**Sunday 28 January 1900**

Heard that the Dutch recaptured Spioen Kop from our fellows in the night and our loss was 500 killed and wounded. *[This was a truer reflection of the grim British disaster at Spioenkop.]* Theirs was very heavy also.

**Wednesday 31 January 1900**

A few big guns firing down Tugela way on and off during the day. Rumours still about our retaking the hill, Spion Kop, and also of six days' fighting down at Colenso in which we lost 1 500 and the Boers 5 000 killed and wounded. *[Both figures were wild exaggerations, especially the Boer losses.]*

**Thursday 1 February 1900**

Dull day with showers on and off. A few big guns fired occasionally today. Camp put on short rations in everything: ½ lbs biscuits or 1 lb bread, 1½ oz of sugar, ½ lb of tinned meat or 1 lb fresh meat, ½ oz salt, 1/36 oz pepper.

**Letter, Intombi Camp, Ladysmith, Sunday 4 February 1900**

*Dear Mother,*

*Just a line to let you know how we are getting on. I have been shifted to a convalescent tent, so I will be sent in to Ladysmith in three or four days from now. I am keeping well so far, only a touch or two of diarrhoea on and off. I hope that by the time you get this, that we will be relieved or not far off.*

*Your own aff son, Jack*

**Wednesday 7 February 1900**

Fine day, very hot. Came in from Intombi camp to Ladysmith camp by afternoon train. 55 days out in hospital.

**Friday 9 February 1900**

Sent up in evening to Sanatorium on the hill. *[This was the Convent established by the Augustinian nuns under Mother Superior Marie des Anges, who spent most of the siege at Intombi. After it was evacuated by senior British officers as being too tempting a Boer target, it served as a convalescent centre. It is now the La Verna Hospital.]* No news of relief.

**Sunday 11 February 1900**

No service held here. Quarter rations of bread etc. Have been on horse meat for some while now everywhere in camp.

**Saturday 17 February 1900**

Official confirmation of relief of Kimberley. Fourth day I have had milk from Mr Reid

(half a bottle). *[Milk was one of the dietary essentials in the treatment of dysentery, and was consequently strictly rationed.]*

**Thursday 22 February 1900**

Heavy firing down Colenso way. Heard that Roberts had nearly entrapped Cronje and Dordrecht taken, also that Buller was doing very well and that 4 000 Dutch under Meyer had left via Elandslaagte for some place or home. Went out to graze my horse for the first time since my illness.

**Postcard, 25 February 1900, Pepworth to Nicholson**

*Dear Jack,*

*Cheer up! Will soon be out of this hole. The column is near with lots of grub and bacey [sic].*

*Yours, Pepworth*

**Tuesday 27 February 1900**

Amajuba Day. *[The 19th anniversary of the Boer defeat of British forces at Amajuba Mountain, north of Newcastle in 1881.]* Confirmation of the surrender of Cronje in the Free State. *[The first significant British victory of the war, at Paardeberg].* Very heavy firing down Pieter's way in the afternoon. Attack made on Dutch position by our men in which position was carried at the point of the bayonet after heavy artillery fire.

**Wednesday 28 February 1900**

Fine day. Dutch had a false alarm here and fired heavily off Gun Hill in the night. Went out horse-grazing and saw any amount of Boers, wagons, etc clearing out. Came in in the evening and about 140 men were ordered on flying squadron. Just as they started out towards Intombi we caught sight of the advance guard of the relief column composed of Carbineers and ILH, etc under Major McKenzie, so thank God the siege is practically over. *[There are numerous accounts of the relief, from soldiers and residents alike, and Nicholson's ranks as one of the more subdued. The McKenzie referred to is Duncan McKenzie, arguably the most renowned Carbineer of his day. He commanded the regiment from 1903 to 1907 and rose to the rank of brigadier-general.]*



