

# *From the very beginning to the very end*

*John Bertram Nicholson's Natal Carbineer  
Anglo-Boer War Diary and Letters:  
Part Two\*: 3 October 1900–27 July 1901*

**(Nicholson's Volunteer Composite Regiment CV)**

Regimental number: 205

Ex-corps and rank: Natal Carbineers, trooper

Enrolment VCR: 1 October 1900

Squadron: 2nd

Discharge: 31 July 1902, disbandment of Regiment

*In the first week of October 1900 the Natal Volunteer regiments were released from service on the proviso that 300 men continue service in a combined contingent known as the Volunteer Composite Regiment (VCR). John Bertram Nicholson was among the Natal Carbineers who volunteered for this further service. This segment of the diary opens with Nicholson stationed at De Jager's Drift, a strategic drift over the upper Mzinyathi (Buffalo) River on the wagon roads between Dundee and Vryheid, and ends with a stint at Nqutu in Zululand. Most of the action that follows takes place in and between these two towns, often in isolated outposts. Nicholson's duties during this period were dominated by convoy escort duty and endless patrols.*

*His astute commentary covers a multitude of issues, from the often grim and arduous conditions, to the failings of the officers and the destruction and hardship caused by the scorched-earth strategy pursued by the British in an attempt to batter the Boers into submission. Amidst the often grinding drudgery of the guerrilla war of containment in northern Natal, several highlights do nevertheless emerge. On 14 December 1900, for example, the VCR engaged Boer burghers at Scheeper's Nek, outside Vryheid, and lost two men killed, one of them Peter Comrie, an acquaintance of Nicholson's from Richmond.*

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**Wednesday 3 October 1900**

De Jager's Drift. A convoy went back today to Blood River at dawn, and on the way the force with it blew up three Dutch houses near the scene of the fight [of 1 October]. All present say it was a very sad scene indeed as the women and children were turned out and only allowed bed clothes, and then everything went sky high. *(This is Nicholson's first comment on the contentious scorched-earth policy of the British military, that was to dominate the irregular campaign from this point to the end of the war. Bear in mind that he himself was a farmer, and would also have been mindful of Boer depredations in the Natal midlands in October and November 1899.)*



*The diarist (kneeling at extreme left) and companions enjoying a meal produced from the crude field mess facilities.*

**Thursday 4 October 1900**

Dundee. We packed up everything in camp and shifted camp to behind the Native church. Everything was in a muddle. No officers anywhere and we did not even know our own units, so we were pretty wild with the officers. *(Nicholson displays a distinctly jaundiced and almost insubordinate attitude towards his officers. In their defence, though, it must be noted that the transition period of Volunteer demobilisation and establishment of the VCR was a confused one.)*

**Saturday 6 October 1900**

Dundee. We came out today after one of the most awful mix-ups I ever saw. First, we were to be ready to march at 12 a.m. [noon], then 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. Then at last we left at 3 p.m., after sitting an hour in our saddles and the officers trying to square up the squadrons a bit – just like them to leave everything to the last. *(Nicholson on officers again.)* Also, men fell in for equipment at 1 p.m., were marched up, and never got it.

I was never so pleased to leave a camp as this one, owing to all the confusion. We were also told to strike tents and pack all kits. We did the kits, and then, when we had taken

them away from the tents and were just about to strike them, the order was cancelled. One minute it was 'saddle up!', [the] next, 'don't saddle up!' We reached De Jager's at 5 p.m. We were not halted to say goodbye to our comrades (*those proceeding to Piet-ermaritzburg for demobilisation*), but just rode through their lines while they cheered.

### **Tuesday 9 October 1900**

De Jager's Drift. A convoy of empties (*wagons*) came in today from Blood River for supplies. About 80 of us went out to meet them. I was on the left flank of scouts going out, and on our way home we formed a rearguard along with our troop. This plan of meeting halfway is the best so the escort is stronger here in the middle than anywhere else.

### **Sunday 14 October 1900**

De Jager's Drift. I was on picquet last night. Just after we got to our post, which was in a donga, we took our horses down into it as ordered and then took our post up above them. In going down to make his bed, one of our chaps slipped and scared the horses, and they stampeded back to camp with Montgomery (*JWV Montgomery, promoted to lieutenant on 1 October 1900*) and I in full cry after them in the dark, and nearly breaking our necks running after them. We found them in camp looking at some forage which they could not eat owing to their nose-bags being on.

### **Sunday 21 October 1900**

De Jager's Drift. Our troop was roused at 4.30 a.m. and marched to Gregory's Nek to meet a convoy there from Dundee. We scouted all the way there and halted at Gregory's where we took over from the regulars. On our way back Tom Hackland and I were sent to a kopje overlooking the Buffalo to watch till the convoy had all come over Gregory's Nek. We then joined the troop and marched into camp along with the wagons. We are having hard work now.

### **Tuesday 23 October 1900**

De Jager's Drift. We left at 6 a.m. for Vant's Drift. There were four of us in all. It appears the Boers have been reported near here so we had to go and find out about it. None of us knew the road and no-one knew the distance, which was quite 25 miles (*40km*), a great deal too much for a patrol to do in a day.

Some of the country was very rough and rocky, and it took us until 3 p.m. to get there, with a halt of only one hour between. We off-saddled and rested an hour and then set off home which we reached at 8.30 p.m., tired out and having lost our way once or twice in the dongas and trees near Doornberg, and [we] also got among wire fences and railway cuttings. Our mates thought we had been captured and were beginning to feel uneasy about us. We heard nothing of any Boers down there, but they could not have been very far off, as it afterwards turned out.

### **Wednesday 24 October 1900**

De Jager's Drift. We had a day off duty today. In the afternoon a wild storm came on .... It started to rain and Montgomery said, 'Get under cover'. Just as they reached the tents a tremendous flash came down and struck Meyer's tent, tearing it up and striking [Troopers] Stokely and Meyer senseless.

Meyer came out of the tent quite safely, with only a few cuts on his body. I was 15 paces off ... and I got a severe shock in my right shoulder. Nearly everyone in camp

felt the shock. Stokely's boot and one leg of his trousers were ripped clean off, but he came to in a few minutes, as also did Meyer, but both suffered a lot of pain and are to go to Dundee hospital.

#### **Thursday 25 October 1900**

De Jager's Drift. The day passed off quietly till 10 a.m., when we suddenly received orders to pack our saddles and get ready to march at 12 a.m. (*noon*). It is rumoured that some Boers have crossed the Buffalo at Vant's Drift, on their way to destroy the (*railway*) line at Waschbank. We left, marched along skirting the Doornberg in a southerly direction. The main body halted just under one of the spurs of the Doornberg.

#### **Friday 26 October 1900**

Laffne's Drift. Yesterday's move of our troop scouting was a blind to put the Boers off. Last night the horse-guards heard explosions, which turned out to be Boers destroying the line near Waschbank. We reached Vant's Drift at 5.30 a.m.

#### **Wednesday 31 October 1900**

Dundee. We all moved off at 1 p.m. for Brandon's Pass. Our troop and one troop BMR [took] the left flank and the roughest country. We reached the foot of Brandon's Pass at dark, horses falling out the whole way with exhaustion. We ascended about four miles (*6,4 km*) of heavy riding and reached where the column had to meet us, only to find that they had moved on to goodness knows where. After hunting till 9.30 p.m. they were found and we all reached them an hour later, dead tired.

#### **Thursday 1 November 1900**

Vicinity of Brandon's Pass. Last night some fool burnt (*H*) Urquhart's house, which was unoccupied. He is an Englishman and he has two sons in the Natal Carbineers. (*The incident caused a row that reached the office of the Colonial Secretary.*) We moved off this morn at 7.30 a.m. over very rough country to Normandien, right under the berg.

#### **Friday 2 November 1900**

Normandien. The day dawned in a pouring rain and for some time we didn't move off. At 9.00 a.m., however, the OC decided to go on and we left for Dundee in torrents of rain. We marched along slowly and reached Van Rensburg's house at 12.30 p.m., wet through and miserable. Halted here about two hours and [a] half, dried our things, and got down what little grub we had. At 2.30 p.m. we saddled up and moved again in the rain, there being no lull in the weather. When we got near the railway-line we saw a train coming, so Major McKenzie made us gallop for all we were worth and we came within 100 yards of the line as it passed.

It was the mail-train, and I think we gave them a fright as we did not see many faces just when it passed by. We reached Dundee at 5.30 p.m., wet, muddy, hungry and miserable, but we had a good change as there was a house and hot coffee and food ready for us. We were very pleased to get it, I can assure you.

#### **Saturday 3 November 1900**

Dundee. Passed off very quietly indeed, rather a contrast to last year when I was dodging shells etc. near Bester's (*on the outskirts of Ladysmith*), and when one struck very near my horse.

**Friday 9 November 1900**

De Jager's Drift. We left on patrol at 5.30 a.m. this morn, for the same place as last time we went out. Sergeant Haine went with us and we had a very long ride, going to large numbers of houses to examine passes etc. We saw a lot of Dutch women in houses, whom we spoke to in Kaffir\*, which was very amusing to hear.

At 2.30 a Native scout came in and reported 200 Boers were coming down to attack us, so we all saddled up and moved out to scout, leaving one man to guard our rear. We completely scouted the country and found no trace of them. At dusk we turned homewards and reached there at 9.30 p.m., tired out and hungry, as were also our horses, which had now been out all day. The Native scout did not get many blessings for warning us falsely.

**Monday 12 November 1900**

Dundee. This morn I waited till 8 a.m. for my leave and then gave up hope. Suddenly at 10 a.m. a telegram came to give G Newlands and I leave to go to Dundee and get leave. Since then I have been thinking of joining as a quick change actor in a theatre, as the way my clothes went off and clean one on was a marvel. I smashed my padlock off my kitbag as I had left my key. The lieutenant, however, said we would never catch the train, so we spent nearly an hour arguing as to whether we would risk it. We then decided to try, and left at 12.45 p.m. after a hurried meal. We rode at a terrible pace. The ride is the fastest that I [have] ever done. We reached Dundee in 2¾ hours, distant 20 to 25 miles (32,2 to 40,2 km). We galloped up to [the] Brigade office, jumped off our horses, and got our passes for seven days leave scribbled out.

Our horses we gave to a friend who was orderly, not even off-saddled, and then ran all the whole way to the station, got our concession tickets signed, and into the train just in time, and only because a red-taped officer could not let us know earlier than 10 a.m. with an instrument to telephone within just a foot of his nose. (*Nicholson venting his spleen against the officer class once again.*) My word, I could swipe some of the big bugs out of office. We had tea at Ladysmith tonight. There were seven of us in a carriage, one being a Dutch woman, so we had a lively time of it altogether, as she could not understand English and made us laugh.

