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WHAT HAS THE BOER WAR TO TEACH US, AS REGARDS INFANTRY ATTACK ?

*A lecture delivered before the Military Society of Berlin, 5th March, 1902,
by Lieut.-Colonel von LINDENAU, of the German General Staff.*

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"Militär-Wochenblatt."

(Continued from January JOURNAL, page 56.)

9. SELECTION OF THE POINT OF ATTACK.

THE three examples selected, as a glance at the sketches will show, are purely frontal attacks. As such they developed themselves, and such they were from beginning to end. The days before these battles went by without the slightest attempt being made by careful reconnaissance to obtain more favourable conditions for fighting than those which were afforded by a purely frontal attack. There was no endeavour made to keep distances between the troops during the advance, so that they might be in a position to change about from front to flank. Nowhere was there anything of the Moltke idea, namely, not to unite forces until the decisive moment in the action had arrived, so that the concentric advance to the assault might result in the enveloping of the enemy.

The English generals have been blamed for these sins of omission in every language in the world. But I may nevertheless assert, that at least there were no sins of omission. Fully conscious, as they were, of the advantages of a flanking movement, the English leaders nevertheless determined on a frontal one, because they considered it the best means, under the particular circumstance of the time, to secure success. To surround the Boer positions was, it must be admitted, a most difficult operation, on account of the methods which the Boers employed. When unable to occupy the front sufficiently, the Boers mounted their horses and prolonged the flank. This prolongation could only be effected at the cost of their already weak and widely-extended front. The idea, then, that one would thus be able to break through the line in front by bringing force to bear at a particular point was, therefore, fundamentally correct. But its accomplishment proved a much more difficult task when opposed to modern firearms than would formerly have been the case. These new long-range weapons, with the power of being able to obtain the maximum fire effect in the shortest possible time, make it easy to concentrate the fire on a given point. The intervals, which there may be between the detachments opposing an advance against the front and flank, can be covered by their cross-fire, and the enemy's attacks can be frustrated much more quickly than

formerly. To break through the enemy's centre is undoubtedly far more difficult than it used to be.

Much greater advantages can be looked for by attacks on the outer flanks. In the meantime, however, when one looks at the battle-fields of Magersfontein, Colenso, and Spion Kop, only a few advantages were gained on the outer wings in these cases. At Magersfontein the left flank rested on the Modder river, and on the right was the broad, hollow-way through which the railway found its way to Kimberley. This hollow-way can easily be brought under an effective fire from the heights on the east and those to the west of the railway. Accordingly an advance by it had to be avoided. At Spion Kop both flanks were extraordinarily strongly protected. The right wing was formed by Taba Myama, the left by Kranz Kloof. The turning of Taba Myama, viâ Acton Holmes, might have been effected, and would have been a subject for British consideration. There was a discussion at Colenso, whether it would not have been better as a preliminary to the battle to seize the Hlangwane Hill on the extreme left flank of the Boer position. From this hill the whole of the enemy's position could have been enfiladed. Its possession was a good pivot for the crossing of the Tugela and the further attacks. Its capture could not have been very difficult, because it could only be held by detached forces sent from the position on the other bank of the Tugela. There were, therefore, at Colenso and at Taba Myama some advantages to be gained by a flank attack, but they were not, however, very great. The frontal attack was, therefore, considering the Boers' mode of fighting, by no means so much to be deprecated as is generally accepted. Whether the desired result might have been arrived at more quickly in another way is intentionally left out of this discussion.

10. THE COURSE OF THE FRONTAL ATTACKS.

We will now see how the British carried out this frontal attack in the three actions, beginning with

MAGERSFONTEIN.

In his advance from the Orange River to the relief of Kimberley, Lord Methuen, after severe fighting at Belmont, Enslin, and the Modder, crossed the latter river on the 28th November. The Boers, under Cronje, had retreated to the position of Magersfontein, as shown on Plate 1. This position was strengthened in the most effective manner, and was invisible from the British side; but, since the troops were in camp at the Modder River from the 28th November to the 9th December, there should have been time for an ample reconnaissance of the position, which was only 10 kilometres distant. Nothing, however, was done, and the time was wasted. Neither the advanced line of the position, nor the extreme points of the flanks were ascertained, although sufficient cavalry and a balloon section were at hand.

After a naval gun had fired on the position at long range on the 9th December, without accomplishing anything, Methuen set out on his march at two o'clock on the afternoon of the 10th December. After they had marched 3 kilometres, and had been fired on by a few Boer advanced posts, the whole of the artillery was brought into action, and the high ground shown in the sketch was shelled till dusk, the British thinking that it was the Boer position. The Boers never replied

