

## **“The Grave of Cold British Steel” – How the Lessons of the Boer War Shaped British Tactics in 1914**

**Max Komhetscher**

In 1914, in the face of a massive German offensive, the British Expeditionary Force proved crucial in defeating the Schlieffen Plan. The BEF did this in spite of the fact that the British army had not faced another well-trained and disciplined European enemy since the Crimean War over fifty years before. Yet the “Old Contemptibles,” as the BEF became known, not only held the line but eventually stopped the advance of the German First Army on the Marne.<sup>1</sup> This was all the more surprising since the same British army had been humiliated in Second Boer War (1899-1902) little over a decade before. The forces of the world’s foremost imperial power were humbled by “a backward, penniless, intransigent Transvaal Republic” in countless battles and skirmishes which proved Boer battlefield tactics far outclassed those employed by British regulars.<sup>2</sup> The improvements in battlefield performance by the British army between 1902 and 1914 were the direct result of these costly lessons learned on the South African veldt, which led to new tactical doctrine and training methods being widely adopted across the British Army. The new infantry fire tactics, battlefield maneuver formations, and techniques for the employment of artillery crucial to the success of the British Army in 1914 can be traced directly to the Boer War and the reforms that it initiated.

As the 1880s progressed, it became apparent that the Boer Republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State held a vast wealth of untapped mineral resources, leading to increasing imperial ambitions in the area by British colonists and authorities in South Africa. British officials began massing troops on the Transvaal border during the summer of 1899. The Boers did the same, and after the British refused an ultimatum to withdraw, thirty to forty thousand Boer militia, armed with modern rifles

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew J. Risio, *Building the Old Contemptibles: British Military Transformation and Tactical Development from the Boer War to the Great War, 1899-1914* (Dissertation, US Army Command and General Staff College, 2005), 5.

<sup>2</sup> W. Baring Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer War* (London, UK: Severn House, 1975), 18.

and artillery, invaded British-controlled Natal on October 11<sup>th</sup> 1899, beginning the Second Boer War.<sup>3</sup> The Boers quickly cut British supply lines and besieged or occupied most settlements in northern Natal. The first major battle of the war, fought on October 20<sup>th</sup> at Talana Hill, showed just how little the British had progressed tactically since the Crimean War. A force of 4,000 British infantry and cavalry under Lieutenant-General Symons, supported by 18 field guns, found their path to reinforce the main British base at Ladysmith blocked by 3,500 Boers with 7 field guns. At 7 am the British infantry broke camp, formed lines, and marched headlong into the Boer line without using cover or firing as they advanced. After the death of General Symons in the bloody assault, the Boers finally withdrew from the hill around 11:30 am. The British artillery, with no system to communicate with their infantry after the battle began, interpreted the end of the firing as a lull in the fighting and began bombarding the recently captured hill, forcing the infantry to withdraw. By the end of the day the British gained a pyrrhic victory, taking 500 casualties, as opposed to fewer than 150 Boers.<sup>4</sup>

Two months later, the British suffered three major defeats during the week of December 10<sup>th</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup> at Magersfontein, Stormberg, and Colenso during the attempted relief of Kimberly and Ladysmith.<sup>5</sup> In these battles, 15,000 British regular soldiers were repeatedly beaten by just 6,000 to 7,000 Boer defenders. At Magersfontein, thirty-one British guns spent two hours conducting the largest bombardment since Sebastopol on the Boers, but only inflicted three casualties due to poor communication with forward elements about the location of the enemy. This bombardment was followed by a failed nighttime bayonet attack that resulted in 900 casualties after daybreak left the British exposed at point blank Boer rifle range.<sup>6</sup> In all the British suffered 2,800 casualties, nearly twenty percent of their total engaged force, during “The Black Week” compared to only 350 for the Boers. Fear of the Boers battlefield prowess quickly led to the British adopting a more cautious tactical approach. Winston Churchill, at the time a cavalry officer, illustrated this in his description of the council of war held on January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1900 before the Battle of Spion Kop. The options discussed by the council were to “withdraw again,” or to “attack Spion Kop by night, rush the Boer

---

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Martin, *The Boer War* (New York, NY: Abelard-Schuman, 1969), 15-40.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-66.