**Tuesday 13 November 1900**

Train: Dundee–Pietermarizburg. Reached PMB at 4 a.m. Left for Richmond at 6.50 a.m. We arrived there at 9.20 a.m. and had a great reception. Sports all day which went off fairly well indeed. At 6 p.m. I went home and changed my clothes into blue and white uniform, and also had a bathe in the Illovo [River], and then went into Richmond to the dance [that] commenced at 9.30 p.m. and went on till 4.30 a.m. with a great dash. I danced 24 out of 30 dances which was not bad as I had very little sleep the night before. At the luncheon earlier, and also at the thanksgiving service (*for the safe return of the demobilised Volunteers. Receptions of this sort were held throughout the Colony during October and November*), Sir Albert Hime (*the prime minister of Natal*) gave us an address, and at the banquet our officer and members also spoke.

**Monday 19 November 1900**

Richmond. Went and saw Hammonds and Newlands this morn and left for the front this afternoon by the 3.15 p.m. train. George Newlands also went up. Caught 10.20 p.m. Mail up for Dundee in PMB. Troop taking census and stock rolls, as all Dutch women etc are

\* This was the word used by Nicholson – it was in general use at the time, and had no derogatory connotation. It is of course unacceptable usage today.

being moved into Dundee, a very good move as they are nothing but spies and rebels. *(This was a hard, but by no means unusual, opinion on the part of colonial troops about internment of Boer civilians as part of the incipient British scorched-earth policy.)*

**Tuesday 20 November 1900**

Dundee. Arrived at Dundee at 9.20 a.m. and reported ourselves at the Brigade office at 10 a.m. As our horses were away on patrol (a shame), we were told to wait till next day when a wagon would go out and we could ride with it, as our horses would be back by then. There is a lot of dissatisfaction in the Regiment. Many resigning and some being fined or discharged for good. *(This state of affairs was symptomatic of the adverse response to the low-key war of attrition being waged in northern Natal at this time, and the frequent periods of inactivity that characterised this period of the war.)*



*VCR troopers pose in the Dundee-Vryheid post-cart.*

**Friday 23 November 1900**

Helpmekaar. We left this morn on a long patrol to Rorke's Drift. It is very rough country down there. We saw the scene of the great battle of Rorke's Drift *(22–23 January 1879 during the Anglo-Zulu War)*. How our fellows held out is a mystery to me, as the ground is so suitable for the Zulu's advance. Had the Zulu attacked by day, they would have taken the place, but owing to the night they never really knew their own strength.

**Thursday 13 December 1900**

De Jager's Drift. The convoy went through safely to Blood River, no Boers being seen. Meanwhile our troop was sent, with two signallers, to occupy Bemba's Kop, commanding all the country around and near Scheeper's Nek. Soon after we got there, we saw some mounted men riding about near Scheeper's Nek. However, they turned out to be two of our scouts (Native), and when brought here reported 10 or 12 Boers who had chased them away, but did not fire. I believe we shall have some warm work tomorrow.

**Friday 14 December 1900**

De Jager's Drift. We were roused at 3.30 a.m. this morn. It was a dull and damp morning with slight drizzle, and also a bit chilly. (*14 December 1900 was to turn into probably the single most eventful day in the Volunteer Composite Regiment operations in northern Natal, and one of the few occasions on which the elusive Boers were brought to battle, and casualties, Corporal Peter Comrie and Trooper George McKellar, sustained.*) At 4 a.m. I was sent to the outlying picquets to see if all was clear, and also to tell them not to come in until sent for.

I arrived at Bemba's Kop just after the column left camp. We then mounted and left the hill for the flats. We gradually extended in half-sections over the flat and marched towards Scheeper's Nek. A mist came down with a smart drizzle and it looked bad for us in the scouting line, as we would have had to ride right into the Boers before seeing them. After some hard riding we arrived just behind the VCR, which we were told to support.

Suddenly the report of a cannon was heard and kept up at a fair rate on our right. This turned out to be the 67<sup>th</sup> Battery shelling the kopje overlooking the Nek. A good strong force of Boers was seen there and it was believed some execution was done among them, as some were seen to fall. Closer to us, however, nearly all the scouts were suddenly ordered to gallop and converge on a piece of rising ground on our right.

At a tremendous gallop they arrived there and dismounted without linking horses, [and] rushed for the kopje where they got just in time to greet some Boers with a volley which emptied some saddles. A hot fire went on but at last the Boers retired. Meanwhile, as soon as the scouts converged on the ground where the first fight took place, our troop galloped away to the left and headed for some rising ground with a low ridge of stones. Arrived there, we halted close up to the kopje, and Lieutenant Montgomery then galloped on and joined Captain McKay (*David Watt Mackay from Estcourt, who had been severely wounded at Colenso in December 1899, and went on to command the Natal Carbineers from 1911 to 1920*) who had just gone on top with four of his men, who were in the scouting line. No sooner did the little party show itself when 'ping ping', the sharp snap of the Mauser was heard, and our comrades retired.

Our officers led us back slowly and then we faced round and dismounted. We then linked horses, and leaving three men in charge of the horses, and also the pack man, we advanced in skirmishing order. As we advanced over the hill nothing was to be seen, just a few feet further on a bullet suddenly rang out just above us. As the ground was too open we were ordered to retire.

As we fell back, I happened to look up, and just below us [saw] about 10 or 12 Boers in full gallop after some loose horses of ours which had come down from the other fight. I at once fired, as also did some others, but there was a bit of uncertainty as to who they were among some of the men. However, our fire stopped them, killing one of their horses and knocking a man off, but just then the Boers behind us opened a hot fire and we had to face round and fire at them. The Boers who had been galloping after the horses thus got away, taking two of our horses with them.

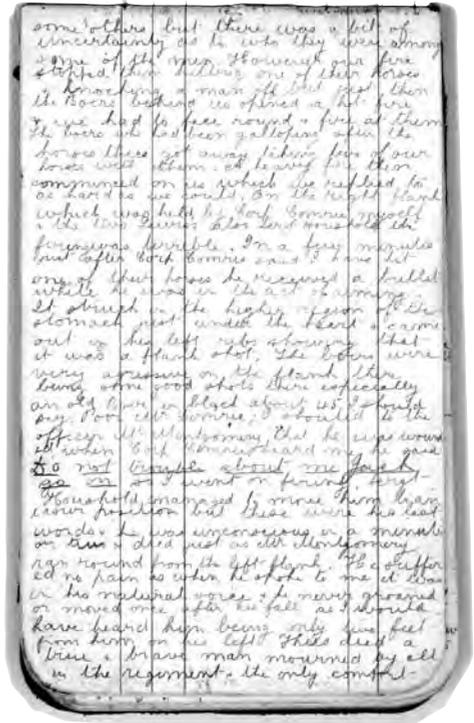
A heavy fire then commenced on us which we replied to as hard as we could. On the right flank which was held by Corporal Comrie and myself and the two Lewises, also Lieutenant Household, the firing was terrible. In a few minutes, just after Corporal Comrie said, 'I have hit one of their horses', he received a bullet while he was in the act

of aiming. It struck in the higher region of the stomach just under the heart, and came out in his left ribs, showing that it was a flank shot.

Poor Mr Comrie. I shouted to the officer, Mr Montgomery, that he (*Comrie*) was wounded. When Corporal Comrie heard me, he said, 'Do not trouble about me, Jack, go on', so I went on firing. Sergeant Household managed to move Peter (*Comrie*) to an easier position, but these were his last words and he was unconscious in a minute or two and died just as Mr Montgomery ran round from the left flank. He suffered no pain as, when he spoke to me, it was in his natural voice, and he never moved or groaned after his fall, as I would have heard him, being only two feet from him on his left. Thus died a true and brave man, mourned by all in the regiment. The only comfort is that no man can die a nobler death than this. However, his Richmond comrades shall miss him.

Meanwhile the fire grew hotter than ever and I shouted to some of our chaps, and said to give us a hand as the Boers are advancing to outflank us. In standing up to fire, as we could not see otherwise, a bullet passed between my arm and body, cutting my sleeve on one side and my bandolier on my body side. It was a marvellous escape, and I can only thank God for his mercy to me. Meanwhile one or two men had run up in reply to my call, and in standing up to fire, poor young McKellar received a bullet from the right in his head and fell. Death was instantaneous. Poor fellow, he was such a nice young chap and will be missed by us all. This was two feet off me on my left. Just after this, I believe, a shot was fired right along our line of fire from the right flank, and now for some minutes the fight looked bad for us, and we were warned by Captain McKay that we might have to stand to our horses at any moment. However, Lieutenant Montgomery steadied us and we set our teeth to do or die.

We advanced along our right, and this, coupled with our steady stand, dismayed the Boers who began to retreat. We then advanced very carefully indeed, but no sooner did we get to the far ridge when a volley of shots was fired at us from some stones a good distance away, and we had to retire, there being no cover at all. We again advanced, but could get no further and had to retire, the bullets 'ping ping' all around us. We had gone back halfway, but here we stopped as the BMI Maxim came up and we had to support it. It, however, did no good as they could not advance far enough, the fire being too hot. Soon, however, the Royal Field Artillery came into action on the scene of the first fight, and the Boers did a bunk, we helping them on a volley or two. Thus



*A page from Nicholson's notebook entry for 14 December 1900, the day his Richmond friend, Peter Comrie, was killed at Scheeper's Nek.*

ended our fight and it was the warmest corner I have ever been in. Had we given it all we should have been massacred. It was owing to the example set by Mr Comrie that we made such a stand.

Owing to the distance from Vryheid and the fact that the weather was not clear, it was decided to bury our comrades where they fell, eight men being told off to dig a grave. I was among them. The rest [were] ordered to camp on Scheeper's Nek in case they were wanted. We dug one grave, as there were only two spades, and the ground was hard and stony, for our comrades and the Boer, Potgieter. We then solemnly placed the bodies in the grave and the Last Rites were performed by Colonel Evans, who read the Church of England service over the grave out of my prayer-book, which I always carry. We then closed the grave and built a cairn of stones over it. We also built a small cairn where they fell, and then we left them in their last long sleep, trusting to meet them again on the silver shore, where all tears are washed away.

### **Saturday 15 December 1900**

Vryheid. Vryheid is very pretty. There are not many people in the streets, but a good many live in the houses. We are camped in the athletic grounds. Orders for a reconnaissance tomorrow at 8 a.m., north of here. There was a very heavy fight here on Saturday. (*Nicholson must be referring to the Boer attack on Lancaster Hill, Vryheid on 11 December, which was a Tuesday. The audacious attack was the most notable incident among several Boer incursions into the southern Transvaal territories recently occupied by the British.*) Both sides lost heavily, but I think Boers more so. (*Here Nicholson is way off the mark. Although the attack was repulsed the British lost far more heavily than the Boers.*) It started at 2 a.m. and went on all day till darkness. The Boers took some prisoners and also a good many horses belonging to the Mounted Infantry. It being a surprise attack, many men were fighting in their shirts etc.