to this fire, and kept absolutely quiet. The advance was renewed on the night of the 10th-11th December, about 12.30 a.m. In consequence of the darkness, it was decided to advance in column of double companies, those on the wings maintaining touch by means of ropes, and no deployment was to be made until break of day. Sunrise was expected early, namely, 3.25 a.m. The Highland Brigade marched straight for the projecting portion of the hilly chain, which was believed to form the Boer left wing. Following them came the Gordons, who were not included in any brigade; whilst the Brigade of Guards advanced to the right rear of the Gordons. The 9th Brigade were ordered to occupy Moss and Brown's Drift, and to take charge of the baggage and train. The advance of the Highlanders went quite smoothly at first. In fact, they got so far as the passage of the wire entanglement. Scarcely had they done so, however, and had reached a point computed to be not more than 300 metres from the advanced trenches lying at the foot of the slope, when the Boers opened a most effective fire on them, notwithstanding the darkness. They had absolute information of the British movement, to the smallest detail. Whether this had been betrayed by means of a lightning flash or in consequence of insufficient caution being observed on the line of march is hard to say. The bright rays of a lantern carried by one of the guides is also said to have been the cause of the advance being discovered so early; and it was not till they had come to within 300 metres of the Boer position as mentioned above, that the Highlanders endeavoured to deploy and extend. They were too late, and were shot down in the attempt. The Highlanders are without doubt thoroughly fine troops, and their officers were men who were resolved to die for their country, whenever they might be called upon. They did everything that brave soldiers could do under such circumstances. In spite of this their men rushed back, and it was only after a time that the officers managed to bring them to a standstill and get them to open fire. This they did at a range of about 800 metres, and kept it up for hours. The energy of the officers further succeeded in getting forward single companies some distance by rushes. But the springing up and then advancing, the noise at the commencement of firing, and the want of uniformity in the rushes appear to have only served as a signal to the Boers to concentrate their fire as far as possible on the advancing detachments. Notwithstanding the bravery of individuals—which commanded even the admiration of their opponents—the rushes had soon to be abandoned owing to the heavy losses; and the whole forward movement came to a standstill.

Soon after the Boers had opened fire, as morning appeared, Methuen ordered the artillery to take up the position shown on the map. On the Boer side only one field piece—a Maxim-Nordenfeldt—was employed in the fight. The British artillery were, therefore, able to employ nearly all their force against the enemy's infantry. They were, nevertheless, unable to beat down the fire of the latter, even although they tried to do so for over three hours. It was ascertained at a comparatively late hour that the left wing of the Boers stretched as far as the river. Against this the Brigade of Guards advanced. These deployed under cover of advanced skirmishers, who were continually reinforced, and eventually three battalions were in the firing line; the fourth—the Scots—was held in reserve. The Brigade made good way at first. On the other hand, the Highlanders, although they had been reinforced by the battalion of Gordons, still made no way. And when,

at one o'clock, the Boers, who up to this had kept their guns in reserve, opened fire against the left wing of the Highlanders, and advanced against it with various groups, the Highlanders again retreated, taking the Gordons with them, only one portion of them holding on in front of the batteries. The British artillery endeavoured to re-establish itself by means of a change of position to the right, in front of the Guards' Brigade. They advanced with their howitzers to within 2,500, and with their other batteries to within 1,100 metres of the Boer lines, and, in concert with the Guards' Brigade, remained in action till dark. As the Boers kept persistently prolonging their left wing, and with several groups advanced to the attack in the direction of Brown's Drift, the Guards' Brigade and about half the Yorkshires were pushed forward on the extreme right flank. At the end of the fight the Scots, nearly the whole of the 9th Brigade, and the mounted infantry were still completely intact. Out of 13 battalions only eight and a half had taken part in the fight; but, notwithstanding this, Methuen, who had the reputation amongst us Germans of being an intrepid and excellent officer, gave up the fight and retired.

"BULLER'S FORTUNE AT COLENZO WAS LITTLE DIFFERENT."

In order to relieve Ladysmith, Buller had to force the passage of the Tugela. The Boers, under Botha, fully cognisant of the British advance from Frere, withdrew their advanced troops to the north side of the Tugela, and occupied and strengthened the position shown on Plate 2, which naturally was one of extraordinary strength. The railway bridge was destroyed. On the 12th December and following days the whole of the British troops intended for the attack were massed at Chieveley camp, in full view of the Boers. On the 13th and 14th as much of the Boer position as could be seen was shelled continuously by eight naval guns, under General Buller's orders. The position of the naval guns is shown in the sketch. The Boers neither replied to the fire nor occupied the positions. Behind the cover of the heights they remained quietly in their camps, with the exception of a few men on the look-out. This plan misled some of the English generals, by causing them to think that the Boers had abandoned all intention of an obstinate resistance. General Clery meanwhile issued an order, approved by General Buller, which follows *verbatim*. Although from the arrangement of this order the German system of drawing up orders is recognisable, nevertheless the majority of German officers will be of opinion that it was much too long-winded. It goes too much into detail. Its purpose was to secure the crossing of the Tugela, but in its third paragraph a movement was ordered which could only take place after the passage of the river had been secured. Further, the order brought about a far too great scattering of the troops, so that later on, at places where they should have been otherwise easily able to outnumber the enemy, the latter were able to meet them on equal terms. The order runs as follows:—

"Chieveley, December 14th, 1899.

10 p.m.

