EMANOEL LEE

· TO THE BITTER END ·

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE BOER WAR 1899-1902

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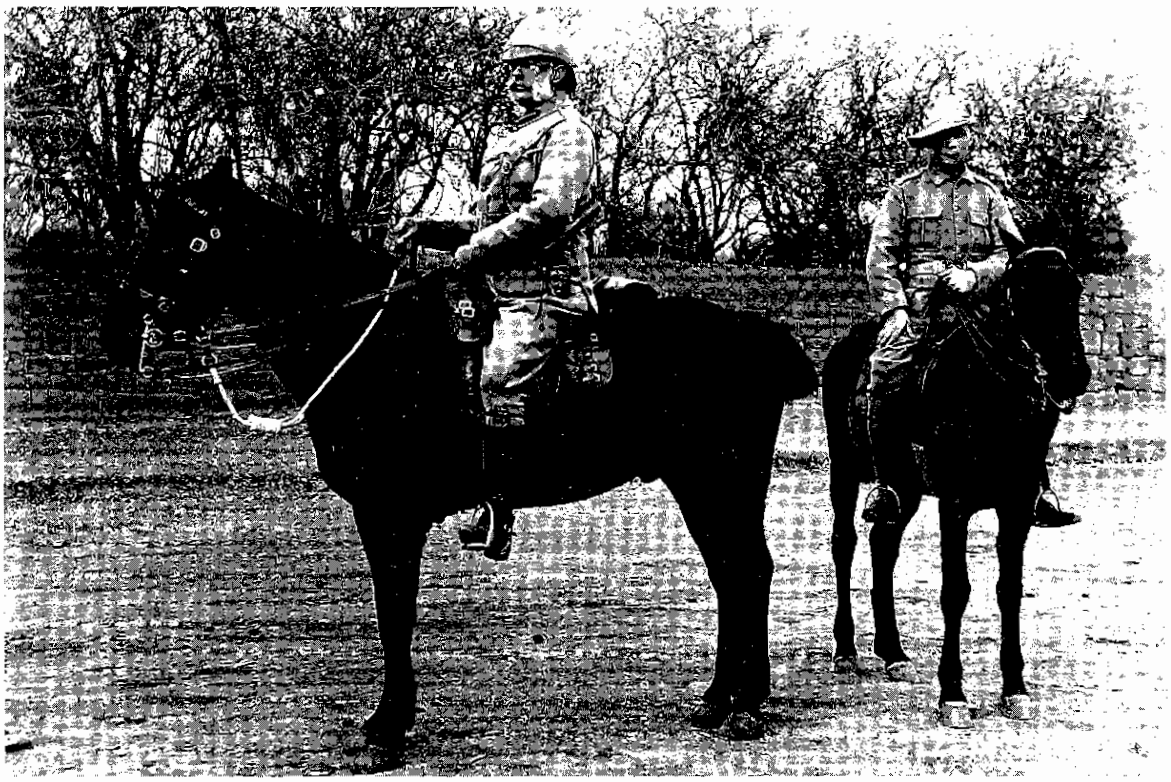
2. THE TWO ARMIES

THE BRITISH ARMY

In 1899 the British army was thought to be in peak condition. It was, however, designed to defend small uprisings all over an empire, not to fight a major war. Campaigns which had been fought since the Crimea had not needed the mobilization of large numbers of troops for any one region; instead small garrisons were established in most British territories. But because of financial constraints, changes in the distribution of its garrisons in the last quarter of the century had left South Africa, which at the time posed no military threat, without a large enough force to defeat the Boer attack. During the negotiations of 1899 the South African garrison was not reinforced because the British government did



9. General Campbell with orderly.

10. Indian troops in Cape Town.

not want to be provocative. The nearest large force was in India, where there were 150,000 seasoned native troops, but these were never used against the Boers, being regarded as essential to peace-keeping on the troubled northern frontier. It was decided also to restrict the fighting to white men. A second Indian mutiny was still a possibility and it is likely that the High Command worried that Indian troops might get a taste for defeating white armies.

The British government was very concerned about its military weakness in South Africa, but it was hoped that a few weeks would see a great difference. Once sufficient troops could be brought into the country, no great difficulty was envisaged in defeating a Boer attack. The British army considered itself to be more than a match for a rabble of farmers: more than thirty successful campaigns had been carried out against a variety of 'native' uprisings in the Empire and in Egypt. Senior officers had wide experience of military administration; the army was well fed, well clothed and backed up by a modern transport system. Khaki uniforms had been used for years and most regiments had considerable tropical experience. The young officers, especially those who had campaigned in India, had a healthy scepticism of Aldershot training. Morale was high.