### **Sunday 16 December 1900**

Vryheid. At 7.30 a.m. we saddled up and left in force for the Piet Retief road, our object being to find the Boer laager and to see if it was strongly held. The VCR formed the advance scouting line. Before we extended, Corporal Symons and eight men, including myself, were sent forward to climb a high hill and signal if any Boers were in sight. This we did, having a very stiff climb, but could not see anything from the top except our Native scouts. We then moved down the other side of the hill and joined our line of scouts. Corporal Symons and three men, including myself, were sent forward to protect the right front, so we advanced to a piece of high ground in front, from which we could see a good way off.

We had not been there long, when 'flip flop', went the Mauser from a ridge about a mile (1,6 km) in front. It became heavier and some replies from our side also mingled in the chorus. It turned out to be the Boers firing at our scouts (Native and English), whom they had allowed to come within 300 yards of their position. By a miracle no-one was hit, but the Boers would not advance. Corporal Symons sent a man in to report this, and at once the whole line advanced to the first ridge. Meanwhile I rode to Mr Montgomery and reported Boers on a kopje on our right front. A few minutes later four guns came into action and pretty soon cleared the ridge of Boers. Some very accurate shooting was done.

John Bertram ('Jack') Nicholson's diary entry for 14 December 1900 provides the historian with an interesting reflection on the reliability of primary evidence. He describes the deaths and burial of two of his comrades, Cpl Comrie and Tpr Mc Kellar. Nicholson had reason to have been impressed by these deaths: both men were within touching distance when they fell, and Nicholson was a member of the burial party. He provides quite specific detail about the grave-digging, and goes on to say that in that single grave they buried Comrie and McKellar, together with a Boer named Potgieter. A while later he returned to the place, and recorded a description of the memorial that had been erected there.

In the Comrie family albums there are contemporary photographs of both the first grave and the eventual memorial. Not only did Nicholson transcribe the inscription on the memorial incorrectly, but the photographs show that the third body in the grave is not of a Potgieter at all but of one Frederic Louis Berning of the Piet Retief commando.

Questions spring to mind. How did Nicholson come to make that mistake with the name? What identification was on the body, and if Nicholson found the name Potgieter, how did Berning come by it? Who corrected this misidentification, and when? The three wooden crosses originally marking the grave are of identical design. Did Boer and Brit co-operate, or is this merely a sign that the dead of both sides were treated with equal respect?

Regarding historical evidence, one might suppose that the diary entry of a participant in a memorable event would constitute reliable information. So too would be a contemporary photograph, taken in the days before digital manipulation of images. Yet if one supposed that, one would be wrong: in this case, the two contradict each other.

Peter Comrie, incidentally, had a long and event-filled military career. Scottish born and a two-year-old child when his parents landed at Durban in 1850, he was attached to Chelmsford's column when it camped at Isandhlwana but was out scouting on the fatal day. Some twenty years later he was a Carbineer besieged in Ladysmith. Although he was then over 50 years old, he, like Nicholson, volunteered to soldier on, and, having survived two of the most memorable episodes in South African military history, took a bullet and died in a minor skirmish towards the end of a campaign which was all but over and done with.

*Note supplied by Moray Comrie*



We were then ordered to advance, which we did. No Boers were to be seen for a good way off, but on some kopjes, a good distance off on our right and front, they were thick as bees. The Police Maxim came into action at once, but the range was too great. Two guns came up, however, [and] put two shots into a kopje with a lot of Boers standing on it. I have never seen such a sudden bob down as the Boers did as the shells burst, and next minute they were flying down the hillside for their lives.

On the right some Native scouts were sent out to some rising ground, but as soon as they got there, they were fired on from a long stony ridge. Some shells were sent over in that direction and the Boers ceased firing. Our troop and the Police was (*sic*) left as support for the guns and a general advance was begun forward. In skirmishing order, all the troops reached the flat, and the VC Regiment scouting line had reached some farms in the valley with some pretty Dutch girls named Van Rooyen. No sooner did they (*the VCR*) reach there, than a Pom-pom opened on our troops and made things lively for a time. The object of the reconnaissance being accomplished and the laager being too strong to attack with the force at our disposal, a general retirement was ordered, which was well carried out under a heavy Pom-pom fire.

No-one was touched but there were some narrow squeaks. One farmhouse was burnt as it was used as the Boer headquarters in attacks on Vryheid. The retirement to Vryheid was skilfully carried out, each body of men covering each other's retreat. The guns and support waited a good while for the Boers to advance again but none were seen. We all reached Vryheid about 5 p.m., tired out with the terrible heat and long ride.

### **Tuesday 18 December 1900**

Vryheid. The main body was roused at 4 a.m. and left at 5 a.m. After we had crossed the Umfolosi by a bridge, eight of our troop were sent out on the right flank in scouting order, just as a precaution. As soon as we reached the Nek, we closed in to the road, then we were allowed to go and off-saddle at a farmhouse (deserted) for half-an-hour, when we again saddled up and advanced about a mile-and-a-half (*approximately 4 km*). Here we halted till the convoy, which was outspanned, got a move on again.

As soon as the convoy marched from the Nek, the VCR took up the whole of the advance line of scouts, as Bethune's were supporting the guns. I nearly came a cropper just here as my horse got both feet (fore) in a hole and came down, but luckily he managed to get up very neatly and I escaped a fall.

### **Wednesday 19 December 1900**

Blood River. We were roused at 5 a.m. and left at 6 a.m. for De Jager's Drift. At first the VCR advanced with the main body just in front of the convoy, but after the convoy had gone halfway, the Regiment fell back and acted as main rearguard, along with the NP (*Natal Police*). We had a very monotonous march with constant halts. We reached De Jager's Drift at 12 noon, and off-saddled on the Natal side of the river. It rained a good deal this afternoon. About 5 p.m. it came down properly and became a steady downpour, going on till after dark. Our tents threatened to be swamped, and we all had to turn out to dig trenches.

### **Thursday 20 December 1900**

De Jager's Drift. Still raining this morn, a very steady downpour. We struck tents and left at 7.30 a.m. for Dundee via Gregory's Nek. Our troop was told off to escort two guns of the 67<sup>th</sup> Battery, Royal Artillery. When we came in sight of Sandspruit we



*Officers of the Volunteer Composite Regiment, 1900, with dog!*

found it bank high. A halt was called and the OC decided to try a lower drift. So we turned downstream, when we were met by a volunteer who had been to test the drift and reported it was impassable.

We then turned back and the OC the guns decided to halt and outspan, but just as he was picking the ground, we were suddenly ordered to march. We were very pleased to do so, as it would have been terrible to have camped there. We made a long detour ... [and] crossed [the] Sandspruit right under Impati Mountain (*Mpate, on the north-west outskirts of Dundee*) and reached Dundee at 1 p.m. The column gradually arrived, as also did the transport. Two or three soldiers were drowned in the Sandspruit in trying to cross it. We were wet though and felt very miserable and dirty.

### **Tuesday 25 December 1900**

Helpmekaar vicinity. Christmas Day. A lovely day. At 6.30 a.m. two patrols of two men each left for the Buffalo, one patrol to scout Rorke's Drift and the other Fugitives' Drift. At 8 a.m. Corporal Symons and I left for Strydom's Farm to get a turkey, and after a long ride we arrived there and stayed for a while and had some tea and cake at W Adam, who lives a few yards off. The place is right at the foot of the Biggarsberg on the Ladysmith side. Just as we were leaving, unsuccessfully, we were called back – [and] told we could have a hen for 15/-. We took it and returned, reaching camp at 1 p.m.

The turkey was at once stuffed and cooked by Trooper Dubery, our cook, and a very good one too. A fowl was also roasted and at 5 p.m. we sat down to a grand spread, considering the time we had to get ready in. Turkey, fowl, pigs, cake, cheesecake, pineapples, raisins, almonds, gingernuts, jam tarts and plum puddings, one being from

England by post to the OC (*Lieutenant-Colonel RW Evans*). We also had whisky, water, tea, wine and syrup (lemon).

**Tuesday 1 January 1901**

Helpmekaar vicinity. So dawns another year in the Boer War, and may it soon end. A quiet day in camp for us. Usual patrols out to the Buffalo. The sports came off at Helpmekaar this afternoon, and our horses came first in one race and second in another.

**Friday 4 January 1901**

Helpmekaar vicinity. Usual patrols out to the drifts. One of these patrols is to go into Zululand, unarmed, with a flag of truce, and try and get in touch with the Boers for the purpose of delivering Lord Kitchener's proclamation (*urging surrender*) to them. Corporal (*HE*) Symons and (*Trooper*) TA Lewis are to go on this business and leave their arms at the river.

**Saturday 5 January 1901**

Helpmekaar vicinity. A sangar was commenced today on top of [the] hill for us to use in case of necessity, and also for the guard, a new post having to be found, thus making things warm for us all, as we will only have one night in bed again. This new post will come into force in the next week if the sangar is finished. Corporal Symons returned this afternoon with Trooper Lewis and reported that he had failed to meet the Boers anywhere, so did not deliver the proclamation as ordered. He reported all clear at the drifts. Our ration wagon came out this evening from Dundee with rations.

**Monday 7 January 1901**

Helpmekaar vicinity. At breakfast George Newlands and I were warned to pack our saddles and take two days rations with us on patrol to Waschbank Valley. A Mr Ashley is said to have reported Boers near his farm, so we are to try and find them. We left at 9.30 a.m. and passed Helpmekaar down the Itoneni Valley, so-called from the Itoneni Spruit, a tributary of the Waschbank. We made enquiries all over the place and also from all Natives moving along [the] road, but not one had heard or seen any Boers.

We passed Sandola Mountain on our right, and precisely at 7 p.m. reached Ashley's, near the main NG Railway. No-one was at home except Natives, so George and I decided to sleep there as it was raining. We went on a kopje for a look round, and from there I went to a kraal for information. Just as I left it, up rode young Ashley from Ladysmith, and I went up to the house with him. He denied all knowledge of Boers, and also he knew nothing about the report sent to Dundee. We slept at this place ('Acorn') for the night.

**Tuesday 8 January 1901**

Helpmekaar. George and I left Ashley's at 7.45 a.m. and rode to Helpmekaar by the most direct road we could find. We had a long ride and reached Helpmekaar at 5 p.m., tired out. We received praise for the way we had done our work from the OC. On the way we off-saddled for two hours at kraals and had some food. Our fellows were busy building sangars, begun last week, when we got in rumours of a convoy going to Vryheid. These rumours turned out to be true, as just as we were having tea, we were suddenly warned to pack up and be ready to leave at 7 a.m. for Dundee.