1.—The enemy is entrenched in the kopjes north of Colenso Bridge. One large camp is reported to be near the Ladysmith Road, about five miles north-west of Colenso. Another large camp is reported in

the hills which lie north of the Tugela, in a northerly direction from Hlangwane Hill; a rocky height covered with bush.

2.—It is the intention of the General Officer commanding to force the passage of the Tugela to-morrow.

3.—The 5th Brigade will move from its present camping ground at 4.30 a.m., and march towards the Bridle Drift immediately west of the junction of Doornkop Spruit and the Tugela. The Brigade will cross at this point, and, after crossing, move along the left bank of the river towards the kopjes north of the iron bridge.

4.—The 2nd Brigade will move from its present camping ground at 4 a.m., and, passing south of the present camping ground of No. 1 and No. 2 Divisional Troops (Artillery), will march in the direction of the iron bridge at Colenso. The Brigade will cross at this point, and gain possession of the kopjes north of the iron bridge.

5.—The 4th Brigade will advance at 4.30 a.m. to a point between Bridle Drift and the railway, so that it can support either the 5th or the 2nd Brigade.

6.—The 6th Brigade (less a half battalion escort to baggage) will move, at 4 a.m., east of the railway, in the direction of Hlangwane Hill, to a position where it can protect the right flank of the 2nd Brigade, and, if necessary, support it or the mounted troops referred to later as moving towards Hlangwane Hill.

7.—The officer commanding Mounted Brigade will move at 4 a.m., with a force of 1,000 men and one Battery of No. 1 Brigade Division, in the direction of Hlangwane Hill; he will cover the right flank of the general movement, and will endeavour to take up a position on Hlangwane Hill, whence he will enfilade the kopjes north of the iron bridge. He will further detail detachments of 300 and 500 men to cover the right and left flanks respectively, and protect the baggage.

8.—The 2nd Brigade Division, Royal Field Artillery, will move at 4.30 a.m., following the 4th Brigade, and will take up a position whence it can enfilade the kopjes north of the iron bridge. This Brigade Division will act on any orders it receives from Major-General Hart.

The six naval guns (two 4·7-inch and four 12-pounders) now in position north of the 4th Brigade, will advance on the right of the 2nd Brigade Division, Royal Field Artillery.

No. 1 Brigade Division, Royal Field Artillery (less one battery detached with Mounted Brigade), will move, at 3.30 a.m., east of the railway, and proceed under cover of the 6th Brigade to a point from which it can prepare the crossing for the 2nd Brigade.

The six naval guns now encamped with No. 2 Divisional Troops will accompany and act with this Brigade Division.

9.—As soon as the troops mentioned in preceding paragraphs have moved to their positions, the remaining units and the baggage will be parked in deep formation, facing north, in five separate lines, in rear of to-day's artillery position, the right of each line resting on the railway, but leaving a space of 100 yards between the railway and the right flank of the line. (Here follow the orders for the baggage, ammunition columns, and supply columns.)

10.—The position of the General Officer commanding will be near the 4·7-inch guns. The Commanding Royal Engineer will send two sections 17th Company Royal Engineers with the 5th Brigade; and one section and Headquarters with the 2nd Brigade.

11.—Each infantry soldier will carry 150 rounds on his person, the ammunition now carried in the ox-wagons of regimental transport being distributed. Infantry great-coats will be carried in two ox wagons of regimental transport if Brigadiers so wish; other stores will not be placed in these wagons.

12.—The General Officer commanding 6th Brigade will have a half battalion as baggage guard.

The two naval guns now in position immediately south of Divisional Headquarter Camp will move at 5 a.m. to the position now occupied by the 4.7-inch guns.

By order,

B. HAMILTON, Colonel."

In accordance with this order the brigades intended for the first line moved off, on the 15th December, in the most careless manner—the 2nd Brigade to the crossing at Colenso, the 5th to Bridle Drift (that is to say, to two different crossings, which lay 5 kilometres apart). The 5th Brigade advanced without any scouts in front, and exactly in the formation shown in the sketch, the leading battalion in quarter-column of fours. It may be here remarked that a British battalion is usually divided into eight companies. The remaining battalions followed in quarter-column. Just as the brigade so formed had advanced to within 500 metres of the Tugela, the enemy's first shrapnel burst in their ranks. At the same moment fire was opened quite unexpectedly by numbers of infantry entrenched on the opposite bank. The brigade formed line of battalion at once, with an interval of 100 metres between battalions, and rushed forward to the Tugela. But here the Bridle Drift was not to be found (it was supposed to lie immediately to the west of the Doornkop Spruit). One portion of the front line sprang into the Tugela, hoping to reach the opposite bank by swimming, but were caught by wire entanglements laid in the river and drowned. The remaining portion of the leading battalion commenced firing. General Hart ordered the three battalions in the rear to change direction towards the east, thinking the ford lay still further eastwards (whereas, according to some, its real position was about 1 kilometre further to the west; but according to others it had disappeared altogether, owing to the Boers having dammed it up). Here they came into the bend of the river, and established themselves in that position. Seeing that further advance was impossible, they opened a heavy, though ineffective, fire on the Boer trenches. It may here also be remarked that, though the regulations ordained volley firing, individual firing only was made use of.