*John Bertram Nicholson*

**Thursday 1 March 1900**

Two patrols of volunteers went out, one at 5 a.m. to Pieter's and one at 10 a.m., with a strong support of regulars, artillery, etc, out towards the Newcastle road. Parties of scouts coming in. Our fellows had a skirmish out near Pepworth's Hill but not much fighting was done. *[The Ladysmith garrison was physically in no state to pursue the tempting target of the retiring Boer commandos, and the supply of fit horses had been decimated. The relief column was in better shape despite the hard fighting in the Tugela*

*Heights in the final push for the town, but, Buller, for his part, chose to consolidate the position at Ladysmith, and no effective pursuit of the commandos was to be launched for several months.]*

### **Friday 2 March 1900**

Quiet day. A few patrols out to guard loot and scouts out. General Buller's official entry into Ladysmith. Wagons pouring in with grub, etc.

### **Letter, Ladysmith, 2 March 1900**

*Dear Mother,*

*At last we are relieved, after four months long siege, and a most trying time it was, but thank God it is all over. I am on duty now, but do not do much work in wet weather as yet. I had nearly a month in bed and I was very glad to get out of it. I wrote a scrawl to you yesterday afternoon and I hope you will get it alright. We do not know what arrangements are being made about a change for us all. Horse-flesh is not such bad tack if minced up flavoured. I had a treat this morn, fried goat and onions.*

*My poor horse is as good as dead, being as thin as a rake, owing to neglect while I was ill. I am very sorry about him as he was a good pony. I do not know what we will do for horses, with so many dead and shot.*

*God bless you all.*

### **Saturday 3 March 1900**

Great march past of troops from the relief column to Tin Camp. About three brigades came in, also presentation of addresses to the generals. We were marched up and lined the roads on either side while they marched past. *[The euphoria at the relief had worn off by this stage, and this parade, marking the formal entry of the relief column into Ladysmith, was greeted with muted enthusiasm.]*

### **Sunday 4 March 1900**

Thanksgiving service for the relief of Ladysmith up behind the Sanatorium. Picking out horses from troop of grazing horses. List of names of men to be sent home on leave taken in the afternoon.

### **Monday 5 March 1900**

We left Ladysmith at 10 a.m. by wagon and had an awful journey down to Colenso and got there at 7.30 p.m., too late for the evening train. Slept out of town just across the bridge. Had a good sleep as we were very tired and dirty etc.

### **Wednesday 7 March 1900**

Reached home by morning train. Tired out. Have been sick on and off ever since. *[JB Nicholson remained at home in Richmond on sick-leave from 7 March to 17 April due to the effect of enteric fever contracted during the siege.]*

### **Thursday 19 April 1900**

Received my horse early this morning, having received telegram to say he was sent off yesterday from home so I waited, being very glad as I escaped going on wagons which

would have knocked me up. Took train at 10 a.m. for Modderspruit. Called at Estcourt and entrained a lot of remounts. The Dutch laagers were numerous and our men must have fought very heavily to take them. Reached Elandslaagte at 8 p.m.. We offloaded wagons and horses and slept there for the night. *[Nicholson, returning from his post-siege sick-leave, appears to have missed the Highlands sojourn altogether, despite his diary entry of the 17th, as the volunteers left that camp on 5 April for Elandslaagte.]*

### **Friday 20 April 1900**

Had some fun although it nearly came to an accident. I was watering my horse in [the] morning at Elandslaagte. Like an ass I rode him with only a reim *[a leather leading-rein]* and headstall *[halter]* instead of it being in his mouth. In getting on I suppose my spurs touched him and he bolted with me, nearly running into the railway lines and fence. There he swerved and in gripping him with my legs he bucked as I touched him with my spurs. This nearly took him into some wire tangled up, and then he bolted a good mile *[1,6 km]* till a big herd of cattle stopped him, and I did not lose time in getting off, putting the reim in his mouth. After this we had some breakfast and started for Modderspruit leading three horses each, there being five of us.

### **Sunday 22 April 1900**

Church parade in morning at 9 am. After dinner I had to go and pump a tank full of water with three others, about two miles *[3,2 km]* away. We had a bad ride down as the jolting was awful so we walked home. Fatigues the order of the day, just the same as any day.