**Thursday 10 January 1901**

Dundee. Saddled up 5.30 a.m., left at 6 a.m. We rode out about a mile (*1,6 km*) and

then waited for [the] convoy. When it started three others were sent out one mile (1,6 km) on the left flank with orders to guard the flank of the advance. At Gregory's Nek a long halt was made to allow the convoy to come up. We reached De Jager's at 2 p.m. and pitched camp. General Hildyard came down from up country and is going with us to Vryheid. He had four or five of our troop as escort.

### **Friday 11 January 1901**

De Jager's Drift. Did not have a very pleasant guard as I had to keep pegging down the horses as the pegs kept coming out of the sand. We marched a little after 5.30 a.m. Our troop formed the scouts on the left flank of the centre. We reached Blood River safely, as did the convoy, but some of our Native scouts were fired on near Blood River in the morning. I am afraid we shall have some more warm work tomorrow at Scheeper's Nek, at [the] same place as last time.

### **Saturday 12 January 1901**

De Jager's Drift. Roused at 4.30 a.m. – left at six. The convoy left before us and crossed the river, and then massed in an oblong till the Nek was cleared. We then crossed the Blood River and advanced in skirmishing order as supports to the scouting line. The Native scouts were extended all along our front. As we approached, however, we could see our fellows already on the top, so today the Boers have decided not to oppose us. On the left flank, however, some smart sniping took place.

The convoy also came up and camped near us. In the afternoon about nine of us went over with some officers and put three wooden crosses over the graves of our two comrades who fell on Scheeper's Nek, 16 (*sic*) December 1900. We also did up the grave and chopped the grass around it. I and three others were on sentry duty all the time in case of a sudden rush. We all returned at 4 p.m. to camp. Very strong picquets were thrown out all round as rumours of a night attack are about. After dark till about 11 p.m. it was nothing but be in readiness for an attack and keep all accoutrements handy and sleep in your boots etc.

### **Sunday 13 January 1901**

Scheeper's Nek. The rumoured night attack did not come off. We were roused at 5 a.m. and marched at 6.30 a.m. The VCR formed the centre line of advance scouts for most of the way to Vryheid and then faced north and took up a position guarding the left flank on a piece of rising ground, and two guns of the RFA supported us. There were a good many Boers galloping away along some trees, and a few shells were placed among them, adding to their speed a good deal. The convoy then passed into the town, and all the flankers [and] rearguards, except our troop, went into Vryheid.

### **Tuesday 15 January 1901**

Vryheid. We were roused at 5 a.m. and left at 6 a.m. The VCR formed the right flanking party. Colonel Evans commanded the main advance body. Arrived at the scene of our memorable fight on December 14<sup>th</sup> [and] we halted and dismounted. Before we moved on, our troop fenced in our comrades' grave with barbed-wire brought from Vryheid. We then moved on in the same formation as before, our troop marching in skirmishing order.

### **Friday 18 January 1901**

Vant's Drift and Helpmekaar. We saddled up today at 7.45 a.m. and left at 8 a.m. for

Helpmekaar. We halted for an hour at [the] foot of Vermaak's Farm and cooked coffee etc. We reached Helpmekaar at 11 a.m. and saw to our kit etc. All our spare things, such as candles, soap, curios, knives and forks etc, have been looted by the confounded Tommies, who are worse than Boers. Our spare things were all nailed down and labelled, so they had no excuse. They also stole five or six books of mine which I rather valued, one being a present to me at Xmas. Our kitbags, being locked and put in a house over at Helpmekaar, were not touched. I will not trust soldiers again for some time, I can assure you.

### **Sunday 20 January 1901**

Helpmekaar. I went on patrol with Sergeant (*JP*) Haine to Fugitive's Drift. From there I walked about four hundred yards to the spot where Melville (*also spelt Melvill*) and Coghill died in 1879 whilst trying to save the Queen's Colours of their regiment. It is a wild and rugged spot, a fitting surrounding to so heroic a sacrifice. We reached Helpmekaar at 5 p.m., having seen nothing.

### **Monday 21 January 1901**

Helpmekaar. Usual patrols out to the drifts. About 10.30 a.m. all private horses were brought in and insured. Some high values were placed on horses which have not done much in the line of work for some time, but because they were fat and bulky, 30 pounds (£30) was put down for them, while good horses were put down for £25 and £27. My horse, 'Charlie', was insured for £20, or valued I should say, as no premiums are paid. This sum is below his value as he has been a good little horse to me. (*Colonial volunteers during this period were called upon to provide their own horses, which were then insured against loss in action or from disease.*)

### **Wednesday 6 February 1901**

Helpmekaar. We left for Dundee at 10 a.m., and after a long and tiring ride arrived there at 4 p.m. We pitched tents for a camp and slept in them. We shall be here a few days and then go to Vryheid with a convoy, and from there up-country with General French. Any amount of rumours are knocking about and if we were to believe half of what we hear, the war would be over in a very short time.

### **Thursday 7 February 1901**

Dundee. A busy day for us in the shape of parades galore for saddlery and equipment inspection. We also had arms inspected, and ammunition, so as to be ready to march at a moment's notice. We were also told that we should get magazine rifles tomorrow at 11 a.m. in place of our own. (*Nicholson is probably referring to the Lee-Metford Mark I cavalry carbine, which had been in British Army Service for some years. To date in the diary he never specifies the weapon he used, but it was most likely the Martini-Metford cavalry carbine Mark III. The new rifles did not arrive on schedule.*)

### **Sunday 10 February 1901**

Gregory's Farm. We were roused about 5 a.m. and were ready to march at 6 a.m. for De Jager's, when suddenly orders were received for the VCR to go back to Dundee and await marching orders up country. We reached Dundee at 9.30 a.m. We were all fallen in at 10 a.m. and marched up to the Orderly-Room to receive magazine rifles, but when we got there found that they were old and condemned, so we did not get them and marched back to camp disgusted at so much unnecessary work, when one look would

have been quite enough to condemn them. Our orders tonight are to march tomorrow morn at 10 a.m. for some unknown spot. Rumour says Utrecht and Newcastle.

### **Monday 11 February 1901**

Dundee. Very busy morning making final preparations for the march. Colonel Evans made us a speech when we had mounted and fallen in, expressing pleasure at us all being together again. He said as we were going to fight, he hoped we would fight like devils.



*The hardworking horses of a Volunteer Composite Regiment column enjoy a rest somewhere in northern Natal.*

We left punctually at 9.30 a.m., and at the railway (station) we got the new magazine rifles of the latest pattern. This caused some delay but we finally got off.

### **Tuesday 12 February 1901**

Dundee. At 5.30 a.m. we all left for Utrecht. After a long while, owing to the bad drifts, we then advanced on until we got within a mile (1,6 km) of Utrecht, when we again halted, as the column was a bit behind. When it came up we all moved on and got into the town at 3.30 p.m. We at once pitched tents as it threatened rain, but it came to nothing after all. Late in the evening we suddenly got orders to leave at 6 a.m. tomorrow morn and leave all tents etc, also spare blankets. We have to carry one blanket, but some of us are not doing so as a greatcoat is enough on this job.

### **Thursday 14 February 1901**

Utrecht district. At 4 a.m., 12 men, including myself, were roused and set off at 4.30 a.m. on a patrol. It was very misty and this increased our danger immensely. Some Dragoons who were also out, nearly ran into us and we nearly mistook them for the enemy, they coming up behind us. We marched on together and after a little while we separated, and the Dragoons took the Vryheid road and we took the Wakkerstroom one. We advanced steadily on and every ridge was searched by one or two men before we advanced over it. In this way we went about four miles (6,4 km) and then halted as it was too misty and dangerous, as well as out of our area.

At noon a strong patrol of all our squadron, except those who had been out in the morning, and Dragoons, went out and speedily became engaged on the right of the Wakkerstroom road and the Luneberg road. A series of little skirmishes took place and the Boers did

their best to nab our men, but owing to our side being well handled, they failed. Towards evening our men withdrew to camp without any casualties at all.

### **Friday 15 February 1901**

Utrecht district. At 12.15 p.m. prompt our horses were ordered in and we all saddled up. At 1 p.m. we marched out in a north-easterly direction. We advanced from ridge to ridge, expecting to see the Boers any minute. At every ridge two or three men would be sent on to see if all was clear before we all advanced. I had my share with the rest. It is a very unpleasant duty, as one man dismounts and goes over the top while the other holds his horse.

We soon got to the valley of the Blood River source (*Blood River Poort?*). From our position we soon opened fire on one or two Boer sentries and scouts. The Maxim also tried out, but the range was really too far to be effective. On the left flank some shells soon cleared out the enemy. The convoy halted after a few miles for the night. We retired also, [but] not before the Boers had had a shot at us.

### **Saturday 16 February 1901**

Utrecht district. A quiet day in camp owing to the thick mist and drizzle. Constant patrols out, on one of which I was a member. All our blankets are wet through and we have no tents at all to cover us, so we are like drowned rats. On the patrol I went on we passed a Boer house with the white flag and some women in it. As I was sent forward to search the place, I soon had my rifle loaded, besides the usual reserve of 10 (*rounds*) in the magazine. Nothing happened, however, and we all came off safely. The rifles we have now are very good and we all like them. They are the latest issue with safety clip and 10 cartridges in the magazine as a reserve.

### **Thursday 21 February 1901**

Utrecht district. Dawn broke in a ceaseless rain. Our squadron left on outlying picquet at 6.30 a.m. The sluits and the Pongwe Spruit were very full and the last only fordable, being up the saddle flaps. We moved on and came to a farmhouse about 200 yards from the road. Here we spread out in open order and advanced on the house which had the white flag flying. Five men had already occupied some rising ground on the right, ready for eventualities. However, all went well and we dismounted for a short time. When this weather will cease cannot be guessed, as no signs can be observed, as in other parts of the country. It looks quite clear one minute and the next it pours again.

It came on a very heavy rain about 5 p.m. and we all spent a very miserable night. George (*his friend, George Newlands, probably*) and I managed to get under a transport wagon but found it floating in water! I had just gone to bed and [was] nearly asleep, when a soldier suddenly got on the wagon and lifted the sail. The water just poured in and wet all my coverings, so the night I spent is better imagined than described.

### **Saturday 23 February 1901**

Utrecht district. No. 2 and 4 (*Squadrons*) left at 8.30 a.m. to escort about 20 wagons with rations to the drift at Chaka Spruit. I could not go, owing to the rain and riding having given my horse a very nasty sore back, and no remounts are to be had at present. For a marvel today is fine and no-one can estimate what the sun is to anyone unless he has been through such weather as we have had. Constant rain and mist for seven days and eight nights, during which we were always riding on patrols etc. and bringing up

wagons or despatches. To add to our discomforts, none of us had any tents, so we had to shift as well as we could every night.