General Buller, who recognised the danger to the 5th Brigade in being situated at the bend of the river, ordered General Hart to withdraw it. This was soon accomplished in the case of the two rear-most battalions, but the two battalions in front, not receiving the order for retirement till long afterwards, were fighting for several hours.

Much more tactical knowledge was shown by General Hildyard in handling his brigade than was displayed by General Hart. He formed his men from the very commencement into firing lines of great strength, with supports in rear, and caused the 2nd Battalion of the East Surrey Regiment to follow as a general reserve. The brigade was, however, only three battalions strong, as the 2nd Battalion of the

West Yorkshire Regiment had been left behind in Frere to guard the lines of communication. The brigade advanced to the west of the railway against Colenso; and as it came within 800 metres of the Tugela it was met by a heavy fire, to which it replied. To the right of the 2nd Brigade, the 6th Brigade, which had been kept next behind in rear, now joined in the fight by detachments. Another portion of the 6th Brigade deployed towards Hlangwane Hill, so as to cover the attack on Colenso. This attack made good headway, in spite of serious losses. Then there took place an episode which proved fatal to the success of the action. The 14th and 66th Batteries of the First Brigade Division, commanded by Colonel Long, who, under escort of the 6th Brigade, were to have supported the attack of the 2nd Brigade, and were intended to come into action simultaneously with six naval guns, suddenly unlimbered on the right flank of the firing line engaged against Colenso. They were here only 600 metres distant from the river. The enemy at once concentrated all their fire on them, with the result that in a short time the two batteries were silenced. They lost the greater portion of the gunners, and those who were left took refuge in the nearest donga. Colonel Long himself was badly wounded. General Buller believing, in error, that in the disaster to the 14th and 66th Batteries the six naval guns were included, gave up all hope of successfully crossing the river, although the whole of his 4th and half of his 6th Brigade were intact, and out of the 16½ battalions at his disposal only 9½ had been in action.

Even if the battle at this particular moment was not in an exactly hopeful condition, still an energetic move on the part of the fresh troops would have doubtless made, in spite of the past blunders, the success of the enterprise a possibility. But victory was only to be gained by the General himself taking supreme command of the attack. To do this it would have been necessary for General Buller to remain in rear of the advance. Instead of doing this he proceeded to the front, to where the endangered guns lay, and allowed the misfortune which had befallen them to react immediately upon himself, and thus formed a pessimistic view of the outcome of the engagement.

His subsequent orders had only for their object the saving of the guns. Hildyard's brigade, which had already reached Colenso Station, received the order to advance one battalion further towards Colenso without allowing itself to become hotly engaged, and with the remaining two battalions to proceed to the help of the guns. But in spite of the great bravery shown by these two battalions, with single companies of the 6th Brigade and the 7th Battery (which was under Dundonald's orders, and had hastened to render assistance with three teams of horses), and in spite of heroic endeavours on the part of individual officers, only two guns were rescued, ten having to be left behind, to fall later into the hands of the Boers.

At 10.30 a.m. Buller ordered a general retreat, and portions of the 4th Brigade were told off to cover the same. The official account of the battle (see Official Despatches, Part I., pp. 11, 12) gives no more definite information concerning the action of the 4th Brigade. It can, however, have only been employed in the last stage of the action, for otherwise its losses would have been heavier. In the day's engagement it had none killed and only three wounded (Official Despatches, I., p. 12). The activity of the 4th Brigade was, therefore, probably only confined to covering the retreat of the mounted troops under Lord Dundonald. The 1st Dragoons were charged with the