<sup>5</sup> Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer War*, 119.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

trenches with the bayonet” and dig in before dawn.<sup>7</sup> The British commanders felt that a daytime battle, even with a greater than two to one numerical advantage and superior artillery, would be suicidal. This feeling was proven correct when the 4,500 troops who took Spion Kop during a night assault at 04:00 on January 23<sup>rd</sup> were forced to withdraw by 20:00 the same day after taking 1,300 casualties.<sup>8</sup> The British artillery performed even more poorly, with 3,000 shells causing a total of 2 Boers killed.<sup>9</sup>

Luckily for the British, after Spion Kop their resources and numerical superiority finally began to make itself apparent and by the end of February Ladysmith was relieved and the conflict descended into a guerilla war that would last another two years. Col. John Blake, a West Point graduate turned Boer commando, stated the British dilemma perfectly. Unlike in the past fifty years when the British faced “hordes of unarmed and defenseless negroes,” in colonial wars, in this war they fought “The Boer with a Mauser in his hand.”<sup>10</sup> Though this is certainly an oversimplification of Britain’s colonial conflicts, it does make a fair point. Fighting the poorly armed native populations of Africa and Asia, British technical superiority and discipline proved enough to win easy victories. But when faced by a determined enemy with modern weapons and the ability to use them effectively, British tactics were no longer adequate, and indeed proved counterproductive. The Boer War became “the grave of cold British steel,” as bayonet charges and mass linear tactics, once the pride of Britain’s disciplined infantry, resulted in horrendous casualties, while the field artillery showed repeatedly that lacked the fire control systems or the technical capabilities necessary to support the infantry on a modern battlefield.<sup>11</sup> Fighting the poorly armed native populations of Africa and Asia, British technical superiority and discipline proved enough to win easy victories. But when faced by a determined enemy with modern weapons and the ability to use them effectively, British tactics were no longer adequate.

To address the tactical deficiencies laid bare by the Boer War, the British Army quickly began the development of new tactical doctrine. *The*

---

<sup>7</sup> Winston Churchill, *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* (New York, New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900), 300.

<sup>8</sup> Eversley Belfield. *The Boer War* (London, UK: Cooper, 1975), 72.

<sup>9</sup> John Y.F. Blake, *A West Pointer with the Boers* (Boston, MA: Angel Guardian Press, 1903), 113.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

*Field Regulations: Combined Training* were published in 1902 as a quick fix, followed by the definitive British pre-WWI doctrinal document, *Field Service Regulations: Part I Administration, Part II Operations, and Musketry Regulations*, all published in 1909.<sup>12</sup> These documents made significant changes to pre-Boer War doctrine. Infantry fire tactics were one of the major reforms addressed, as the Boer War gave countless examples of the deadly effectiveness of modern rifles. Prior to the war, British field doctrine and training relied heavily on massed volley fire, recommending its use from the maximum rifle range of 1,500 yards to 800 yards with individual fire only acceptable within 500 yards of the enemy.<sup>13</sup> The 1909 *Field Service Regulations* radically changed this, with the maximum acceptable range of rifle fire doubled to 2,800 yards, with “effective” range being set at 1,400 yards, and volley fire not even earning a mention.<sup>14</sup> This was because the volume of accurate fire produced by individual soldiers and the need to find cover were now considered crucial to winning firefights rather than massed volleys. Firefights, in turn, were now considered the decisive action of a battle and therefore needed to be won before a close quarter assault was launched.<sup>15</sup> The *Field Service Regulations* of 1909 stated that “The essence of infantry tactics consists in breaking down the enemy’s resistance by the weight and direction of its fire,” showing the shift in British tactics definitively away from the bloody pre-fire superiority assaults of the Boer War.<sup>16</sup> To support new fire tactics, the British army vastly increased the ammunition available for target practice and developed pop-up and moving targets which led to the British army becoming by 1903, in the words of one commentator, “a better shooting force than the army of any Continental power.”<sup>17</sup>

With the emphasis on long distance firefights came new open order battlefield formations. For the attack, widely dispersed skirmishers, using cover and concealment to close with the enemy, replaced the antiquated pre-Boer War massed columns and three-rank line formations that led to

---

<sup>12</sup> Risio, *Building the Old Contemptibles: British Military Transformation and Tactical Development from the Boer War to the Great War, 1899-1914*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> *Field Service Regulations..... 1909. (Reprinted, with Amendments, 1914)* (London, UK: Pub. by H.M. Stationery Off, 1914), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Risio, *Building the Old Contemptibles: British Military Transformation and Tactical Development from the Boer War to the Great War, 1899-1914*, 44.