This afternoon those who had horses unfit were fallen in and each horse inspected. If they [were] bad the horse was handed in to a depot, but if [they are] getting well and only temporarily unfit, they had to be kept, as well as the remounts which were now sent for. After a deal of bother, we caught the required number – 28. These were then issued irrespective of what the few men who had all the trouble, had selected for themselves. This caused a bit of murmuring, but duty, however hard, must be obeyed. It was late before we got them branded and fed.

### **Tuesday 26 February 1901**

Utrecht district. Today we saw for the first time in this war a looting corps of 28 men called Loxton's Horse. They keep 75% of all they can loot, receiving no pay. This is a big shame as we who have been out 17 months cannot keep a horse, even if we catch them, and these men only follow us when we have cleared the country, like a lot of jackals. The country is very good stock country, but like Richmond, abounds in ticks.

### **Wednesday 27 February 1901**

Utrecht district. A fine day. This is Amajuba Day, the turning point in the war last year when Cronje surrendered and Ladysmith was practically relieved. To remind us of those bygone days, it seems, we are now on half rations of biscuit and half rations in groceries such as sugar etc., so our coffee is very seldom sweetened. We hear that they are to be still further reduced. Of course, we are allowed to pick mealies whenever possible, and kill sheep if required, so we fare quite as well as usual.

### **Friday 1 March 1901**

Utrecht district. Dawn broke misty and damp. We spent one of the most miserable nights of the whole campaign, rainy nights included. This was owing to the silly ideas of our officers, who kept sending out men to scout while it was so dark that one could barely see five yards. They soon got lost to us, and at last we had only four men left, all the rest being out looking for each other. I caught a bad cold last night, so my thoughts are pretty hard on our officers.

### **Tuesday 5 March 1901**

Utrecht district. Reveille for our squadron at 4.45, [the] remainder at 5 a.m. This was because our squadron had to leave on outlying picquet. We all left at 5.30 a.m. for five different posts, with six or seven men at each. Our post was Gun Hill (*not the Ladysmith one, of course*), but owing to the mist being so thick, we failed to find it as we had never been there before, so we got to some hill or other at 10 a.m. We did not ride all the time, however, as we halted at a kopje about three miles (4,8 km) from camp and waited for the mist to lift. But when we found out that the mist would not lift, we moved on as best we could and succeeded in striking some high ground which some picquet had used before, so we halted and off-saddled for the day, as it was absolutely useless to try and find our right post.

To add to our discomfort, a sharp drizzle came on now and then. Luckily I found four sheep, of which we killed one and let the others go. Having got some fencing poles, we soon had a good roast on the fire and some coffee. Water was a bit of trouble to find as we could only see a few yards. Our horses also kept disappearing in the mist and we

had to be constantly on the move to prevent losing them. No outpost could be placed, however, so we spent the day round the fire and against rocks. At 4.15 pm we saddled up and left for camp, which we reached after a long ride and as nearly as possible losing our way more than once. We are now getting three biscuits a day (barely), and if it were not for mealies etc we would feel very hungry. It rained a good bit during the night, but as I was under cover I did not mind it so much as the last spell.

### **Saturday 9 March 1901**

Utrecht district. For a wonder dawn broke fine, [and] a lovely day was the result. Last night I was unable to find my horse, but this morn he turned up on his own and saved me some trouble, as I would have had to look for him on foot. At 7 a.m. all available men left on duty to destroy Dutch crops etc. When we had gone about four miles (6,4 km) the BMR squadron took two wagons and skirted the hills to the left, visiting two or three farms and doing as much damage as possible to crops, wagons etc.

Our squadron, or what is left of it, went north and after crossing two very bad spruits, in one of which the wagon went nearly under, we reached A. Potgieter's farm and at once set to work. It appears that the women and one or two old men had refused to go in to Utrecht as ordered, but as soon as they saw us piling up their belongings to burn, they cleared out in double-quick time to save them. Meanwhile two fatigues were on – one with the Natives, on which I was put, was engaged in cutting down mealies just below the cob. We managed to finish two big fields of good mealies during the day.

The other fatigue had to destroy wool and burn a wagon. The privileged ones or the stripes (NCOs) had their pick of the house (*for purposes of looting?*) as soon as the people had left it. At 1 p.m. about eight of us, among whom were no less than five men with stripes, left for another farm belonging to Andries Potgieter. Here young Montgomery and I burnt a wagon after some hard work to get it started. The poor woman burst into tears and pleaded with Captain Crompton that their husbands would come in at once and surrender if we would save their wagon. Duty is inexorable, however, and we had to burn the wagon.

This war is indeed a terrible one and will now get worse as it drags on and on. (*Nicholson's comments on this day are probably his most poignant on the traumatic impact of the scorched-earth policy, on both Boer civilians and British and colonial troops.*) We returned to camp at 5 p.m., tired out.

### **Sunday 10 March 1901**

Utrecht district. Dawn broke again in a pouring rain. It seems to rain for ever in this wonderful country. No attack was made by the Boers, however, for which we were not sorry as we got very little sleep last night. We all remained just under the hill all day and got some fires going. The rain kept on all day and we got very wet and miserable as our squadron wagons did not come up owing to the bad roads. We have to sleep at the foot of the hill tonight as best we can.

### **Wednesday 13 March 1901**

Utrecht district. The state of the saddlery, boots, clothing etc of the men is terrible. Most of us have no change to put on and no dubbin can be procured in this out of the way place. The health of the men is wonderful considering, but of course it is only afterwards that we will feel the effects of this long spell of wet weather. The horses are all tucked up as it has been a pretty cold as well as wet spell of weather, and they have also been

on half rations of oats.

### **Friday 15 March 1901**

Utrecht district. During my beat of horse-guard some heavy rifle fire was going on to the south-east of Pivaan's Poort. It appears about 10 or 12 VCR exceeded their orders, which were to take a convoy to Pivaan's Poort and return scouting along the east of the road. It appears they went too far east to a farmhouse where a trap was laid for them. They called at the house and a Boer woman gave them a drink. They then passed on and no sooner did they get away from the house than a heavy rifle fire was opened on them at close range, but by a miracle none were hit. They galloped off for all they were worth, two falling from their horses or being thrown.

### **Monday 18 March 1901**

Utrecht district. Our troop went on top of the Elandsberg as usual for the day. No.1 Troop is in reserve and keep their horses in as we had to yesterday. It is a shame as our poor horses are practically starving, what with small feeds and hard work every day, added to this whenever we do have a day in, the horses are left tied up all day. At 10 a.m. we were all marched over to the VCR headquarters' south line of defence for orders to be read to us. The orders were general orders, such as care in killing of sheep, as some fellows kill more than they can tackle. Also an order was read to us forbidding all looting from now for which I am glad as it is a blow to the clique in our troop which could get leave to go looting whenever they pleased. All the horses looted so far have to be handed in to be sent to Utrecht or Knight's Farm.

Two VCR were captured yesterday about two or three miles (3,2 to 4,8 km) from here. They went out at 12 to relieve two others who went out in the morning. As it happened the first two who left early went to a different place to the usual one, and either went to sleep or were in a hole instead of a place where they could see, as they never saw their relief come up or the Boers in waiting for them. After taking them three miles (4,8 km) they (*the Boers*) released them and allowed them to come back to camp. They said they would fight for ever and their children after them.

### **Saturday 23 March 1901**

Utrecht district. Reveille at 5 a.m. I was on last shift horse-guard from 2.50 to 5 a.m. It was very chilly on guard. I did not spend a very nice night last night as I had only a greatcoat and waterproof to lie on and the ground was a bit hard. A general move was made at 7 a.m. The naval long-range gun and No.4 Squadron, also all the infantry, went by the Pivaan's Poort road. Meanwhile the remainder of the VCR left by a road skirting Tabankulu, a big mountain to the west of Elandsberg and running right away to Wakkerstroom. We then advanced in a westerly direction towards some farmhouses. After crossing some very rough ground covered with big boulders and nasty spruits, we reached the ridge just at the foot of the mountain. While crossing one of the bad spruits my remount hurt his leg and became quite lame. The scouts advanced meanwhile and descended on to the flat. I forgot to mention that the last ridge had a white flag on it and as Corporal (*WH*) Ladds and I were advance men for our troop, I did not at all relish the job of riding up, dismounting and creeping up to ridge after ridge alternately with my comrade. However no treachery was intended and the BMR reached the house safely. Here they found a Boer family who wished to surrender. Every preparation was made for them to leave.

To return to the scouts. They soon got out on the flat and were passing under the hill when suddenly flip-flop went the familiar Mauser and they had five shots fired at them from the rocks and bushes in the hillside. They at once retired and the two 15-pounders on our left came into action at once. Some smart shelling took place but not many good shots. We all got well out on to the flat when suddenly a hot fire was opened on us. We all got a move on and kept up a smart pace, bullets striking all round.

We all joined the troop and gave our horses to a man to hold and then advanced to



*One of the grimmest aspects of the guerrilla phase of the Anglo-Boer War in northern Natal: a VCR patrol burns a Boer farmhouse.*

the ridge to cover the road over which the Boer family which had surrendered would come. When they came the Boers at once opened a heavy fire on the escort which we did our best to keep down. However the wagons and escort came through alright. As the Boer position was tremendously strong and we could not reach the second house, a general retirement was ordered, the guns going first and the mounted troops last. The retirement was well carried out, each troop covering the retreat of the other by holding ridge after ridge.

### **Sunday 24 March 1901**

Scheeper's Nek. All Natives cleared out of camp to Dundee with spare horses. Only high rank[ing] NCOs can keep boys (*servants*) now. At 7 a.m. we all received a free issue of khaki serge slacks, boots and tunics, and putties. This is in place of our own which are showing signs of wear and tear caused by the last heavy rains, very badly so. A few of us also got saddles to use in place of our own which have been condemned. We are to hand them back at [the] end of [the] war. All old saddles exchanged are handed in. At 10 a.m. sharp we saddled up and moved off.

### **Monday 25 March 1901**

Scheeper's Nek. Marched at 6.30. Our squadron left a little later as they were rearguard, so we amused ourselves by burning a wagon left by our men in exchange for a good Dutch one. We also searched the camp. At 7.30 we moved off and marched in an extended line as far as the kopje we occupied yesterday. At nearly every farm smoke

could be seen rising up. This was from wagons which are also burnt as they are property of burghers on commando. At one house I saw three all burning at once. Carriages are also destroyed.

### **Saturday 30 March 1901**

Vryheid. We marched at 5.40 a.m. as advance guard and support to the guns. We crossed the Blood River by the new temporary road bridge in place of the one blown up. We advanced about a mile (1,6 km) when the guns halted on a rise behind which the whole convoy came up and outspanned for a time. At 9 a.m. we all advanced and the Native scouts took the lead.