### **Thursday 26 April 1900**

During the afternoon some men of our picquets were said to be captured by Dutchmen. This was told to us by a man who had left his post without arms. The lieutenant at once took eight men and galloped for all he was worth and surrounded the kopje. When they got to the top they found the Boers to be four of our Native scouts, so the man who spread the alarm got a good talking to, also some men who fell asleep on their post.

### **Sunday 29 April 1900**

Church-parade held at 9 am. The bishop *[this was probably Hamilton Baynes, Bishop of Natal from 1893 to 1901]* preached and gave a very good sermon indeed. In the afternoon he gave another voluntary meeting to which I went. A few of us had a talk with him after the service.

### **Sunday 6 May 1900**

During the day I and two others took the seven horses down to water on Pieter's Farm. We called at the farmhouse on our way, to have a look through, as the farm belongs to a rebel and is deserted. After going round I went into an outhouse and simply got covered in fleas which I only found out when I got to my post, and then I had to strip everything off and found myself a mass of blisters. I killed a good many but some troubled me a good deal afterwards.

### **Monday 7 May 1900**

Heard that the 3rd Brigade was moving at 1.30 p.m.. Relieved at 6 a.m. and returned to our camp. We were warned at 8 a.m. to pack everything. Of course we made a big rush and after all the order was cancelled. The whole brigade moved out towards Helpmekaar

Road. No.4 Squadron NC and a troop of SALH [*South African Light Horse*] were left, so here we are left in camp without – as far as we know – any riders. Camp-guard, and horse- and baggage-guards placed at night. [*This day, 7 May, marked the first of two campsite relocations for the Natal Carbineers, with a second following on the 9th, in preparation for Sir Redvers Buller's long-delayed move on the Boer positions in the Biggarsberg range on the 10th.*]

### **Wednesday 9 May 1900**

Rest of brigade still out patrolling. I was on camp-guard last night with five others on the posts. Some shots fired in [the] morning away on our left, which we have not found out who fired them. Great movement of troops eastwards towards Job's Kop, also transport and ambulances. Everything points to a fight in a few days.

### **Friday 11 May 1900**

We left at 6 a.m. this morning, 40-strong, for a patrol to the west towards Tinta Inyoni. Corporal Peter Comrie, myself, and Pottow [*Trooper Bertrand Pottow, a farmer from Thornville*], were told off as advance scouts. We went on for four miles [*6,4 km*] scouting, and every rise I came to I used glasses and searched every kopje in our front.

### **Sunday 13 May 1900**

Our new regimental sergeant-major [*this would be WOI William Burkimsher, who succeeded Bernard Bowen, who had died on 28 March from enteric contracted during the siege of Ladysmith*] also went to rejoin [the] regiment which is said to be on Vermaak's Kraal, about 10 miles [*16 km*] this side of Helpmekaar.

### **Monday 14 May 1900**

A quiet day. Usual fatigues and duties. I was on guard last night with Newlands and two others. We had a quiet night. [*Nicholson appears to have missed the action of the 13th and 14th, when Buller evicted the Boers from the Biggarsberg and opened the way to the recapture of Dundee on the 15th.*]

### **Saturday 19 May 1900**

We left camp at 6 a.m. with 150 men. Jackson [*possibly Trooper RH Jackson of 'G' Troop hailing from Richmond Road, or Thornville*] and I acted as gallopers to the major who was in command of the force. His name was Stewart and he was Buller's aide-de-camp [*Queen's Messenger*] with the title of Bimbashi in Turkey or Egypt. [*This officer of the South African Light Horse enjoyed a reputation for flamboyance.*] We had a very heavy time of it riding backwards and forwards with orders. We then rode past Tintwa Inyoni on our right and we could then see all the old battlefields and where we had our first experience of shells.

### **Thursday 24 May 1900**

The Queen's birthday, 81 years old. [*The elderly monarch's last birthday, as it turned out*]. We gave a cheer as we marched by the divisional staff at the request of General Lyttleton for the Queen. We were roused at 3 a.m. and marched at 4.15 a.m. along a very dusty road with constant halts by the way, hardly out of the saddle before we were in again. No trotting but the same monotonous pace that so sickened us all.