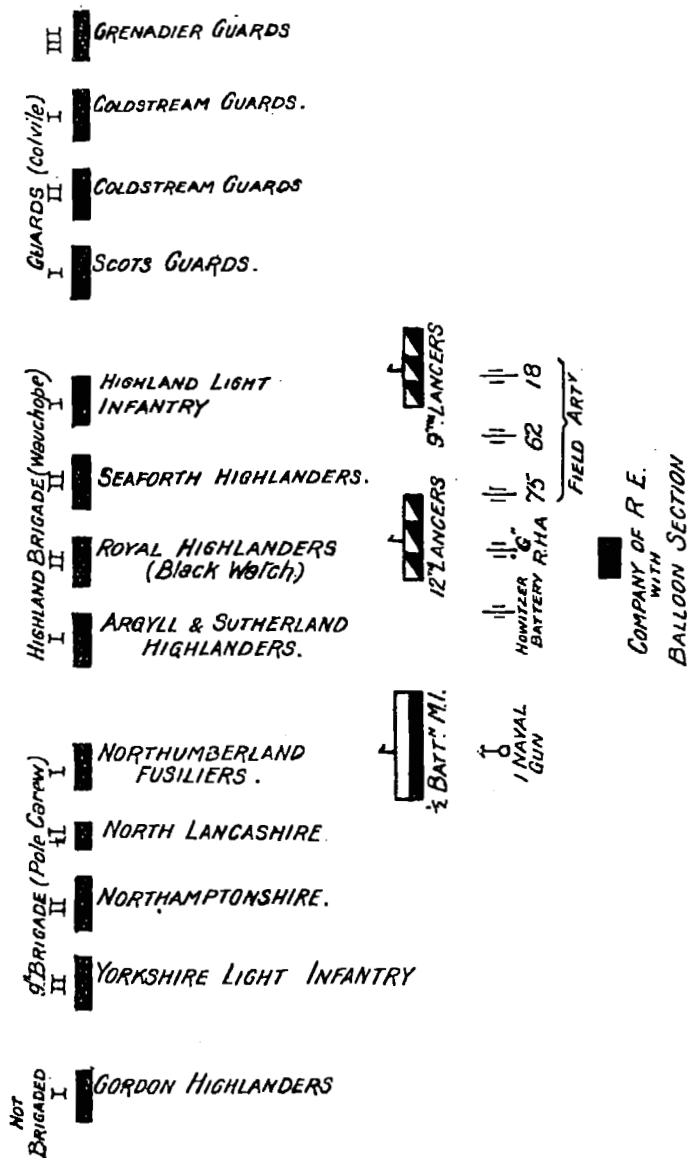
duty of securing the left flank. Dundonald himself advanced with a thousand men and the 7th Field Battery against Hlangwane Hill, but here met with a severe fire, and soon desisted from the prospectless attack of the hill. His battery took part in the fight at Colenso with four guns. The retreat of the British on Chieveley camp took place in good order, and the Boers did not pursue. The decisive tactical stroke intended at Colenso accordingly became, owing to the premature abandonment of the issue, merely a reconnaissance in force; and it was not until 25 days later that Buller was in a position to undertake a fresh effort for the relief of Ladysmith.

(To be continued.)

APPENDIX II.
THE BRITISH FORMATION AT MAGERSFONTEIN.

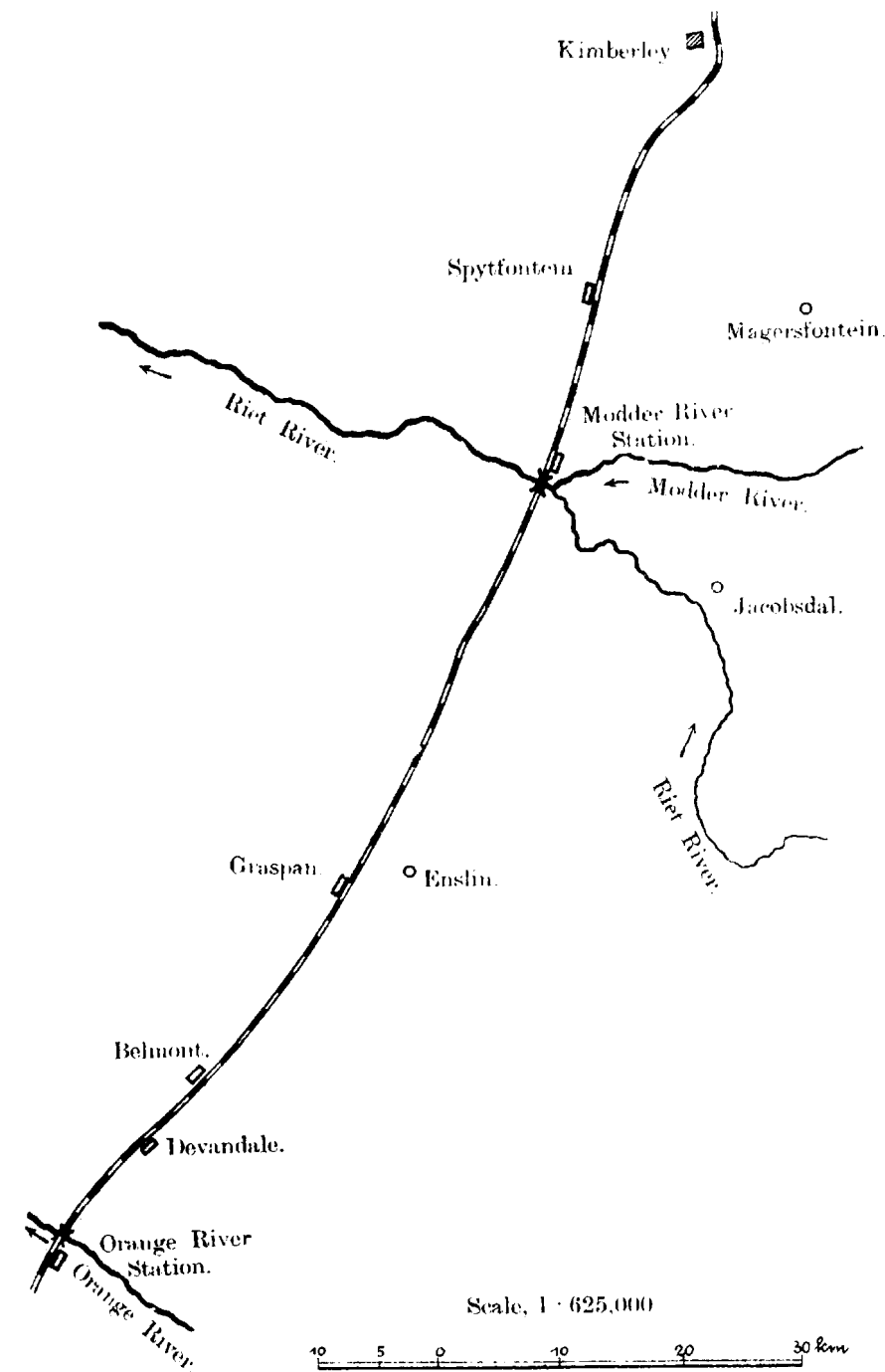
11th December, 1899.