Here a general halt was called to allow the wagons to park up and outspan for two or three hours. At 2 p.m. a move was made. During the halt a few of us managed to cook two kettles of tea which went down 'A1'. Our troop took up a more central line for the remainder of the day, being scouts for the guns which were now the main body, and flankers on the left, having been replaced by two guns in front. We reached Vryheid about 5 p.m. having met no opposition. The convoy consisted of about 160 wagons.

### **Sunday 31 March 1901**

Vryheid. After breakfast I went down and had a bath in the Umfolosi (*Mfolozi*) with three or four of my mess. We intended going up the town in the afternoon and having a look at the church which is a beautiful one, but orders were suddenly received to march at 2.50 p.m. with the convoy for Blood River. This spoilt our plans and we at once packed our blankets and tents. We kept advancing and holding a ridge then halting to allow the convoy to get on ahead. On the way we picked up some lucerne which had been dropped to lighten a wagon. Each man carried a feed for his horse and a comic figure we cut, each with a bundle of lucerne in front of us. There would have been a very sudden throwing down if the Boers had been anywhere near.

### **Monday 1 April 1901**

Vryheid district. All Fools day. A good many men were caught in the various traps set for them so as to make April Fools of them. We left camp at 7 a.m. for De Jager's Drift. Our squadron [was] advance guard. I was told off for Colonel Evans' orderly with two others. Colonel Evans went up to the VCR camp [at] Rooikopjes, where No. 2 and 4. Squadrons are stationed. He stayed there till 9.30 a.m. during which time he off-saddled as we also did. On moving off we soon overtook the convoy. Here the Colonel said he had no more need of us and of course the Regimental S[ergeant] Major, with remarkable fairness mind you, tells us to join the rearguard and not our own troops as a man with any gumption would have. Another thing – he stopped me whistling a popular air with the remark, 'This is not a travelling band'. By these little things you know a man. Such are the stripes in some cases completely spoiling a man.

### **Wednesday 3 April 1901**

De Jager's Drift. I did not spend a very nice night last night as there were only three of us which made the shifts long and it also rained heavily all night. My beat was from 10 to 12 and 3 to 4 a.m., this being the beat for second shift which I drew. However, when we came off each shift we had a kafir-hut to sleep in by luck as our post was at a kraal, so although we lost the benefit of six men being on, as was the case at the next post, still we made up for it by sleeping dry. The convoy moved along alright and outspanned on



*Rations were never sufficient. Corporal JB Nicholson and companions digging for potatoes.*

the Nek half way between De Jager's and Blood River.

We also halted and tried to boil a kettle but owing to the damp weather and shortness of wood we failed utterly. This country is not blessed with much in the shape of firewood and we miss our tea very much, as sometimes we are in the saddle from dawn till sunset with only a cup of coffee and a biscuit before we start. This is all we get unless we make a lengthy halt to enable us to get firewood which is not often procurable. We reached camp at 5 pm, tired and hungry.

### **Sunday 14 April 1901**

Vryheid. Reveille 5.30. At 9 a.m. we left, our troop or squadron being advance scouts. We moved out at a smart pace and kept well ahead of the convoy. We arrived on the Nek about noon and halted till the convoy came up. As it outspanned for two hours we had time to cook some tea. We then left about 3 p.m. and reached Blood River camp about 4.50 p.m. Just before we got there I had a nasty spill, my first, and I hope my last, on the campaign. It happened that as I was riding a Government remount and he put one foot in a hole and went over like a dying horse and nearly crushed me. I had my side a bit hurt but luckily no further injuries. We camped with the wagons as usual.

### **Wednesday 24 April 1901**

Dundee. A quiet day till the afternoon. At 2.30 p.m. we saddled up our horses. The order was full marching order. We moved out to the north of camp and were put through different formations of drill. We then formed a long line and the colonel started to inspect us. He passed about two men and then dismissed the whole parade in disgust, as owing to there being no definite order as to the articles we were to carry, some men did not even bring any of the most necessary articles.

### **Thursday 25 April 1901**

Dundee. A quiet day. At 10 a.m. the squadron officers held a heavy marching order inspection. That is [when] we put all the articles needed on a sheet with our saddlery. This

is instead of the parade dismissed yesterday and saves us from a parade tomorrow.

### **Saturday 27 April 1901**

Dundee. We had the usual parade of horses for exercise at 10 a.m. At orders yesterday all ideas of disbandment were knocked on the head by Colonel Evans who had seen General Dartnell about us. We are too valuable to be disbanded.

### **Thursday 2 May 1901**

Dundee. At 10.30 a.m. I went up to the Wesleyan Church and after some hard work put the church straight again. I then went up town to get a few groceries for my mess and called on my way and had a cup of tea at Mrs Dicks where I spent an enjoyable half-hour. In the evening I went to see the Bioscope with Trooper Stutters and enjoyed it very much. (*Motion picture photography was still in its infancy, but these films shown here could have been taken by WKL Dickson, who wrote an account of his experiences with a 'biograph' on the Natal front.*) The pictures seemed very real and lifelike, especially the war pictures such as moving a 4.7 gun (*a British 4,7 inch naval gun*) across a river.

### **Saturday 4 May 1901**

Scott's Ridge, Dundee district. The night passed off quietly and no Boers turned up to molest us at the wagons. The Natives all round the wagons were sleeping there for fear of the Boers and we had some fun chasing one and two whom we took to be spies. We retired to camp at dawn. Here we had a lot of fatigues, what with fetching our tents and those of the officers and then going for firewood at a Dutch house, which by the way, was badly knocked about (*i.e. looted and stripped*) in getting the wood.

### **Thursday 9 May 1901**

Dundee. A fine day. Late yesterday evening a report came in to say a body of Boers were going to make a raid on the (*this, the Natal side?*) side of the Buffalo. We all saddled up in readiness for a move and 12 men, a non-com, and Lieutenant Montgomery, went out to the Jew's store to protect it. The remainder all took up positions on the kopje and did extra picquets in case of the Boers attacking. The only sounds to be heard were four explosions at the Duttley Mine where they were blasting for coal. The night past off quietly however and we returned to camp. The usual patrols left at the usual time for De Jager's and Vant's Drifts and came back in the afternoon.

### **Friday 10 May 1901**

Dundee. We had a quiet day in camp today. The usual patrols went out to the railhead (*this was at De Jager's Drift*) and Vant's Drift. They came in and reported all clear. An observation post is found daily above camp of three men. There are two picquets of three men each and a horse-guard formed every night. Two of these post patrols and one does observation.

### **Sunday 12 May 1901**

Dundee. We had the first frost this morn. It was cold last night and my feet got like icicles when I was on guard. At 9 in the morn, after we had packed our blankets in readiness to move our camp, the patrols saddled up. One of them of which I was in charge went to Landtman's Drift (*on the Buffalo/Mzinyathi River east of Vryheid*). We off-saddled there for two hours and waited for the De Jager's patrol which came at noon. We then saddled up and returned. Meanwhile our camp had been shifted to Malonjeni, a post to

the south of the Vant's Drift road, so we had a longer ride than usual.

I nearly had a bad smash today as my horse, who is a bit obstinate, after a bit of messing about, suddenly took the bit between his teeth and galloped to the top of a stony kopje. How he got up is a marvel to me, as well as why I did not fall off as I had two guns in my hands. Luckily I managed to stick on and after that he was much quieter. A nasty west wind kept up all day and was bad tonight. The camp is better than the last one, being a little more sheltered and near good water.

### **Friday 17 May 1901**

Dundee. A quiet day. Levelled our beds down as they were very uncomfortable owing to the slope. About 2 p.m. Trooper (*J*) Cross suddenly arrived with a despatch ordering us to pack our kit-bags and be ready to move to Zululand. We at once got to work and packed all our kit but for once we had luck and slept in our camp instead of moving that night. We move tomorrow about 8.30 a.m. on route to Zululand on a reconnaissance or something.

### **Sunday 19 May 1901**

Dundee and Nqutu. Reveille 5.15 a.m. Coffee up 5.30. We left at 6.15 a.m. At first it was not very cold but as we moved along a cold wind sprang up and gave us fits. After a long canter or two, with a walk now and then, we reached Nqutu at 9.30 a.m. Here we off-saddled and had breakfast and dinner. We move at dusk tonight for Nondweni, as far as I can gather to take up some position while Major Chapman tries to corner up some Boers against us. He is operating from Nkandhla. We shall have a very cold ride. At 5 p.m. we got the order to saddle up and marched at 5.30 p.m. It was bitterly cold during our ride. We reached our camp near the Enterprise GM Company (*Gold Mining and Prospecting Syndicate established in about 1893*) at 11.15 p.m. Most of us did but did not spend a very pleasant night as reveille was at 5 a.m. and we only got about three hours sleep.

### **Monday 20 May 1901**

Nqutu. Our squadron was advance scouts and left at 6.30 a.m. No.1 Troop of our squadron was extended on our front and our troop was in support. About 2 p.m. our squadron crossed the Umfolosi, which by the way is nothing but a quicksand just here. Lieutenant Montgomery led the way across and had to dismount in the water as his mare had got bogged. We then moved on in skirmishing order, and having reached a kopje we hid ourselves on the crest overlooking a bridle-path used by the Boers in going and coming from Babanango. Here we lay all the afternoon, our horses being hidden away, but no Boers turned up so at dusk we returned to camp.

### **Wednesday 22 May 1901**

Nqutu. Marched at 8 a.m. Last night about 16 men of our squadron, all out of No.1 Troop and some of Captain Gold's men, left at 8.30 p.m. to search some Boer farms. They went to about three houses but, except a few women, found nothing in the Boer line. They were out all night and destroyed some mealies at each house. Our troop was advance scouts for the day. Our route lay along the Itotyotsi (*Tshotshosi*) River for some distance and a halt was made for a couple of hours near the spot where the gallant Prince Imperial fell in 1879 (*during the Anglo-Zulu War*).

The place is walled in with stones and is beautifully kept. Ornamental trees and shrubs

are planted tastefully round. Here we were rejoined by the men who had been out all night searching Boer farms. After a long and roundabout route we reached Nqutu at 4 p.m., tired and hungry. One of the heaviest frosts I have seen fell this morn where we slept. All our blankets etc were white and seemed as if they were covered with snow.

#### **Thursday 23 May 1901**

Nqutu. Marched at 8 a.m. After a smart journey we reached Vant's Drift where we halted for three hours and had some food and coffee. At 1 p.m. we saddled up and moved off on the Dundee road. We halted at the foot of Malonjeni Mountain for the night. At 3.40 p.m. we all fell in and Colonel Evans thanked us for the way in which we had worked together on this trip to Nondweni. It seems the Boers had intended a raid into Zululand or Umvoti County and this move was to prevent this. Meanwhile by a night march on Sunday May 19th, our little column had thrown itself on the Boer line of retreat.