<sup>16</sup> *Field Service Regulations..... 1909. (Reprinted, with Amendments, 1914)*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 93.

massive losses when facing modern rifles and artillery.<sup>18</sup> In battle the infantry was expected to “endeavor to gain superiority of fire. This will involve a gradual building up of the firing line in good fire positions.”<sup>19</sup> The concept of the firing line as something dictated by “good fire positions” rather than the dimensions of the assault formation was a major step forward for British tactics. It not only limited casualties by allowing troops to use the best cover available for fighting positions, but it also allowed for increasing initiative by small units and individual soldiers to fight the enemy as they saw fit. For the defense it was also emphasized that “concealment and cover from fire are important factors in defensive operations” and “the influence of ground upon the effect of fire must be one of the first considerations; in selecting a position.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition to infantry tactics, the artillery capabilities of British army were subject to great reform before WWI. The British artillery had even less combat experience than the infantry in the years prior to the Boer War, leading to an even more embarrassing performance. New guns and howitzers for the field and heavy artillery were introduced immediately following the war, but new tactics had a longer and more uneven evolution. Based on Boer War experiences, the *Field Service Regulations* of 1909 recognized that howitzers were “specially adapted for the attack of shielded, guns, or of an enemy behind cover, or in entrenchments” which led to an increase in their number and employment. New doctrine also recognized the limitations of preliminary bombardment due to “the invisibility which smokeless powder confers” on the modern battlefield, making target acquisition much more difficult. Instead, “the artillery must usually limit its action to preparing to support the infantry as soon as occasion demands it.”<sup>21</sup>

The new focus on the synchronization of artillery and the infantry increased the resources available to commanders’ efforts to win fire superiority and greatly increased the role of artillery in British battlefield tactics. The range considered “effective” for British artillery was, like that of rifle fire, greatly increased after the Boer War in response to the power of modern small arms fire. Pre-Boer War doctrine stated that artillery fire of over 1,800 yards should avoided and early in the war British artillery

---

<sup>18</sup> Risio, *Building the Old Contemptibles: British Military Transformation and Tactical Development from the Boer War to the Great War, 1899-1914*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> *Field Service Regulations..... 1909. (Reprinted, with Amendments, 1914)*, 141.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

officers often brought their batteries into battle at nearly point-blank range. As casualties mounted, the British artillery was placed beyond both the effective rifle range of the Boers and the ranges trained before the war, decreasing effectiveness even further.<sup>22</sup> After the Boer War, the *Field Service Regulations* of 1909 radically increased the effective range for the use of field artillery to 4,000 yards and that of heavy batteries to 5,000 yards, the maximum ranges set at 6,500 yards and 10,000 yards respectively, and called for less concentrated gun placements.<sup>23</sup> The main British artillery training range at Salisbury Plain was also extended from 1,500 yards in 1897 to 4,000 yards in 1904 in recognition of the need for longer range fire.<sup>24</sup>

Between the end of the Boer War and the beginning of the Great War, longer engagement ranges, greater focus on fires training, more dispersed formations, an emphasis on cover and concealment, and increasing initiative at lower echelons revolutionized the outdated British artillery and infantry tactics of the pre-Boer War era. Through the shock of finally experiencing a modern battlefield in the Boer War, the British army had revolutionized and reformed its tactics to meet Continental European standards.

The first test of these new tactics against a modern opponent would come during the critical month of August 1914. Britain declared war on Germany on August 4<sup>th</sup>, and by the time the first units of the British Expeditionary Force, made up entirely of regular British units, reached the French port of Le Havre on August 13<sup>th</sup> the Battle of the Frontiers was already well underway. Nearly five million French, German, and Belgian soldiers were already engaged as the mere one hundred thousand men of the BEF's four divisions entered the fray.<sup>25</sup> The BEF advanced into Belgium to the left of the French Fifth Army to meet the German advance. On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, the BEF took up positions to the north and west of Mons, Belgium for their first major battle of the war.<sup>26</sup> The infantry firepower of

---

<sup>22</sup> Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914*, 123.

<sup>23</sup> *Field Service Regulations..... 1909. (Reprinted, with Amendments, 1914)*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914*, 123.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Hart, *Fire and Movement: The British Expeditionary Force and the Campaign of 1914*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 59.

<sup>26</sup> Risio, *Building the Old Contemptibles: British Military Transformation and Tactical Development from the Boer War to the Great War, 1899-1914*, 82.

the British devastated the numerically superior attackers of the German First Army. As one BEF soldier stated “Our rapid fire was appalling even to us, and the worst marksmen could not miss, as he had only to fire into the ‘brown’ of the masses of the unfortunate enemy, who on the fronts of our two companies were constantly reinforced at the short range of three hundred yards. Such tactics amazed us.”<sup>27</sup> This situation, the British utilizing excellent cover and rapid fire against German units fighting doggedly in massed formations, sounds eerily similar to Talana Hill and other Boer War battles. The Battle of Mons, however, became a mere holding action as the British quickly were forced to fall back when the retreat of the French Fifth Army opened their flanks to German envelopment. This retreat was described by Boer War veteran and BEF Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal Viscount French as extremely skillful, as the artillery “could be seen bursting well over the enemy lines and holding his advance completely in check,” while the infantry fought “with great determination and tenacity” as they withdrew from “well chosen and situated” firing positions.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, the British performance at Mons was not perfect, but as their first battle in nearly sixty years against a European power it was an excellent start. Against infantry odds of up to four to one and facing an enemy with superior quality and quantity of artillery, the British had held their own, inflicting between two to five thousand casualties against the Germans at the cost of sixteen hundred British troops.