GENERAL LORD METHUEN.



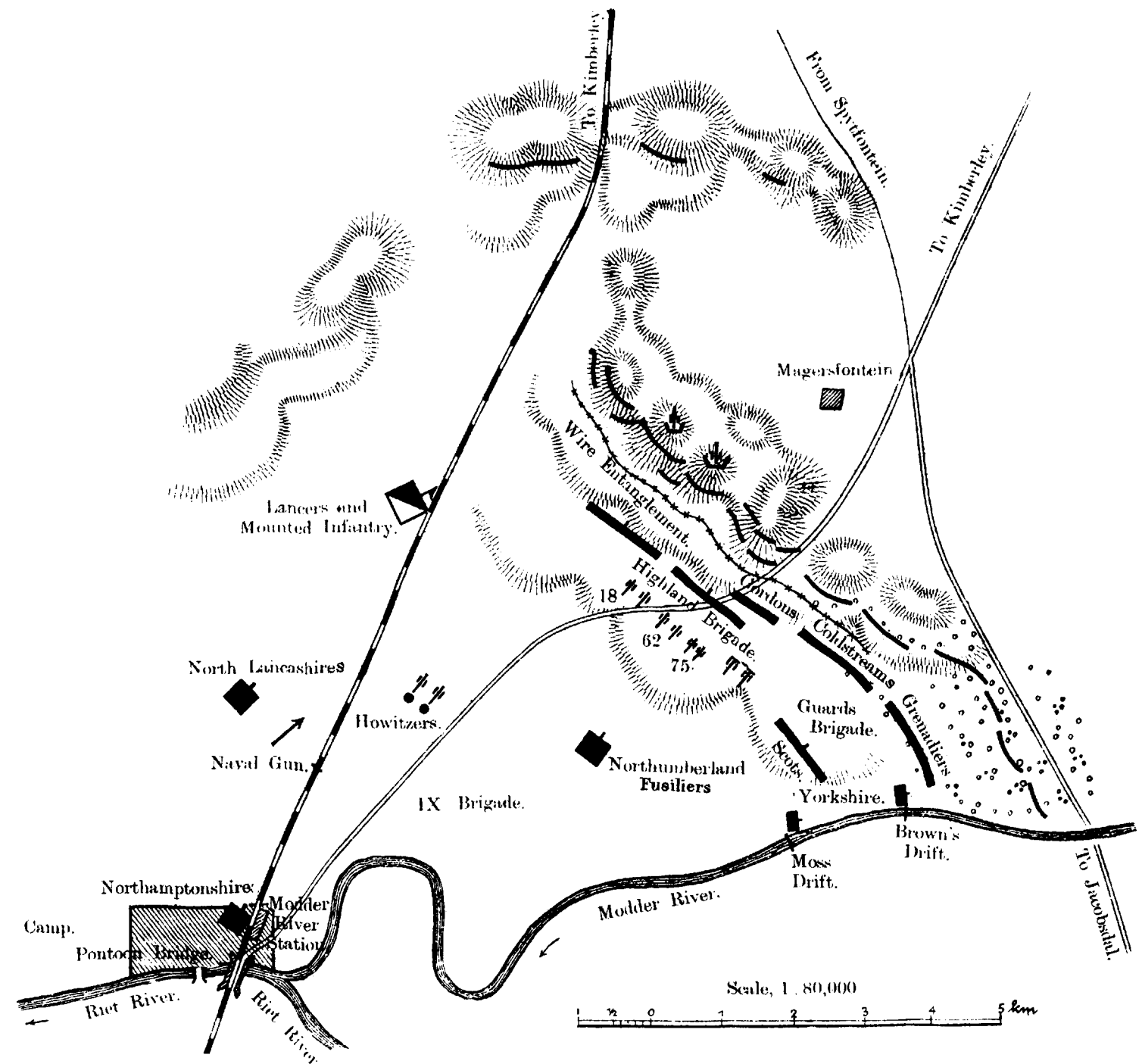
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PLAN TO ILLUSTRATE LORD METHUEN'S OPERATIONS.



SKETCH TO ILLUSTRATE THE BATTLE OF MAGERSFONTEIN.