I was put on horse-guard for the night. My beats were from 7 to 9 p.m. and from 1 to 2.40 p.m. At 8.00 p.m. three shots were suddenly fired by Colonel Evans as a false alarm. At once our troop advanced in skirmishing order, the other troop saddled up and so on all round the square. Some amusing scenes were seen, some men ran out without their boots and some without coats. Some thought it was a reality. The colonel came round on horseback and complimented us on our turnout. There was very little grumbling although a lot of men were already asleep. It was recognized as a very needful experiment considering the terrible nature of a night attack.

#### **Friday 24 May 1901**

Vant's Drift. Reveille 6 a.m. We marched at 8 a.m. Our squadron separated from the rest and marched to Malonjeni, the rest going along the Dundee road. Colonel Evans wished us a pleasant time and hoped we would see plenty of Boers. Re-pitched our tents on [an] old camp site. No patrols out. The day passed off quietly. At 9.30 p.m. about 20 or 30 Boers crossed the Natal border and raided Smullian's store (a Jew) about two miles (3,2 km) from here. They did not stay long and only took a few things out of the store, but took four post-cart horses along with them, it being a post-cart outspan. We got up at once and saddled up. About midnight we moved off, and after a terrible climb down a boulder strewn hill, during which we nearly broke our necks, we reached the store too late to be of any use.

However we followed on their track at a fast canter in which it was a marvel we did not break our necks as the ground was very rutty and broken. We reached the Buffalo at Lafne's Drift. We then crossed the river and went about four miles (6,4 km) inland. No trace of the Boers however, so we went to a kopje not far off and tried to sleep with our horses linked up and ready saddled. The usual precautions were taken in the way of picquets. It was now 4 a.m. We only had greatcoats and some had none at all, so we did not get much sleep as our feet were like icicles.

#### **Saturday 1 June 1901**

De Jager's Drift. Saddled up at 6.30. Every chance of seeing the enemy if they only stand. A fire was burning on Scheeper's Nek last night and did not go out. Our squadron furnished 30 men as support to two guns on the left flank. Some of the Hussars also on the left. No.3 Squadron furnished the advance scouts. The scouts gradually advanced but the enemy showed no signs as yet. On the left we were ordered to scout for the guns instead of supporting them. Half of us were in front and the other half supported us. As

we advanced we could see No.3 (*Squadron*) gradually gained the top of the ridge and still the enemy did not show up having as usual retired on a better position. On the left we also reached the top without opposition.

Here a halt was made while the convoy came up. Lieutenant Montgomery sent me back to the guns to report all clear on the left and they then came on. When I rejoined Mr Montgomery, he sent me to Captain Crompton, OC VCR (*perhaps in a temporary capacity, as Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Evans still held the substantive post*), and told me to report all clear on the left, and get leave for a wagon and water-cart to come over to the scene of our skirmish last December. The wagon had a tombstone and cement for the grave of our comrades lost on the 14th December 1900 (*Corporal Peter Comrie and Trooper G McKellar*).

After a time we arrived at our destination which was held by 30 men who were with Lieutenant Montgomery. Outposts were placed all round on the most prominent ridges and the remainder helped to offload the stone etc. Two or three men who had a little experience in building at once set to work and erected the stone. The water was drawn from the water-cart for mixing the cement and sand. After some hard work the job was finished and looked very nice. The inscription read as follows:

In Loving Memory  
Erected by their comrades  
of Corporal P Comrie NC aged 52 and Trooper G McKellar NC aged 20  
of the Volunteer Composite Regiment.  
Killed in action on this spot Dec 14th 1900  
whilst gallantly opposing an attack on a convoy to Vryheid.

The grave has kept very well, having hardly altered since the day of the fight.

### **Sunday 2 June 1901**

Vryheid. It was a bitterly cold day all day and in the morn it was so terribly cold that very few men except those for duty got up. Two observation posts were found by the VCR to the south and east of camp. They left at 6.30 a.m. and were relieved at 1 p.m. Each post had three men and a corporal. About 30 men and 2 guns went out with two wagons to get coal a few miles out. A few Boers were seen but a few shells dispersed them. They had a few shots at our men but at too great a range to be effective. However our men did not get any coal as it was too hard to get at owing to the steep hill it was in.

They returned about 2 p.m. and I managed to get a piece of zinc or galvanised iron and this broke the strength of the wind a good bit. The wind gradually fell as night approached but it still remained very cold. Tomorrow we leave for Blood River early.

### **Tuesday 4 June 1901**

Vryheid. Moved off at 6.40. The convoy had left earlier to enable it to cross the river in time. It parked up just across the river till we came over and then it moved on. Our troop was on the left flank and No.1 Troop of our squadron was reserve in the centre. It was a very cold morning with a white frost and our hands and feet got quite painful. At our first short halt we found some rubbish and soon had it blazing and in this way we got our hands and feet fairly warm. About 9.30 a.m. the convoy outspanned till 11 a.m. when we moved off again. During our halt we cooked some cocoa. As we approached De Jager's the half sections gradually closed in until we were all together again. We then moved on slowly with halts here and there to allow the wagons to come up, and

reached De Jager's about 3.30 p.m. We off-saddled on the Dundee side of the river in the sandiest spot the officers could pick. The latest is our squadron is going to Nqutu to be stationed there.

### **Monday 10 June 1901**

Dundee. I got up at 7 a.m. and spent a busy day doing shopping etc for my comrades and myself. The convoy left early for De Jager's. At 2 p.m. the VCR stationed at Dundee and round about left Dundee for De Jager's under command of Captain Crompton. At 3 p.m. I left Dundee for De Jager's with our post and arrived at our camp across the Buffalo about 5.15 p.m. Three oxen were killed on Gregory's Nek owing to a brake on a wagon smashing and the wagon, which was going down a steep incline, ran over the oxen.

### **Thursday 13 June 1901**

Vryheid. Our orders last night were to stay a day in Vryheid, but owing to Boers threatening a raid on Natal we were ordered to leave at 8 a.m. today. Moved off at 8 a.m. Our squadron was main guard and marched along the road. We reached the Nek unmolested and the convoy outspanned so we off-saddled. Of course the advance scouts remained out in front saddled up. At 2.30 p.m. we moved on and reached the Blood River about 4 p.m.

### **Friday 14 June 1901**

Blood River. The convoy moved on slowly and outspanned near the earthworks of the Dundee-Vryheid railway for about five hours. It then moved on and reached De Jager's just before five p.m. The camp was across the river on the Natal side. It was a bit chilly as night fell. As we were rearguard we did not get to camp till late. Of all the tiring jobs rearguard caps the lot, especially for an ox-wagon convoy.

### **Wednesday 19 June 1901**

Vant's Drift. We spent a rather nasty night last night as our wagons did not turn up with our blankets. Some of us had one blanket but a good many had only a greatcoat and a few had nothing at all, and sat up till about 12 midnight waiting for their blankets. My beat on picquet was from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. and from 4.20 to 6 a.m., being the last shift. My feet got like icicles during my last shift. Our wagons turned up about 9 a.m. and we then fed our horses. It appears one (*wagon*) was upset and the other stuck in some rough ground along the road. At 10 a.m. we moved off.

### **Thursday 20 June 1901**

Vant's Drift. During the day our officers went out and selected a new camp to the south of the magistracy to which we moved at 3 p.m. Most of the chaps pitched tents, but our mess had been ordered to leave our tent at Malonjeni so we camped out in the open. However, as it was a damp night George and I slept in some other fellows' tents. We are to get no bread here but we get biscuits one day and flour the next. How we are to bake the bread remains to be seen as we have no appliances to cook with.

### **Friday 21 June 1901**

Vant's Drift. The patrol went out and returned about noon not having met any Boers, but some were reported not far off. In the afternoon some shots were heard in the direction of the observation post and the OC, hearing it, thought the post was attacked. About twelve of us were ordered to saddle up at once and in running for my horse I stumbled and fell hurting my knee badly, and tearing my breeches badly at the knee.

However, in the excitement I refused to stop behind and get it dressed, and off we went at a gallop under Captain Crompton. After a long and hard gallop we reached the kopje and at once crept up to the top and surprised our own picquet which had been shooting rock-rabbits. They got a good telling off by the officer and then we returned to camp where I had my knee dressed.

**Saturday 22 June 1901**

Nqutu. Usual routine during the day. The patrol went out to [the] north of Nqutu as usual but did not see anything. After breakfast we got a lb (*one pound or 0,5 kilograms*) of flour each issued out to us and at once set to work to try and cook it. Lewis buried a biscuit tin in the earth leaving one side open for a door, and then, having collected a lot of cowdung we set about making bread. Our first loaf was nearly burnt to a cinder and some others made bread which would have knocked a man down if struck with it. However, after a few trials we managed to do a bit better but still we are far from perfect.

**Sunday 23 June 1901**

Nqutu. About 9 p.m. last night some alarm was raised that the Boers were about to attack Nkandla, so to make sure of our safety in case they changed their minds and attacked us, two extra picquets were put on. Of course with my luck I was one of the men put on, and had to get ready just as I had decided to go to sleep. However no attack came off and we came back to camp at dawn. The patrol and observation post were delayed in going out owing to a mist on the hills. On their return they reported all clear. The day was a wonderfully warm day and every sign of a summer day was to be seen, even some thunder clouds began to show up to the west. In the evening a few of us met together in one of the tents and had a few hymns to the accompaniment of an accordion, and so passed a very pleasant evening.

**Monday 24 June 1901**

Nqutu. A quiet day in camp. Reveille was as usual at 6.30 a.m. and the usual daily routine was gone through. After breakfast we were all fallen in to see if our equipment was complete in the way of ammunition. We also requisitioned for anything we required. I got a box from home last night by a wagon from Dundee, so I had a slice of luck. Today we had biscuits for rations, flour being served alternately with the biscuits. In the afternoon a pretty good scratch team walked over to the infantry camp to play them a game of football. Our side got whipped by three to nil. Our men were outclassed a little by superior combinations but the (*British*) regulars indulged in a good deal of foul play much to the disgust of our men.

**Monday 1 July 1901**

Nqutu. The usual daily routine was gone through for the day. The patrol's observation post returned to camp and reported all clear. About eight men of No.3 Squadron left here to reinforce the Vant's Drift post owing to some of the men from that post being sent to occupy Rorke's Drift. In the afternoon we had a very good football match between scratch teams of the VCR. My side won by three goals to one goal after a very good game. During the afternoon I was warned for horse-guard and managed to draw the third relief. George and I applied for leave some time ago to go down to the Richmond Show but at present our chances seem mighty low of getting it. The willing horse in this corps (*i.e. the VCR*) seems to do all the work, shirkers etc. get leave, also they seem to take what they like and never get run-in for it or anything else.