We marched about 10 miles [16 km] today, and owing to the major, we went about two miles [3,2 km] beyond our camp, and then had to return there, reaching there about 4.30 p.m. covered in blackjacks through which the major led us like a flock of sheep. Newlands and I again acted as gallopers to the major, so we never had a rest. At one place, while the others were off-saddled having breakfast, we were riding to and fro between him and his advance-guard.

### **Saturday 26 May 1900**

We visited a Dutch farmhouse where we found a Dutch vrouw and her married daughter. The elder husband named Degenaar was a prisoner in Newcastle, the younger went to fight us as a rebel and has not been seen since. The old lady got so excited in telling us about her husband that she burst into tears.

### **Sunday 27 May 1900**

Had orders to be ready to shift at anytime. Church-parade held to which I did not go as I was on duty. After breakfast [the] sergeant-major and myself and three others went out patrolling. We got about four or five turkeys and geese etc for him. [The] sergeant-major rather surprised the same old Dutch woman we saw yesterday by speaking Dutch to her, as yesterday he spoke Kaffir as she could not understand English.

### **Monday 28 May 1900**

Our squadron was rearguard to all the transport of the division. The Division marched about 15 miles [24 km] right to the Buffalo [*Mzinyathi*] which I saw for the first time. Some of our chaps swam across [and] planted a Union Jack there. Very flat, treeless, and waterless country which we marched over today. Got to camp at dusk very tired and dirty-looking.

### **Tuesday 29 May 1900**

The mornings have been bitterly cold for the last few days. We formed part of the advanced guard. Our squadron were sent out in scouting order to our left. We occupied Stale's Drift [*Steil's Drift on the Mzinyathi/Buffalo River*] at 8.30, and crossed into Transvaal territory at the same time, thus having the honour of being the first regular Volunteers such as NC, BMR etc, to cross the border in a whole squadron.

### **Wednesday 30 May 1900**

Cavalry reconnaissance cancelled so what we thought would be a flank movement in Laing's Nek turned out to be only a patrol. Instead of marching at 6 a.m. we marched at 8 a.m. in the direction of Utrecht. We are now in dangerous country as the Dutch play tricks with the white flag. We passed one house with Dutch vrouws in it flying a white flag in Natal, the owner being a prisoner-of-war in Newcastle as a rebel.

### **Thursday 31 May 1900**

The Richmond Troop came in and we heard of an instance of the way the Dutch fight. A party of them [*the Richmond men of the Carbineers*] rode up to a house to scout and came across some Natives clobbering mealies. They asked them where the Boers were and the Native said they had cleared out. Two or three of them dismounted, but one smelt a rat and kept a lookout on his horse. He saw some horses saddled on a hillside

and a little higher some armed Boers, and he then told our fellows to mount quickly, and no sooner were they in their saddles when the Boers opened fire on them and they had to gallop away under fire.

### **Friday 1 June 1900**

After breakfast I was sent to Newcastle to see if any provisions were to be bought, also to post letters and pick up any news. I also met General Buller, who asked me if I came from Wool's Drift and how far he was from it. At Newcastle the Boers had done a great deal of damage to the houses and railway.

### **Saturday 2 June 1900**

We were roused at 5.15 a.m. and marched at 10.45 a.m. with some of the TMI as rearguard. I had a mishap in a muddy sluit [*irrigation ditch*] going along. I nearly came off as the horse struggled in a mud hole. Sergeant Montgomery came off the back of his horse as it sat down with him and he was knee-deep in water. [*This would appear to be JWV Montgomery, a farmer from Mid-Illovo, who rose steadily through the ranks to temporary lieutenant-colonel during World War I. He served as honorary colonel of the Natal Carbineers from 1952 to his death in 1968, at the age of 101.*] Lost my stirrup leather in the water, and had to undress and look for it and succeeded in finding it.