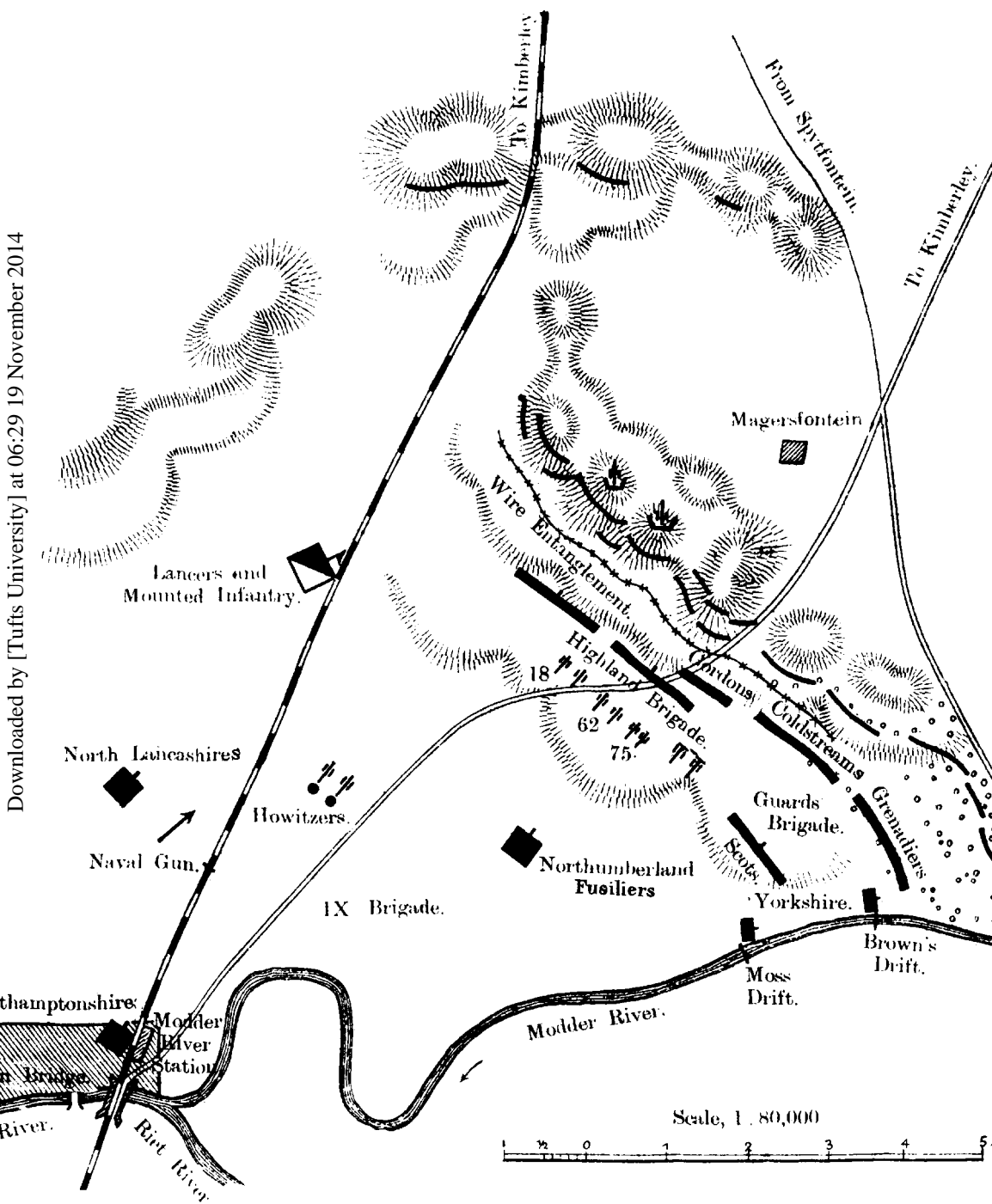
POSITION AT 1 P.M. ON THE AFTERNOON OF THE 11TH DECEMBER, 1899.