The BEF began following the French armies in retreat, but turned at Le Cateau on August 26<sup>th</sup> to deliver a blow to the Germans that mirrored the British doctrine more perfectly and successfully than any other battle the BEF fought. In the words of British artillery officer Major Arthur Corbett-Smith, the BEF hunkered down in “as much cover as the men could make for themselves by digging,” as the Germans “came on in their usual masses” with little effort to establish fire superiority. These efforts were halted by firing lines that devastated German mass attacks until the assaulting regiments “almost ceased to exist.” Whatever Germans remained were thrown back by British counterattacks were the infantry rushed forward from position to position as the artillery “put a curtain before them.”<sup>29</sup> This level of fire control and infantry-artillery coordination had been unthinkable during the Boer War. Unfortunately, a failure to

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>28</sup> John D. P. French, *1914* (London, UK: Houghton Mifflin CO., 1919), 67.

<sup>29</sup> Arthur Corbett-Smith, *The Retreat from Mons* (New York, NY: Cassell and Company, 1916), 169-173.

distribute orders to retreat to all units at the end of the day led to large numbers of British troops being capture at the end of the day, marring this otherwise impressive display of tactical prowess.<sup>30</sup> Through these battles and delaying actions, however, the British had done their part in delaying the German advance long enough for the awaited French counterattack to develop. On September 6<sup>th</sup> the French Sixth Army began its counterattack and by September 7<sup>th</sup> the BEF had turned to join the advance against the Germans. The tide had turned.<sup>31</sup>

Over the course of the sixteen days between the landing of the BEF at Le Havre and “The Miracle on the Marne” the BEF had marched over 240 miles, sustained 15,000 casualties, and fought several major battles and countless skirmishes against Europe’s preeminent land power.<sup>32</sup> In this campaign, the British regular army had proven itself man for man to be the equivalent of and even superior to any Continental army, a far cry from the army that had been badly bloodied by two upstart Boer republics just over a decade prior. The battles of Talana Hill, Spion Kop, Magersfontein seem small in comparison to titanic clashes of August 1914, but the taste of modern battle that the British army had gained in the Boer War enabled it to see the need for tactical reform. It is likely that without these reforms, the BEF would have gone into Belgium woefully unprepared for modern warfare and collapsed under the weight of the German offensive. Instead, utilizing new infantry and artillery tactics that emphasized mobility, cover and concealment, firepower, mutual support, and initiative, the BEF bent but did not break as it was pushed across France, despite several defeats by superior German forces. The British regular army had proven itself the tactical equal of its rivals in 1914, something it could not have done without the defeats and reforms born of the Boer War.

---

<sup>30</sup> Risio, *Building the Old Contemptibles: British Military Transformation and Tactical Development from the Boer War to the Great War, 1899-1914*, 85-86.

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914* (Oxford, UK: Osprey, 2014), 154.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

Blake, John Y.F. *A West Pointer with the Boers*. Boston, MA: Angel Guardian Press, 1903.

Churchill, Winston. *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria*. New York, New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900.

Corbett-Smith, Arthur. *The Retreat from Mons*. New York, NY: Cassell and Company, 1916.

*Field Service Regulations.....1909. (Reprinted, with Amendments, 1914)*. London, UK: Pub. by H.M. Stationery Off, 1914.

French, John D. P. *1914*. London, UK: Houghton Mifflin CO., 1919.

### Secondary Sources

Belfield, Eversley. *The Boer War*. London, UK: Cooper, 1975.

Gilbert, Adrian. *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914*. Oxford, UK: Osprey, 2014.

Hart, Peter. *Fire and Movement: The British Expeditionary Force and the Campaign of 1914*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Jones, Spencer. *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013.

Martin, Christopher. *The Boer War*. New York, NY: Abelard-Schuman, 1969.

Pemberton, W. Baring. *Battles of the Boer War*. London, UK: Severn House, 1975.

Risio, Andrew J. "*Building the Old Contemptibles: British Military Transformation and Tactical Development from the Boer War to the Great War, 1899-1914.*" Dissertation, US Army Command and General Staff College, 2005.