### **Sunday 3 June 1900**

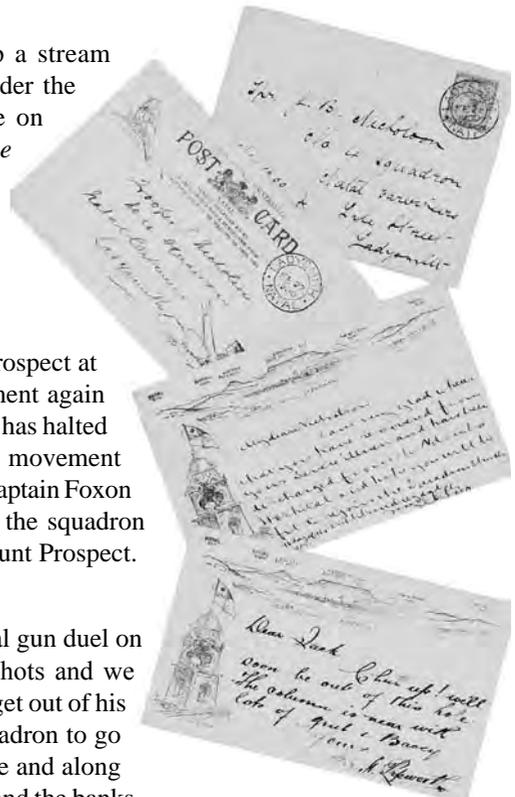
Marched about six miles [*9,7 km*] up a stream [*upstream?*] to De Wet's Farm just under the historic Ingogo Heights. An armistice on with the Dutch for four days now. [*Time was granted from 2 to 5 June for the Boers, under Commandant-General Chris Botha, to consider, and ultimately reject, surrender terms from Buller*].

### **Monday 4 June 1900**

Roused at 6 a.m.. We reached Mount Prospect at 2.30 p.m., very glad to rejoin the regiment again after all our wanderings. The main body has halted owing to the armistice and no forward movement will take place until the armistice is up. Captain Foxon and a good many others have rejoined the squadron today. Our camp is at the bottom of Mount Prospect.

### **Wednesday 6 June 1900**

Dutch refuse terms of armistice. General gun duel on both sides. Long Tom fires about 20 shots and we dodge about all over the place trying to get out of his way. Our orders tonight are for our squadron to go on the 24-hour picquet at Colley's grave and along the ridge commanding the railway-line and the banks of the Buffalo.



*Historic envelopes from  
besieged Ladysmith*

### **Thursday 7 June 1900**

Our squadron marched at 6 a.m., having been roused at 4.30 for the picquet. We were keeping a good lookout when we suddenly saw six Boers come out of the valley. We at once decided to fire on them as they could disappear easily down the Buffalo if we let them come any closer, and they could approach us quite easily as the banks of the river are very deep. The range [was] about 2 000 yards [*1 800 metres*]. We fired a volley then had independent shots. We made them shift away a bit, but as soon as they got onto a new burn [*as in a fire-line veld burn*] where we could hardly see them, they halted and had quite a lot of shots at us. We kept quiet so they moved on and again attempted to come closer, but we at once fired on them till they retired.

### **Friday 8 June 1900**

Roused at 6 a.m., relieved at 7 a.m., and marched in about eight o'clock, rather late owing to some of the picquets coming in late. A quiet day here in camp. While sitting at breakfast young Woods [*Nicholson is probably referring to JPS Woods, a farmer from Estcourt who worked his way up from trooper in 1893 to lieutenant-colonel and command of the Left Wing/2nd battalion of the Carbineers in 1911*] led a horse by. On looking up I recognised the horse as my old trooper which I had lost in Ladysmith after the siege. I told him about it and he said he had bought from a Native without a pass, but the way he said it I could see he picked it up somewhere.

Great battle on at Botha's Pass [*in which Sir Redvers Buller memorably departed from his Colenso-style frontal tactics to successfully outflank the Boer positions on the Natal-Transvaal frontier, and effectively evict the commandos from the Colony*].

### **Saturday 9 June 1900**

A patrol of Carbineers, consisting of the Ladysmith Troop and a few others such as Rundle, went out to reconnoitre Laing's Nek to see if the enemy were there. This they soon had proof of as the Boers began to show up all along the Nek, and our guns at once shelled them, doing some good practice. Long Tom then began and fired a good many shots, wounding three or four of the infantry on the spur above our camp.

