

THE SKIRMISH AT GRASSPLATZ:

(26 SEPTEMBER 1914)

Introduction

In 1969, Harry Klein's unit history, known as **Light Horse Cavalcade. The Imperial Light Horse 1899-1961**, appeared in Cape Town. Established in September 1899, this unit, now renamed the **Light Horse Regiment**, participated actively in the Anglo Boer War, 1899-1902, and in World War 2, 1939-1945.

The ILH furthermore participated in the German South-West-African campaign under the command of Colonel P. S. Beves who, at that time, also commanded the so-called C Force. Members of the unit were involved in the skirmish at Grassplatz, a German outpost near Lüderitzbucht, shortly after disembarking in German South-West Africa.

1. En route to German South-West Africa

On 24 August 1914 the ILH had assembled on the sports fields at Booyens in Johannesburg.¹ On 8 September following, the unit departed by train from Newtown en route to Cape Town,² and on 12 September arrived in the mother city.³

Three days later D Squadron of the ILH embarked as a component part of the Brigade⁴ (C Force) under command of Colonel P. S. Beves. This squadron comprised 5 officers, 131 other ranks and 141 horses.⁵

On 18 September 1914 Lüderitzbucht was occupied without a shot being fired. The enemy retreated to Rothkuppe but left an outpost at the railway line at Grassplatz some 19 km east of Lüderitzbucht.³

Here, on 26 September 1914, D Squadron of the ILH underwent their baptism by fire in a particularly sad little action, as four members of the Squadron, two of them brothers, lost their lives in this skirmish.⁷

2. The Skirmish

In his **Light Horse Cavalcade** Klein asserts that Colonel Beves, who desired nothing less than immediate activity and the safeguarding of his outposts, despatched D Squadron (ILH) and two companies of the **Rand Light Infantry** to Grassplatz. The task force was instructed to take the station and to surround and occupy the outpost.

D Squadron was supported by infantry advancing from Kolmanskop. After a night march, during which the guide lost his way, the cavalry were nevertheless able to reach the enemy positions by dawn. The greater proportion of the German troops had vanished, but the ILH Squadron advanced on the station, while the infantry took up a position on a nearby ridge which gave the attacking force an unobstructed view of the station area.

The further succession of events as described by war correspondent W. S. Rayner, is set down by Klein in the following terms:

"Four Germans were directing the operations of about fifty Natives who were loading up stores. As the Natives were unarmed, the Light Horse refrained from firing. The Germans took advantage of this by getting well in among the Natives and opened fire. They slightly wounded two men and managed to get away. A short while later the ILH put up another party of Germans, killing four and capturing one, an officer, who was slightly wounded. They themselves lost four men killed and three wounded, one of the latter was Captain de Meillon, the Union Scout, who had been attached to the Squadron for the day. Another of the killed, Trooper Clifford Gronau, had

already been wounded that morning. Two of the others killed were the brothers Winslow — Rex and Wilfred, of the Johannesburg sporting family of tennis fame. There was something truly pathetic about the death of the second Winslow. He heard his brother cry out for water and, naturally, rushing to comply, was himself shot down as he was holding the water bottle to his brother's lips — shot doubtless by the same German."⁸

In his diary Lieutenant Colonel James Donaldson, DSO, recorded that:

"On our way back along the railway — at Stettin, midway between Grassplatz and Kolmanskop — we encountered six Germans. Two of whom got away, three were killed, one wounded and taken prisoner. Both of those who escaped were wounded and one we learned died the following day. We lost the two Winslow brothers, both famous tennis players killed and two other men badly wounded, who died the next day. They were shot down by one German whose horse had been killed. When his horse was shot and fell, the rider, an under officer, pitched forward to clear it. My men thought he was dead, then he suddenly started shooting. He first got one Winslow, and his brother who went to help him, as well as others. I felt greatly cut up at losing these men. The German was taken prisoner."⁹

