



## Anglo Boer War 1899—1902 BUT WE GOT THE GUN!

Siege of Ladysmith  
ROBIN SMITH

The raid on Surprise Hill by the 2nd Battalion of The Rifle Brigade  
on 10/11 December 1899 and their ambush by the Pretoria Commando.

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### Prologue

Quite soon after the outbreak of the Anglo Boer War in October 1899, Ladysmith was surrounded and besieged by Boer forces from the Transvaal and Orange Free State. For a time, there was very little action as the Boers sat down in their laagers around the dusty little town, resolving to bombard the British garrison into submission with their heavy guns. When this was clearly not having the desired effect, they launched an assault on 9 November which was easily beaten off. The British soldiers and the townsfolk waited for relief by General Redvers Buller's imperial forces massing to the south beyond the Tugela River. However, the tangle of hills and koppies between Ladysmith and the river was a formidable barrier and relief was nearly three months away in December 1899.

The garrison, in spite of its commander, Lieutenant General Sir George White, VC, taking the view that sorties outside the lines would serve no purpose, nevertheless took such initiatives on several occasions. A raid by the Colonial regiments on the night of 7 December 1899 succeeded in destroying two Boer guns on Gun Hill east of the town, a 15.5cm Creusot "Long Tom" siege gun and a 12cm Krupp howitzer, and capturing a machine gun.

British regular troops of the Rifle Brigade undertook another attack three nights later on Surprise Hill on the northern side of Ladysmith. They reached the summit undetected, skirmished with a few defenders and laid charges in the barrel of the Boer Krupp howitzer. For some reason the first charge failed to detonate but the second destroyed the gun barrel. The delay gave time for the Boers to intercept the British soldiers as they descended the hill to return to Ladysmith. Both sides suffered casualties, the Rifle Brigade many more than the Boer defenders of the hill.

The Rifle Brigade however has a closer association with Ladysmith. A regiment of riflemen came into existence early in the 19th Century as the 95th Regiment of Foot. Light infantrymen, armed with a rifle of far greater accuracy than a smooth-bore musket and kitted out in drab green coats with black facings, they acted as skirmishers and shock troops. They were with the Duke of Wellington throughout the Peninsula War in Spain and Portugal and were with him too at Waterloo, the climax to the wars with Napoleon Bonaparte. Shortly afterwards they were constituted as a separate brigade and named after the weapon that distinguished them from the regular infantry regiments.

The most famous rifeman of the 95th was General Sir Harry Smith, a Captain as a young soldier in Spain. In 1812, at the conclusion of the siege of Badajoz, he had occasion to afford protection to a young lady, Juana Maria de los Dolores de León, who shortly after became his wife. Sir Harry spent several years of his life in South Africa, in the eastern Cape Colony during the wars with the Xhosa people and later as Governor of the Cape Colony. Juana Maria, Lady Smith, gave

her name to Ladysmith and her husband to the nearby town of Hartismuth.

The two Krupp howitzers from Gun Hill and Surprise Hill were not totally destroyed. They were taken back to Pretoria and rebuilt in the Nederlandsche Zuid Afrikaansche Spoorweg-Maatschappij (NZAS-M) workshops – one gun re-manufactured out of the remains of the two. Captured at the end of the war by the British, this gun was sent to England and put on display in the depot of the Rifle Brigade in Winchester. It is no longer there and no record exists of where it might have ended up. Probably the barrel and the other metal parts of the gun were taken away and melted down in the early days of the Second World War to make guns to fight other battles.

Once Ladysmith was relieved by Buller's forces at the end of February 1900, the Rifle Brigade erected a monument to their dead. They placed it at the spot where the fiercest fighting had taken place in the early hours of 11 December – where a small number of brave young Boers fired on 'G' Company of the Rifle Brigade. Not far away from this spot was the original mass grave of eight of the casualties of that night's action, now lost once their remains were reinterred in the nearby Tin Town cemetery in the 1960s. Built from stones and small rocks collected in the vicinity, in the traditional form of a pyramid a little taller than a man, the structure remained intact for almost a century. Vandals, in search of artefacts, military badges or perhaps bone fragments (there were none!), wrecked the cairn sometime in the 1990s.

*There was a base of stone and the white marble*

for Military Archives in London. His entries for the period around the time of the raid give valuable insights into what happened. A non-commissioned officer who was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his part in the action, the diary includes a hand-drawn sketch, a document even more valuable than any of the written accounts. Rifle Brigade Captain Johnny Gough (as he then was) also kept a diary in some detail. The Adjutant of the battalion, Lieutenant Hugh Dawna, wrote the story of the raid for *The Rifle Brigade Chronicle*, a hard-covered book covering the doings of the brigade and published annually until 1958.

Apart from Deneys Reitz, no one on the Boer side wrote very much about the action. There are numbers of participants on both sides as well as people within Ladysmith who wrote about their participation or described what they saw or heard that night. Numbers of journalists, weighed in with stories and anecdotes, some of them absolutely outrageous and blatantly biased, some more objective and unemotional.

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One of the Boer casualties was Harry Spanier, the first Jewish casualty of the war on the Boer side. His monument is in Heroes' Acre cemetery in Pretoria together with his Boer comrades. Désiré de Villiers, still but a teenager, son of a prominent citizen of Pretoria, was killed at the Foot of Surprise Hill and buried in the family plot in the same burial ground. His father erected a striking white marble statue over the grave which is still intact to this day.

*But we got the gun!* is an attempt to put on record the most comprehensive study of the Rifle Brigade raid that has yet been written. Just as the rebuilt monument will now be a permanent reminder of the action on Surprise Hill, this book seeks to be a definitive written record of our knowledge of one of the most evocative actions during the siege of Ladysmith.

But we got the gun!



From Henry W. Nevinson: *Ladysmith – The Diary of a Siege*:

It was sad to see the stretchers coming home this morning. Meeting a covered dhoolie, I asked the bearers who was in it. "Captain Paley," they said. He recognised me at once and was conscious, but his singularly blue eyes looked out of a deadly yellow and bloodless face, and his hands seemed to have the touch of death on them. When I said I was sorry, he answered, "But we got the gun."