### **Sunday 10 June 1900**

At 9 o'clock our squadron got orders to saddle up and go out to protect a convoy out at Botha's Pass. We thought it was to take the convoy through, but instead of that we had to go right to Botha's Pass and fetch one in. After a long ride during which we saw many evidences of the ruin caused by the Boers. At one farm they burnt a large planting of grape-vines and one house was smashed up anyhow. We arrived at the Pass and off-saddled for three or four hours. About 12 a.m. [*noon*] we climbed a small kopje, and getting through the fence, stood in the Orange River Colony.

### **Wednesday 13 June 1900**

Our squadron still at Ingogo Nek. General Dartnell says he is going to try and get us home soon. [*It was, in fact, on this day that the Governor of Natal, Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson, declared Natal to be 'clear of the enemy'.*] I had a walk through the [*Laing's Nek*] tunnel. It was very dark inside. The Dutch blew both ends out and sank three shafts further in, only one being successful in being blown through. The tunnel itself is very strongly built with masonry right through.

**Sunday 17 June 1900**

A rumour that the Boers had been seen at Dannhauser. We went about halfway there and then halted for a time to let our horses graze and also to have something ourselves. We reached Dannhauser about 4 o'clock p.m., tired and cold. We had off-saddled and let our horses loose when it came on to rain and we had to catch our horses and shift camp to a more sheltered spot. It rained on and off till ten o'clock and we were not allowed to have tents, although they were on each squadron wagon.

**Sunday 24 June 1900**

The governor came up [*presumably from Pietermaritzburg*] and attended church-parade which was held at 2.30 p.m.. He did not say a word to us about going home, nor did he speak to us at all.

**Tuesday 26 June 1900**

Quiet day. Usual fatigues. Football played constantly now. I was on fatigue yesterday afternoon at [the] station. [*Nicholson's entries for the week or so to date reveal the limbo in which the Natal volunteers found themselves while awaiting a decision on their demobilisation. They now found themselves in Dundee, where they languished for several months, because they could not, by law, follow Buller into the Transvaal. Outposts were established at various stations such as De Waal's Farm and Gregory's Nek.*]

**Thursday 28 June 1900**

At ten o'clock sharp four squadrons of Carbineers under Major McKenzie, and 100 BMR, also about 200 men of the NMR and UMR [*Umvoti Mounted Rifles*], went on patrol, along with the Hotchkiss-gun Detachment and two guns of the NF [*Natal Field*] Artillery. We all marched through Dundee and past historic Talana and along the road to De Jager's Drift.

**Saturday 30 June 1900**

I was told I could not go on patrol as I would be on horse-guard at night. However, I volunteered to do both patrol and horse-guard, and so I went. We were warned to be very careful as Boers were said to be at Jordaan's Farm where we had to meet a patrol from No.2 Troop. We scouted all along the Buffalo and very nearly every house and kraal on the way to pick up information.

**Tuesday 3 July 1900**

In Orders tonight we were told that, owing to the situation having changed once we left Laing's Nek, we were needed here longer than was thought at first, so the general [*Buller, presumably*] requests us to make the best of a bad job and not grumble. [*There was a lot of grumbling. Apart from individual volunteers agitating for release from active service, from this time forward the Natal government came under considerable public and financial pressure to reduce the Colony's commitment to the war effort.*]

**Saturday 28 July 1900**

Patrols sent out at [the] usual hour, about 8.30 a.m.. By luck I was sent to Dannhauser as it turned out to be the means of keeping me out of a unpleasant affair in the afternoon. I had nearly requested to be put on the Buffalo patrol, but owing to having already

changed Tom Hackland his duty on picquet, he doing my horse-guard, I thought I would not trouble any more and by doing so escaped Captain Foxon's smash by the Boers that afternoon. I will fill this in later on when we know the truth. *[An eight-man patrol under Foxon's command was ambushed by 30 burghers in the vicinity of De Jager's Drift. Foxon himself and a trooper were wounded, and three men were taken prisoner].*

### **Tuesday 7 August 1900**

The prisoners who were captured *[in the Foxon incident]* are going to be released, and they were to have been exchanged today, but the Boers did not turn up with them as agreed.