3. The official report of Colonel Beves

In the aforementioned report the reader becomes acquainted with two unofficial reports, of which that of Lieutenant Colonel Donaldson is based on personal observation. In the case of war correspondent Rayner, it is not known whether he was present at or near the skirmish or not. On the other hand, the report of Rayner is more detailed than the diary notes of Lieutenant Colonel Donaldson. More comprehensive yet than either of these, was the official version of the occurrence, compiled by Colonel Beves on 27 September 1914 which was despatched to the staff officer of the Active Citizen Force in Pretoria on 2 October 1914. On the same latter date Colonel Beves sent an identically worded report to the Secretary for Defence.

Besides referring to the skirmish, Colonel Beves made mention of the fact that a cannon was dragged up and emplaced with much difficulty on a hillock some 2 km north of Lüderitzbucht. The enemy had blown up the railway track here and there, while a detachment of the RLI was despatched to Douglas Bay on 27 September 1914. On 29 September 1914 troops were again sent to Grassplatz, while others went to Charlottentahl. The following is the text of the third report from the field by Colonel Beves.

Lüderitzbucht.

Despatch No. 3.

27th September 1914.

The Secretary of Defence.

Pretoria.

With regard to the operations of the 25th and 26th September, the following particulars may be of interest: —

The Imperial Light Horse, about 100 strong, under Lieut Col Donaldson moved out from here at 8.30 p.m. on the 25th September. They were to go to the East of Grassplatz, but a mistake in guiding brought them to a point one mile East of Kolman's Kop, at 1.30 a.m. on the 26th.

At 6.15 a.m. in daylight, a move was made further East, and an enveloping movement on Grassplatz was being carried out when four mounted men and many natives on foot, broke from a hut. Although chased 6 miles the mounted men got away. The I.L.H. Horses had not been two days off the ship, and the Enemy are very well mounted on seasoned ponies. The men on foot were rounded up and proved to be Natives and coloured men. The Hut proved to be Grassplatz. After a rest and feed for the horses a start was made towards Luderitzbucht at 9.30 a.m. Meanwhile 200 of the Rand Light Infantry had located and engaged an enemy patrol at 8 a.m. and drove it Eastwards towards the I.L.H. At about 10 a.m. this Patrol, finding the I.L.H. behind them, tried to escape. Two did so, but five of the enemy, including an armed native, were killed, and one man wounded in the ear was taken prisoner. The man who was captured says both the men who escaped were wounded. The condition of the Horses of the I.L.H. quite precluded all idea of a second pursuit, although they finished the

day singularly fit considering their long land and sea Journey. Trooper H. Winslow was rendering aid to his brother, who was wounded, when he was shot. Both the Winslows and Trooper Croon were reported to have been shot by a man who lay so still, that all thought he was dead, though this point has since been disputed. A rumour current later, to the effect that the enemy were using explosive bullets, proved without foundation. The ammunition of the dead men and of the prisoner was examined and was found to be of the usual pointed German type.

The operation was carried out in a very sound manner, with method and without flurry. The Rand Light Infantry did exactly what was required of them and worked intelligently and rapidly. The Imperial Light Horse, though handicapped by the condition of their horses, covered 40 miles in 18 hours, and returned to quarters none the worse, though tired.

The physical condition of the troop . . . (is) . . . excellent and this small affair was carried through in quite the right spirit. Today the four men of the I.L.H. were buried with the usual Military Honours, the same honours were paid, by a firing party and trumpeters of the I.L.H. together with the bugles of the Garrison, to three of the Enemy's dead whom we fetched in this morning under a white flag. It was impossible to bring them in yesterday.