British equipment was modern. The Lee-Enfield Mk I rifle, introduced in 1895, and the Lee-Metfords, although not quite as good as the Boer Mausers, were fine weapons. The artillery was

a great source of pride: field guns and howitzers had been tested under a great variety of battle conditions; most units had Maxim guns (later called machine guns). In the first battles they did not have the Maxim-Nordenfeldt automatic cannon, called the 'pom-pom', which was a disadvantage, but British shells for the larger guns were loaded with lyddite, a high explosive said to kill everything within fifty yards by its detonation, and over a much wider area with its poisonous fumes. Nevertheless, major deficiencies soon became evident. There was a marked distinction between the Indian army and the home command, and the two seldom met. Officers on both sides looked down on each other: the home command considered itself to be socially superior, while the Indian Army was proud of its practical experience. Older officers in Britain were dominated by a parade-ground theory of war. They were more interested in moving cavalry elegantly and positioning artillery correctly than in infantry tactics. The biggest deficiency

11. The 'thin khaki line'. Before the Boer War British troops were trained to shoot in volley. Here the middle rank is ready to fire. As soon as they have done so, they step back to reload and the kneeling line stands up to take their places. Meanwhile the rear line moves forward into the kneeling position.

was in infantry training. Only cavalry troops were taught to ride, although both armies in the American Civil War, and later Roosevelt's army in the Cuban campaign, had proved the value of mounted infantry. In the first weeks of the war offers of mounted infantry from the colonies were turned down.

In addition the conditions of army service were still old-fashioned. Men signed on for at least six years, after which it was very difficult to begin another career. Low pay discouraged the idea of army service for ambitious men, and it was virtually impossible to rise from the ranks. It was a standing joke that regular soldiers received much less pay than volunteers ('the one shilling and thrupences helping the five bobs again'). The men were unhealthy and ill-educated. Officers were taught to use them as 'machines of war': great stress was laid on keeping them 'well in hand', 'standing them up to fire' and allowing them only to shoot in volley. There was little or no training in marksmanship, and camouflage was not considered sportsmanlike. Autonomous action in battle was strictly discouraged.

12. 'The Worcesters leading the attack.'

Most officers looked upon war as an extension of their activities on the cricket or polo field, combined with the excitement of a grouse shoot. Newspaper articles and private letters are filled with sporting terms. Artillery 'pitched its shells well up'; a column sent to capture Boers was called a 'drive'; a line of troops ordered to advance with full equipment into the fire of Mauser rifles were called 'beaters'. Today it is difficult for Britons to understand how their grandfathers were prepared to walk slowly into a 'valley of death' as they did in the Boer War and the Great War:

> Our indomitable men walked erect and straight onward. Not Rome in her palmiest days ever possessed more devout sons. As the gladiators marched proud and becoming to meet death, so the British soldiers doomed to die saluted, and then with alacrity stepped forward to do their duty and win a glorious grave. There never was a better infantry than ours; each individual linesman is a far grander hero than ninety-nine hundredths of the people in England have any conception of. Rough he may be, but the stuff that makes for Empires and for greatness fills every vein and heart-beat. Anglo-Saxon soldiers always advance in this way.

Stirring stuff, but the writer added:

> Perhaps there may be occasions when the sight of men coming on so steadily in the face of almost certain death will try the nerves of their antagonists, but my view is that, save where men have to get within running distance of a few lines of trenches, the system of rushes from cover to cover by small squads is far less wasteful of life.[1]

Of course it was not like that at all. A lieutenant of the King's Royal Rifles wrote home after the battle of Dundee:

> When we got the order to advance my heart was rather in my mouth, as I knew we were under fire, and in a minute or two I might be a corpse or rather cold. However up I had to get and give my men a lead. They all behaved splendidly. Bullets came whizzing past unpleasantly. I was dying to run to get to the wood. However, I got so excited I forgot everything.
>
> Half-way across the open was a fence and getting over there some poor fellows were shot; at least we got to the fence ... In the wood there were plenty of ditches, and at the end of the wood was a wall. We lay there to get breath. Poor Hambro was shot through the jaw, but would take no notice. Then came the bad part. There was a bramble hedge on the top of the wall, so one could not get over, but there was a gateway, and through this we had to go, and it was a hot time. But there were some beautiful rocks about fifty yards off, so not much damage was done ... When I got about half-way up the hill I found myself next to Hambro, who had been wounded twice; we lay down under the rocks, as the firing was very heavy. We saw lots of men shot as they crossed the wall. Hambro and I had to retire. I had my helmet knocked off with a piece of rock the shell hit. When I went up the hill a second time, Hambro was lying almost dead, with his legs reduced to pulp. Too terrible! I suppose a shell must have hit him behind. We must have been there for an hour, bullets whizzing over us. Colonel Sherston was dying; his groans were awful.