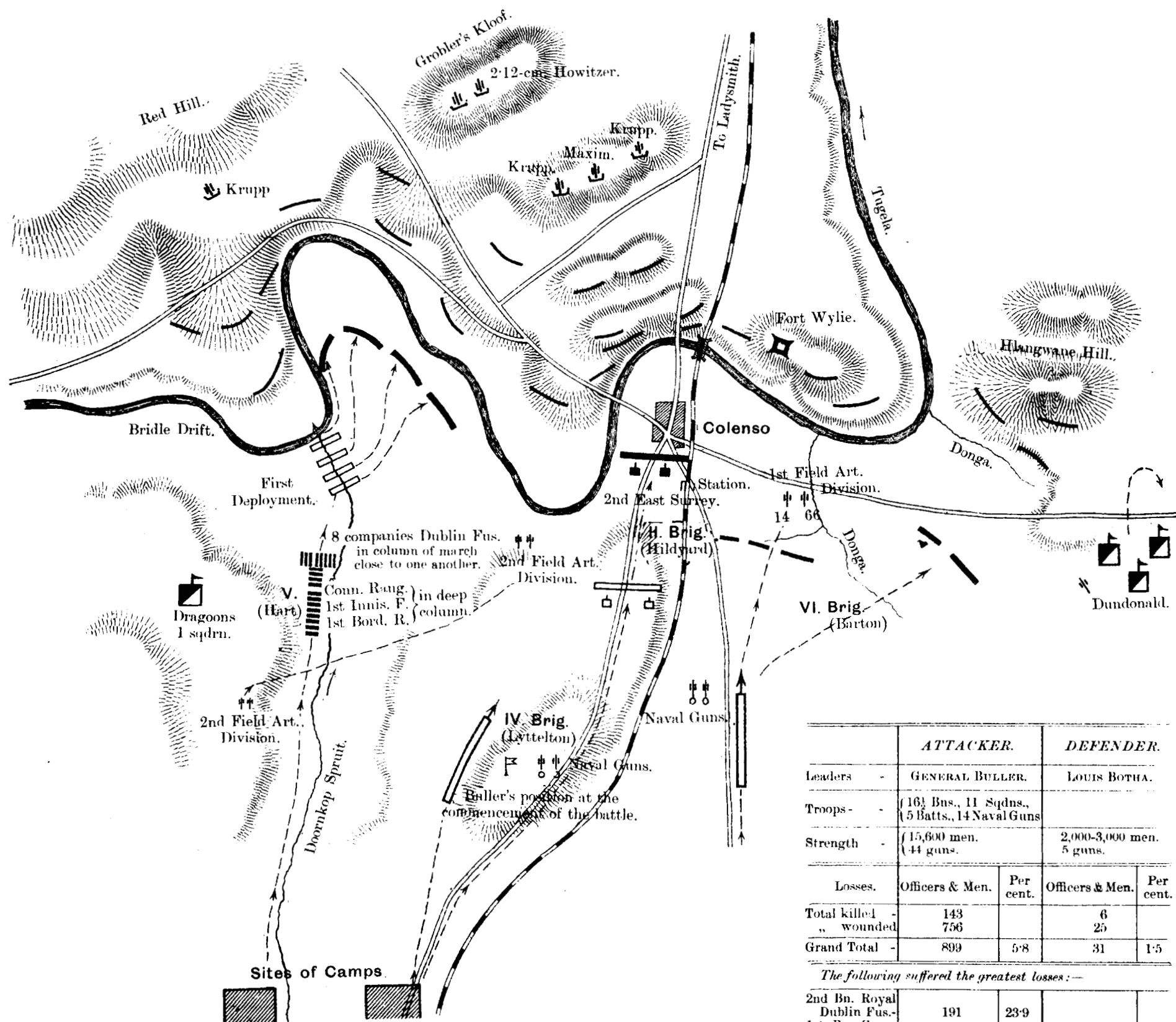
	<u>ATTACKER.</u>		<u>DEFENDER.</u>	
Leaders	LORD METHUEN.		CRONJE.	
Troops	{ 13 Bns., 6 Sqdns 5 Batts., 1 Naval Gun.			
Strength	{ 12,000 men. 29 guns.		{ 6,000 men. 13 guns.	
Losses.	Officers and Men.	Per cent.	Officers and Men.	Per cent.
Total killed -	205		60	
„ wounded -	690		159	
Grand Total -	895	7.4	219	3.6
<i>Single battalion losses :</i>				
2nd Black Watch -	282	35.2		
2nd Seaforth Highlanders -	187	23.4		
The following percentages taken from 70-71, compare :		Battle.	Percentage of killed and wounded.	
Infantry of the Guard -		St. Privat.	30 (nearly)	
Rifle Battalion of Guards -		„	54 officers 100 p.c.	
German Infantry -		Mars la Tour.	25	
Infantry Regiment No. 16 -		„	68	
Infantry Regiment No. 52 -		„	52	
French 2nd Turco Regiment -		Wörth.	86 officers 89 p.c.	

SKETCH TO ILLUSTRATE THE BATTLE OF MAGERSFONTEIN.

POSITION AT 1 P.M. ON THE AFTERNOON OF THE 11TH DECEMBER, 1899.



SKETCH TO ILLUSTRATE THE BATTLE OF COLENZO,
ON THE 15TH DECEMBER, 1899.

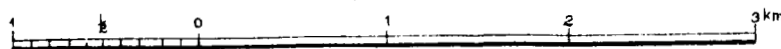


	ATTACKER.		DEFENDER.	
Leaders -	GENERAL BULLER.		LOUIS BOTHA.	
Troops -	(16½ Bns., 11 Sqdns., 5 Batts., 14 Naval Guns)			
Strength -	(15,600 men. 44 guns.)		2,000-3,000 men. 5 guns.	
Losses.	Officers & Men.	Per cent.	Officers & Men.	Per cent.
Total killed -	143		6	
„ wounded -	756		25	
Grand Total -	899	5·8	31	1·5

The following suffered the greatest losses:—

2nd Bn. Royal Dublin Fus.	191	23·9		
1st Bn. Conn. Rang. -	129	16·1		
1st Bn. Innis. Fus. -	104	13·0		

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