### **Saturday 11 August 1900**

An awful day. A storm of wind got up about 9.30 a.m., after our horses went out, and gradually got worse and worse, blowing tents down and tearing some to ribbons. It also started about five grass-fires, and it was all the whole camp could do to get them out, aided by the short grass. Some horses were singed and a general stampede ensued, horses galloping madly all over the place, also ours which had been sent for, as we were warned for picquet. Some of the ammunition for the field artillery was nearly burnt, but by great exertions the wagons were pulled away. The order for picquet was cancelled till tomorrow owing to the wind. The dust was something awful, like Ladysmith. Our bell-tent was blown to ribbons and I lost my hat.

### **Monday 20 August 1900**

Out on picquet in the evening a scare took place and all the support went and slept on a kopje at the back of De Waal's. However, nothing came of it and they went back in the morning. During the night some explosions took place on the line *[the Natal Government Railway line]* which turned out to be the Boers cutting the line.

### **Thursday 23 August 1900**

A quiet day out at De Waal's. The troops in camp stood to arms at 2 a.m. this morn and marched out to Talana, where they took up positions in case of attack. Fighting is taking place daily near Newcastle, and some heavy firing is heard here at times. The Boers, we hear, were driven off with loss from Newcastle, but succeeded in cutting the line in yesterday's fight.

### **Friday 24 August 1900**

Our men in camp stood to arms this morn again and took up positions at Talana, which they held until dawn in case of attack. They then fell back on camp. Meanwhile the heliograph was at work, and informed the general of the fight going on up Newcastle way. *[By the end of 1900 the Boer burghers remaining in the field had recovered from the shock of the loss of their capitals, and proceeded to stage a military revival that took the British, who considered the war to be all but over, by surprise. Several clashes mentioned by Nicholson in these pages were symptomatic of this new Boer resolve.]* He determined on a counter movement, and every man in camp saddled up at 11 a.m. and moved out. A flying column of Carbineers under Colonel Greene left first and came along at a great pace, throwing out scouts in advance.

I was on guard tonight from 10 to 12 p.m. and from 3.20 to 4.40 a.m.. It was the coldest night on record since we came to Dundee and towards morning, so to speak, I lost my feet, they being so cold that I could not feel them for numbness.

### **Monday 27 August 1900**

We all stood to arms this morn at 3.30 a.m. till daybreak as a precaution against a surprise by the Boers. A troop also patrols in the night, leaving camp at 8 p.m. and going out on [the] Talana road about five miles [8 km] and then halts and throws out Cossack posts for the night. Ten men and a non-com also hold a picquet on the west of the Impati Mountain along the road to De Waal's Farm.

### **Tuesday 28 August 1900**

During the afternoon we marched up to the general's [Buller's] staff tent, where we formed a hollow square. The general came up and, calling on Trooper Sclanders to come forward, he pinned the silver medal of the Royal Humane Society on his right breast for his gallant conduct in rescuing Captain Tremayne of the 13th Hussars at Trichardt's Drift on January 18 or 19 last during the operations along the Tugela. On his getting the officers out there still remained a private in the water [of the Hussars] and Sclanders jumped in again, and after a strong fight succeeded in getting him out...In the case of the trooper, however, it was too late to save his life, he being dead when saved. [Nicholson's description is understandably vague as he was in Ladysmith at that time, and therefore not present. David Gray Sclanders was part of the squadron of the Natal Carbineers with Buller's relief column. The incident occurred during the advance on Spionkop in early 1900, when British cavalymen got into difficulties fording a swollen Thukela River on 17 January.] The general made a very good speech, and hoped the winner would get still more distinctions. We also gave him three cheers.

### **Friday 31 August 1900**

In the afternoon I was on fatigue at the station offloading seven trucks of forage and oats. We had a scare on at 7.30 p.m. and had to saddle up owing to a rumour that the picquet of the BMR were driven in at Gregory's Nek. The Boers are getting daring, chasing several of our patrols in at De Waal's and Maypole. All passed off quietly, however, and we went to bed.

