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South African Campaign

Captain R. Trimmel

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SOUTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN.

*Précis of a Lecture delivered at Vienna by Captain R. TRIMMEL,
late Austro-Hungarian Military Attaché with Lord Roberts' Army.*

Translated from the "Reichswehr."

CAPTAIN ROBERT TRIMMEL, of the General Staff, delivered a lecture recently in the Vienna Military Science Institution, to a large military audience, giving his impressions and notes during the first phase of the South African campaign.

He was with the English Head-Quarters in South Africa as Austro-Hungarian Military Attaché, from the beginning of November, 1899, to the end of July, 1900, and was an eye-witness of the operations from the date of the arrival of Lord Roberts up to the capture of Pretoria.

Captain Trimmel first presented a characteristic portrait of the two contending parties. He next described the methods of fighting of the individual arms; and finally gave a general view of the methods adopted by the English for keeping the Army supplied with men and *matériel*. According to the lecturer's personal observation, the English soldier has all the characteristics of the "mercenary." He follows his officer blindly, and absolutely carries out his duty, but without ambition. His own individual character first shows itself when fighting begins. Calm as he always is, he even then does not show rashness. It is when he is really hotly engaged, that he begins to exhibit his complete self-possession. But, at all times, when it is a question of intelligence, the English soldier is far inferior to the Boer. A high type of manliness and practical common sense must be allowed to the English officers. Their *moral* was conspicuous, particularly in the days of defeat. At such times criticism was less audible amongst them than in the days of success.

Captain Trimmel was able to make notes on the results of the English battle-training of the several arms from personal observation only after Lord Roberts assumed command, as permission to be present at the actual scene of fighting at the commencement of the war was not accorded to him any more than to the other Military Attachés while General Buller was in command. At the opening of the war the English fought chiefly in loose formations, and their reserves, too, followed in open order. At that time their artillery endeavoured to over-master the enemy's in a real spirit of self-sacrifice. It only began to be recognised in the later battles, after many failures, that fire superiority could never be attained by the infantry, as it was impossible to get a sight of the

enemy. How little effect the English artillery fire produced in many cases may be gathered from the fact that whole batteries were often engaged for hours with a single Boer gun without succeeding in silencing it or even sensibly improving the conditions for the infantry advance. The peculiar configuration of the ground, by adding to the difficulty of fixing localities, introduced fresh complications. For instance, on the day of the fight at Waterfall Drift, the lecturer and the American Attaché were both reported "missing." As a matter of fact, they had gone out from the English left flank, and, having arrived between the contending lines, were unable to see anything of either the English or the Boers. It was only by noticing the fall of the bullets that they discovered where they really were.

The lecturer next touched on the several forms of projectiles used and their effect. Shrapnel was generally ineffective, chiefly owing to the difficulty of estimating the range and getting corrections, as it was impossible ever to see one of the enemy's guns (except at night, when the flash could be observed), and also on account of the height of the burst, as the bullets, on the bursting of the shrapnel 260 to 330 feet above the ground—an ordinary occurrence—only had the effect of small pebbles. At Paardeberg, for instance (immediately before Cronje's capitulation), 5,000 Boers were actively engaged for hours in face of the concentrated fire of 100 English guns, and yet after the capture of the enemy's position only 150 wounded Boers could be counted. The naval guns proved themselves of far greater value, thanks to their larger calibre. The lyddite shells obtained good results against fixed objects, but had but little effect against troops in open order. The expectation of the deadly shock to be caused by the explosion of these shells was not realised. Artillery fire was generally opened by the naval guns at ranges between 9,000 and 11,000 paces, and was succeeded by the field guns at 4,000 paces, and maintained at that range.

The lecturer next explained, in very interesting fashion, the doings of French's Division after the relief of Kimberley, and gave many examples to show that the actual fighting was carried out by the mounted infantry. In connection with this point, Captain Trimmel drew comparisons between the cavalry and the mounted infantry. The cavalry went into action with the firm conviction that they must fight it out with sword or lance, and in fact tried over and over again to get at the Boers with these weapons, but they seldom succeeded in doing so. Then the cavalry of themselves adopted mounted infantry tactics.

In reconnaissance, the cavalry were able to effect but little, owing to the wide extent of the field of operations; indeed, they were barely able to carry out screening duties in the tactical sense, and gradually found themselves obliged to adopt dismounted action; and finally to put themselves on exactly the same footing as the mounted infantry, as far as fighting tactics were concerned. The mounted infantry were not trained nor organised for independent action, till after the war had commenced, and Lord Roberts had taken over command. And it is only of late that we see them formed in larger tactical bodies;—as brigades, composed of

several battalions turned into independent operating forces, by the addition of artillery and technical troops. The service of supply was intimately connected with the assistance that could be afforded by the railways, and the rapidity with which these could be repaired—seriously damaged as they were—while the army advanced. The English technical troops deserve the greatest credit in this connection. The medical service, provided with military *personnel* for one army corps, and augmented by civilian *personnel* to cope with the needs of the whole army, demanded the utmost exertions from every one of its members.

The climatic extremes of the country, and the want of tents, must not be overlooked in connection with the long marches that were carried out. Even the English Head-Quarter Staff generally bivouacked in the open, and the Military Attachés were only able to get some shelter from the frequent rain at nights after the surrender of Paardeberg, when a few tents and shelters became available for distribution.