The 4,7 gun has been mounted on Nautilus Hill, about 1½ miles North of the Town. From this position it commands the Harbour, with its numerous bays, and the outer anchorage, and has a great field of fire inland. Being so far out it has to be treated as a "detached post", and is not included in the line of outposts. It has a strong escort of Infantry always with it. Dragging the gun to the top of the hill, after it was landed from a lighter, was a considerable feat, reflecting great credit on the Cape Garrison Artillery who man the gun, and the 300 men, jointly supplied by the Transvaal Scottish and the Rand Light Infantry for hauling purposes. The gun is in position now, and the permanent platform is well in hand, and should be finished by tomorrow. The hill will be strongly entrenched and everything done to make the place as strong as possible.

The Line between here and Kolmans Kop has been blown up in fourteen places, but one

days work will be enough to repair the damage. The actual demolitions are of a trivial order. To Rotkuppe from Kolmans Kop there are many more breaks, but I do not know the number.

28th September 1914.

Yesterday a detachment of 20 of the Rand Light Infantry, under an Officer, and with three guides from the Intelligence, were sent by sea to Douglas Bay, where they landed at 4 p.m. From that point they proceeded to march South East to Anichab, where they surprised a police post at 7.30 p.m. One of the Police tried to escape, but surrendered on being fired at; the other man was found hiding in the building. A horse and mule were also taken, and were sent overland to Lüderitzbucht. Four fire arms were taken. Thirty bales of fodder of various kinds were destroyed as it was not possible to bring them away.

29th September 1914.

Our intelligence has kept us well informed of the movements of the enemy in the vicinity of Kolmans Kop and Grassplatz, and yesterday reported that a patrol of about 10 was prowling about on the scene of the affair of the 26th inst. A similar manoeuvre to that carried out on that day was arranged for today, with the addition that troops were also sent to Charlottentahl. The Imperial Light Horse moved out last night and were in position at dawn this morning two miles beyond Grassplatz and drove Westwards, on a frontage of 3 miles. 300 Transvaal Scottish left at 2 a.m. and at dawn were facing Eastwards on a wide front and drove towards the I.L.H. A Company of the Scottish was at Charlottentahl at dawn, ready to intercept any who tried to break North. The right troop of the I.L.H. put up the enemy's patrol of 7 men who tried to escape Northwards, and were engaged by six Scouts of the Scottish at Charlottentahl. Four escaped and three were captured. One man was hit in five places, and he is in a precarious condition, in Hospital. The Officer was hit in four places, but none of the bullets injured him. One hit his pistol, one the cuff of his coat, a third, his collar, a fourth went through his hat. I mention this in detail in order to show that our shooting would appear to be good. The shooting of the enemy, up to date, has been accurate also, but there is really too little to

judge by yet. Our men had no casualties, although peppered for a few minutes.”

Conclusion

In the publication **The Union of South Africa and the Great War** (Pretoria 1924) these oc-

currences are not mentioned. Brigadier-General J. J. Collyer also states¹⁰ that no enemy pressure was exerted on the C Force. Except as it affected patrol-activities, the German Commander actually remained in his positions until the general German withdrawal to the north commenced.¹¹

NOTES

1. Klein, H.: *Light Horse Cavalcade the Imperial Light Horse 1899-1961*, p.64.
2. *Ibid.*, p.65.
3. *Ibid.*, p.66.
4. *Ibid.*, p.67. The Brigade consisted of 7 Citizen Battery Field Artillery, D Squadron 5th Mounted Rifles I.L.H.; 8th Infantry (Transvaal Scottish); 11th Infantry R.L.I. and one section of Engineers.
5. *Ibid.*, p.67.
6. *Ibid.*, p.67.
7. *Ibid.*, p.68.
8. *Ibid.*, p.68. From: Rayner, W. S. and Shanghnersg, W. W. O.: *How Botha and Smuts Conquered German South West*. The fourth member of the I.L.H. who fell, was Trooper Frank Croon.
9. *Ibid.*, p.68.
10. Collyer, J. J.: *The Campaign in German South West Africa 1914-1915*. Pretoria, 1937.
11. *Ibid.*, p.29.