### **Wednesday 5 September 1900**

It appears that a patrol of BMR who go out daily at dawn to patrol the Buffalo were ambushed on a small ridge about two miles [3,2 km] out. The men, four in number, were riding along in sections and had sent a scout on ahead, but as he went out of sight and did not come back to report anything unusual, they moved on. Just as they came over the ridge, they got the order 'Hands up', and at the same time the Dutch fired at their horses. Our men turned to fly but three of their horses dropped under the fire, and one of the men, Stuart by name, was wounded, and the fall off his horse, which was shot at the same time, stunned him, and the Boers left him for dead, but rifled his pockets.

**Tuesday 18 September 1900**

We had to march with the main body, and of course had to keep pace with the wagons and infantry. After a long march we reached [the] Blood River. General Hildyard was away in front, and some big guns were clearing Scheeper's Nek of the enemy.

**Sunday 23 September 1900**

Church-parade at 9.30 a.m.. In the afternoon we suddenly fell in and our officers then came and told us that 300 men were required to stay on till the end of the war, so as to release those who were more required at home. *[Nicholson is speaking of the genesis of the Volunteer Composite Regiment, comprising Natal volunteers drawn from regiments such as his own Natal Carbineers, and effective from 1 October.]* About eight of us at once stepped forward and then we were told to fall back, and were then marched up in squadrons to the colonel of the regiment *[probably referring to Colonel EM Greene]*. He told us the same and said he considered that those who were staying on should get a few days leave. We then fell out and our names *[the volunteers for further service]* were taken, but next day only those who had come afterwards and put their names down conditionally got leave.

**Monday 24 September 1900**

Our names retaken, and all of us were asked if we would like leave, which we all said we would. This was the end of it as very few of us got it. Some of those who put down conditionally got away today.

**Thursday 27 September 1900**

DLI *[Durban Light Infantry]* and NRR *[Natal Royal Rifles]* all being re-equipped and horses being given to them. *[This was a significant development as both these infantry regiments had to date been largely sidelined in a Natal Volunteer war effort that was built primarily on mounted infantry. The units thus affected had been striving for several months for conversion to mounted infantry. However, these units were only days short of demobilisation, and this development presumably referred to those volunteering for further service.]* It was a bit of fun watching some of them riding for the first time.

**Monday 1 October 1900**

Volunteers preparing to leave. Colonel Greene made a farewell speech. No.3 and 4 Squadrons horse inspection. About 11.30 am, while the parade of horses were still going on, we all got orders to saddle up at once and go to De Jager's as the Dutch *[approximately 140-strong]* had attacked our convoy six miles *[9,7 km]* on the Blood River side of De Jager's. A great rush was made and only those who came in last night were told not to go out. As soon as we were saddled we left at once for De Jager's. Some Special Service men *[those who had enrolled in a regiment on the outbreak of hostilities, ostensibly for a year or the duration of the conflict]* could not go out as they had handed in their equipment. We went out at a clinking pace and arrived there at about 2.30 p.m..

It appears that the convoy had outspanned and our scouts had not gone far ahead. The fight commenced on some ridges about 1 000 yards *[914 metres]* from the convoy,

and owing to the wind, which was terrible, some of the scouts never knew anything about the fight till the Boers suddenly appeared and took some prisoners. They gradually drove our fellows back on to the wagons, capturing some on the way. Twenty-four wagons were burnt, eight taken away, and four left. The ones taken were mule-wagons and the pick of the stuff was loaded on them. All our prisoners, about 45 in number, were released, but guns were broken and bandoliers were taken. All orders for the return of the volunteers were cancelled, and some of them had to get out of the train which was to take them home. *[The departure of the volunteers was only postponed, by a week until the 8th, but the attack did remind those remaining in the field that the supposedly defeated Boers were still capable of striking telling blows. It also reinforced the importance of efficient convoy escort, and Nicholson and his compatriots were to see plenty more of that.]*

MARK COGLAN