*Boer prisoners captured in one of the British military drives in northern Natal.*

#### **Thursday 4 July 1901**

Nqutu. At 10.30 a.m. the sports were commenced by the Trial Stakes which was won by 'Thips' and 'Dandy' (Lewis) coming second. The judge's decision in this race was open to much grumbling as most of the onlookers declared 'Dandy' the winner and the rider of 'Thips' bumped Newlands riding 'Dandy', and although the judge warned Warr for bumping he still gave him the race, a most unfair decision. The race itself was a very good one indeed. The day passed off very well and some good races were run.

I entered old 'Charlie' in this but he had no chance and also got a bad start. Captain Woods won the individual tent-pegging with swords after a keen competition. Trooper Shaw won the competition for tilting-the-ring and cutting with sword at heads on posts. The sack race was run by Trooper Warr after an amusing race. The 100 yards Handicap (foot) was won by (*JA*) Mason (Sergeant) of our squadron.

Two accidents occurred during the day one of which might have been much worse. Johnnie Cummings (*Trooper J*) of our squadron was bucked off his own horse while riding behind Sergeant Ladds in the Fugitive Race. In the fall he unluckily broke his arm just above the wrist and this debarred him from all the foot events, in which he was a hot favourite. Luckily for him he broke his left arm and not his right. During the tent-pegging with swords Trooper Walker's (No.3) horse bolted with him clean into a wire fence before he could stop it and gave him a nasty spill. A totalisator was run by Corporal (*GL*) Thompson on which I made 9/-, but of course had to pay 10/- for the entrance of my horse in the pony race.

A mule race was held in the sports and caused some laughter when one of the drivers fell over with a tremendous circus act. Some wits suggested when they saw him groaning and twisting on the ground, that he was working for a brandy, like the two first men who had spills. Two soldiers acted as clowns on mules and caused some laughter when they had a spill every few minutes.

**Wednesday 10 July 1901**

Nqutu. Reveille 6.30 a.m. My beat last night was from 12 to 2 a.m. and from 5 to 6.30 a.m. Towards morning it got much colder and my hands were like icicles. The Richmond Show comes off today. About midday the men who had been out all night returned having failed to see any Boers. They went out about 20 miles (32 km) and slept near Nkandi. The Boers are getting worse and worse as they think nothing of shooting Natives. The Boers seem to still maintain an obstinate resistance to all endeavour to bring an end to this dreary war.

**Friday 12 July 1901**

Nqutu. The men for convoy duty were roused at 5.30 a.m. and saddled up at 6.15 a.m., leaving shortly afterwards. After going about eight miles (13 km) we halted and half of us off-saddled. At this place within four miles (6.4 km) of Vant's Drift we waited till 3 p.m. before the convoy appeared. It seems that 40 wagons were kept waiting all day for six others which were late in leaving Dundee. Instead of sending the 40 straight off and the other six when the empties were returned; no the 40 must wait for the six. Mark the grand sense displayed by Colonial officers. Nqutu is connected by wire with Vant's Drift, yet we must get up at 5.30 a.m. to ride eight miles (13 km) and sit down to wait till 3 p.m. Upon my word a boy of 12 could do better. This is not the first time some of our officers have distinguished themselves in this magnificent way. One often hears sarcastic remarks about military officers but in my opinion the colonials can produce some specimens to equal them.

**Saturday 13 July 1901**

Nqutu. Twelve men were sent off first thing to bring in the six wagons which were left behind yesterday. They returned about 2 p.m. with the wagons. No attempt was made by the Boers to molest them although they were not far off. They could not screw up enough courage to attack the convoy. I was sent out on observation post and left at 8.30 a.m. with two others making to the south. Swarms of horses were driven in by Natives to the Magistracy during the day as a commandeering order had been issued.

**Sunday 14 July 1901**

Nqutu-Vant's Drift. Twenty five men, including myself, left at 7.30 to escort the empty wagons back to Vant's Drift, also the commandeered remounts. About two miles (3,2 km) out the wagons outspanned for two hours. When the wagons halted we cooked some very good coffee and boiled a dozen eggs we had bought, and thus had a very good breakfast. At 11 a.m. the wagons moved off but no men came to meet us from Vant's Drift till we reached the ridge within two miles (3,2 km) of the drift.

We waited on this ridge till the convoy had passed and then returned to camp at an easy pace. This convoy work is very trying work and very little is made of it in civil life, but at the same time it is one of the most trying duties of a soldier. We [are] to go to Isandhlwana (*the site of the famous battle of 22 January 1879 during the Anglo-Zulu War*) with three wagons to get the wood which is cut by Natives.

**Monday 15 July 1901**

Nqutu. Saddled up at 8.30 a.m. and left for the wood with fifteen others under Lieutenant Barter. The road we took was past St Augustine's Mission Station and Rorke's Drift. Just before we reached the latter place we turned due east towards Isandhlwana. At

12 noon we outspanned for an hour and half at a little spruit about two miles (3,2 km) from Rorke's Drift. (*This is probably the Amazimyama.*) At 1 p.m. we moved off and reached the spruit near Isandhlwana at 2.30 p.m. Here we found the wood ready cut and soon had it loaded up on the three mule-wagons we took with us. Meanwhile Lieutenant Barter had left to go and see the graves and battlefield. We left at 4 p.m. and went as far as Rorke's Drift where we slept the night.

#### **Thursday 18 July 1901**

Nqutu. Reveille 6.30 a.m. Last night an alarm took place in camp. It appears a cartridge went off in the dust-heap and the officers thought it was a signal of an attack. We were all turned out at once which was done pretty quickly. However, after a few minutes had passed and all remained quiet, Lieutenant Montgomery took George and I (*sic*) and went right round the posts to see if they knew of the source of the shot. Meanwhile the rest of the men were told to get back to bed and sleep ready for anything. The result of our investigations was that the cartridge had exploded in a dust-hole. I was on horse-guard also for the night, my beat being from 12 to 2.30 a.m. and from 5.10 a.m. to 6.30 a.m., so I did not have a very good night of it as the cartridge exploded at 10.40 and by the time I got to bed it was past 11 p.m., and at 12 I was roused to go on horse-guard.

#### **Friday 19 July 1901**

Nqutu. At 9 a.m. five of us, including myself, under Sergeant Symons saddled up and left for Isandlwana with Colonel Evans. We took a bye-path led by a native scout who showed us the road which was only a bridle track. The colonel's cart had meanwhile gone to Rorke's Drift with our horse feed and one blanket and greatcoat per man, also the colonel's kit. About 11.30 a.m. we reached the mission station near Isandlwana where we off-saddled for a couple of hours and had dinner which we carried.

After a ten-minute ride we reached the graves which are scattered far and wide as if the men when killed had been wandering about. As we approached the centre of the field they grew thicker and in one place where the final stand was made cairns lie thickly. Only two or three graves are distinguished by stones, one being young Blaikie (*this was Trooper James Adrian Blaikie*) of the Carbineers. A little care and the massacre of Isandhlwana would have been a glorious day for England's arms, as the position could have been impregnable if the men had been drawn up in the famous hollow square of yore with the transport in the centre. The only consolation we can get is that our men died nobly and well, fighting to the last.

I was very much surprised to see that Natal has done nothing to honour her sons who fell on that dark day as no tablet – or stone – has been erected to their memory. (*This oversight was to be corrected only in September 1907 when a memorial to the Carbineers was unveiled on the battlefield.*) As we left the battlefield we saw a long string of graves leading away to Fugitive's Drift (*on the Mzinyathi/Buffalo River where survivors from the battle of Isandlwana crossed into Natal*) which shows that some poor fellows broke away, among them being Lieutenants Coghill and Melvill who died to save the colours (*the Queen's Colour of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment*) just across that drift. We reached Rorke's Drift at 4.30 p.m. and off-saddled at Cummings Hotel where the colonel's cart had outspanned.

#### **Saturday 20 July 1901**

Rorke's Drift. At dawn we left the drift after a most miserable and unsuccessful night.

No Boers came our way and the cold was simply unbearable. We had only one blanket and a great coat each, so could not get much warmth out of them. As soon as we got to bed one of the horses started plunging, and I had to get out of bed and go and see to them. At 1 a.m. we were roused as the sentry on duty said he heard some horses coming on the other side. However it was a false alarm, so what with this and the cold we spent a most lively night. After some breakfast there I went over and got two men to go on towards Dundee with the colonel's cart and he left shortly afterwards as we did also for Nqutu.

### **Sunday 21 July 1901**

Nqutu. After horses were let loose we settled down for a quiet day, but at 10 a.m. 'horses in' went on the bugle and nearly every available man saddled up. We left at 11 a.m. under Lieutenants Barter, Rundle and Montgomery. After a long and smart ride we reached our destination, near Monhla, fifteen miles (24 km) out to the north-east of Nqutu. Here we found that a young Boer, driving loot cattle from Natal, whilst telling some Natives how he had done it, was suddenly seized and disarmed by them. A Native accompanying him, being armed, at once fired on the Natives, but failed to hit one. They at once chased him and with the help of one or two others knocked him over with a knob-stick and secured him.

### **Thursday 25 July 1901**

Nqutu. Two Boers came to the foot of the hill near the regulars camp during the morning under a flag of truce. They came in to endeavour to find out where the Boer the Natives took the other day was. They brought letters and money for him. Our officer, Captain Barker, however, told them to re-cross the border as speedily as possible or he would fire on them and also told them not to come again or he would shoot them. They then cleared out towards Nondweni.

### **Saturday 27 July 1901**

Nqutu. Reveille 4.30 a.m. Last night about 20 men of No.3 Squadron under Lieutenant Rundle went out at 9 p.m. and surrounded two farmhouses at a place called Monhla but with no success. At one place we massed up and charged altogether over the last bit of skyline. The wagon drivers made a great noise in doing this and caused a general laugh. The joke was the winter manoeuvres, but more serious work unknown to us was coming. About 1 p.m. two Boers came up towards an observation post and a Hussar fired at them. They cleared away but Lieutenant Rundle's troop who had spotted them put on so hot a fire from the flank that they dismounted and got into a donga. Their horses were driven off by a hot fire, one being wounded, and our men then advanced in extended order and took them prisoners. They did not attempt any opposition and had a small white flag. Great excitement among the men when it became known.

They, the prisoners, were handed over to the infantry. Meanwhile Lieutenant Rundle's troop having seen three Boers in the distance, went out to catch them but they had got wind of us, owing to Symond's looters (*Symond's Horse*) being out buying mealies near them, and so got away. We remained in camp till 9 p.m. at night when we moved out. The country ahead was a blaze of fire (*it was a common practice of the Boers to set fire to the veld in order to obscure their movements and obstruct the British columns*) and we expected to see any amount of Boers.