

The Battle of Spioenkop

23-24 January 1900

This self-guided trail leaflet will assist you along the trail and provide a brief explanation of events. The markers on the trail correspond to the letters in the pamphlet.

A: INTRODUCTION : Britain had for a time in the latter 19th century tried to gain control over the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (Transvaal). When Sir Alfred Milner became governor of the Cape Colony and High Commissioner for South Africa, the policy of aggressive imperialism was intensified. President Paul Kruger was determined to preserve the independence of his country, the ZAR, but relations steadily deteriorated, culminating in a failure by Britain to respond to an ultimatum to withdraw troops from the borders of the ZAR. War was declared on 11 October 1899.

Boer troops moved into the Colony of Natal and laid siege to Ladysmith, where large numbers of British forces were stationed. The Boers, in response to the arrival of thousands of British troops in Durban, took up positions along the Thukela River near Colenso. In early December a British force of 19400 men, under Sir Redvers Buller, suffered a humiliating defeat at Colenso.

During January, Buller was joined by General Sir Charles Warren, but still their attempts to breach the Boer defense line were unsuccessful. Spioenkop was the highest point on the Boer line, and on 23 January 1900, a British attempt to capture it began.



General Buller

B. A SURPRISE ATTACK: The spur that juts out to the right from Spioenkop as you look towards the Spioenkop Dam is the route used by the British as they made their way to the summit. The force, comprising 1700 men under Maj. General. E. Woodgate departed under drizzling pitch dark conditions at 21h00 on 23 January. By 02h00 they had reached the plateaux below the summit. The summit of Spioenkop was at the time occupied by a force of about 100 Boers.

C: When the British reached this area they halted and fixed bayonets. The men then advanced in lines.

D: As the British approached this area a loud challenge from the Boer watch, followed by rifle fire issued out of the darkness. As the Boers reloaded, the British charged forward and bayoneted one of the Boers. He lies buried here. The remaining Boers fled the summit via the north eastern slopes and raised the alarm in the Boer encampments below. It appeared that the summit had been captured at little cost to the British.

E: After gaining control of the summit, Woodgate gave instructions for the hill to be fortified, and a shallow trench and breastworks were constructed. The trench faced north and was about 400m in length. The breastwork formed the extreme left of the British position. The trail now follows what is left of the old trench.



Once Louis Botha became aware of the British success he gave orders for the Boers to occupy the surrounding slightly lower hills. He believed that Spioenkop was defensible from these positions, and it was for this reason that he had in the first place positioned only a few men on the summit. 400 men were ordered to climb the north eastern slopes and attack the British on the summit.

General Botha

They would be supported by rifle fire from the surrounding hills and seven field guns placed at strategic positions around Spioenkop. These preparations occurred under cover of darkness and the thick mist.

F: The shallow depression and line of stones stretching from left to right is all that remains of the British trench. It was probably no deeper than 40cm. The stones and soil from the trench were formed into a low wall. By 06h30 the trench was complete and the men rested, waiting for the mist to lift. Note that the field of fire from this position is good.

G: These British mass graves mark the position of Woodgate's trenches. After the battle many of the British soldiers were buried in these trenches. The right hand extremity of the graves marks the end of the trench. Note that the field of fire from these positions is more limited than from the previous position.

Soon after 07h00 the mist momentarily lifted, showing Woodgate that his position (from the main British monument to the right) was extremely vulnerable to Boer cross-fire. He gave orders for some of his men to occupy positions stretching from the rocks near the car park, to the Boer memorial and to the right extremity of the British trench. Some of these men made contact with the Boers who were advancing from the northeast. A desperate fight commenced.

By about 08h00 the mist started to clear. The Boer forces on the three surrounding hills could easily see the British soldiers on the crest, and unleashed a hail of rifle and artillery fire. British casualties were high, and Woodgate was mortally wounded, resulting in great confusion as to who was in command. By 12h00 the Boers had driven the British from their positions on the crest, and advanced on the British trench, exerting pressure on the area which Woodgate had feared would be vulnerable. Boer artillery, aided by a signalman on the crest was devastatingly accurate.



"There must have been six hundred dead men on this strip of earth, and there cannot have been many battlefields where there was such an accumulation of horrors within so small a compass."

Deneys Reitz

I: The British buried in this grave probably died while trying to hold the crest during the opening stages of the battle. The view towards the British trench from here gives one an idea of the view the Boers had of the British. From about 15h00 the battle on the summit became relatively static, with the British grimly holding position whilst being bombarded by artillery fire. Once it became dark Lt. Col Thornycroft, at this time in command, ordered a retreat back to camp. Many of the Boers had by this time also fallen back.

Due to severe losses suffered, and the intense heat, about 200 Lancashire Fusiliers capitulated at about 13.00 on the British right flank. Late in the afternoon another force, the Kings Royal Rifles drove Gen. Burger and his men from the Twin Peaks. Buller however did not exploit this success and withdrew his men under cover of darkness. The Boers also suffered heavy losses

H: During the afternoon the Boers tried to outflank the British trench along this southern slope. The arrival of re-inforcements prevented a complete collapse of the British line. After a battle which lasted for about two hours on this southern slope, the British managed to drive the Boers back towards Aloe Knoll, and secured the area. Some of the British fighting here belonged to the Imperial Light Infantry, to whom this memorial has been erected.

At sunrise the following morning, the Boers found that the British had retreated, and that only the dead and wounded remained on the summit. The British had suffered a major setback.

J. The Boers buried in this grave were probably killed during the early part of the battle whilst exposed to crossfire when the British still held the crest.

K. Most of the British soldiers buried in this grave were members of the Royal Lancaster Regiment.



British dead awaiting burial at Spioenkop

Losses (approximate)	DEAD	WOUNDED	PRISONER
BRITISH	343	563	187
BOER	68	134	Nil

Buller had once more failed to breach the Boer defense line. One month later, on 27 February 1900, Buller finally managed to break the Boer siege of Ladysmith, which had lasted for four months

Information courtesy of Mr. G. Torlage.

Further Reading: Reitz, D. Commando: A Boer Journal of the Boer War. (Johannesburg, Jonnathan Ball, 1929)
Packenham, T. The Boer War. (Jhb, Jonnathan Ball, 1929)
Breytenbach, J. Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid Afrika Vol III (Pretoria Govt Printer 1969-78)

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