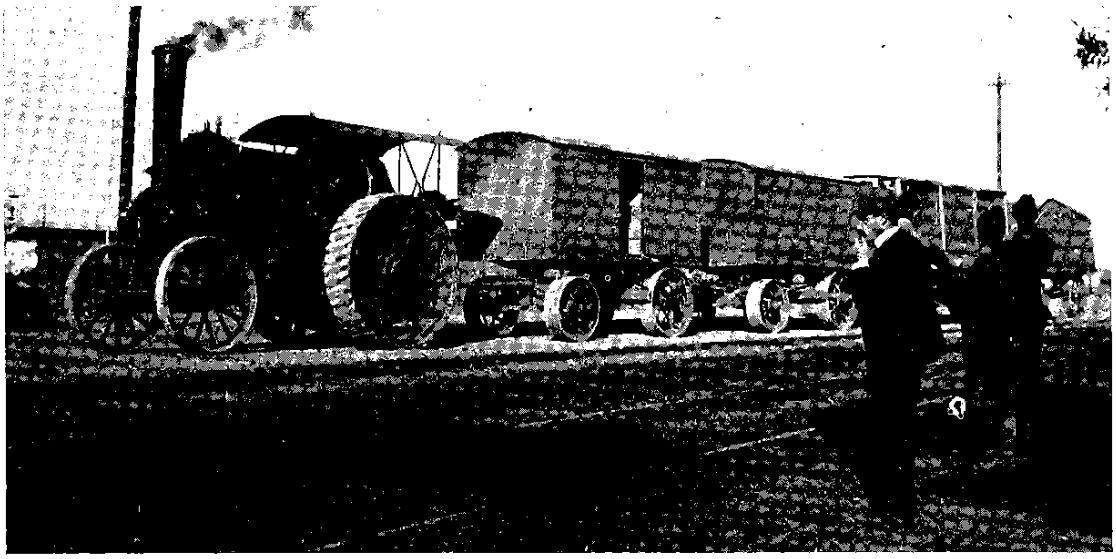
Then an awful part happened – our artillery, mistaking us for Boers, began firing on us. Colonel Gunning, who was just below me, stood up and yelled out, 'Stop that firing!' These were the last words I heard him speak, but I believe his last words were, 'Remember you are Riflemen.'[2]

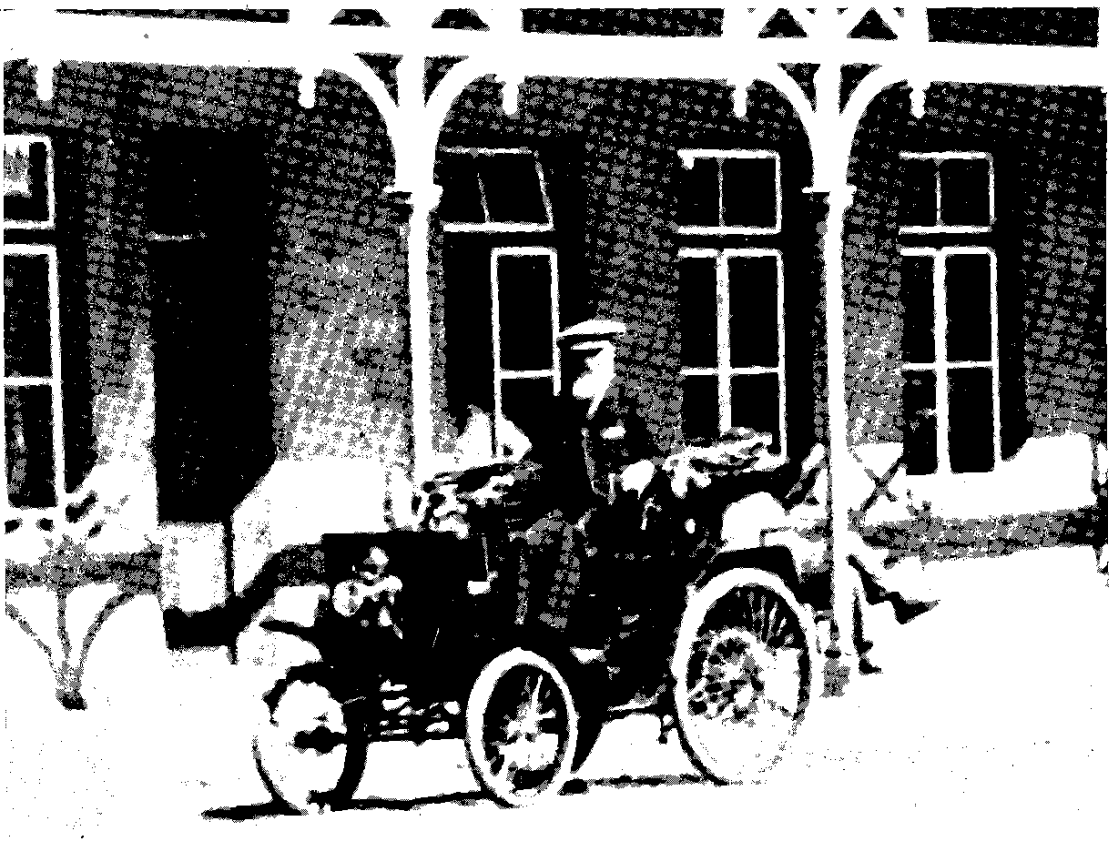
Technical developments could have been used more effectively. There was no radio, but the army had an excellent field telegraph system. The electric telegraph had been developed before the Crimean War, and although it could easily be interrupted by cutting the wire, it proved invaluable. At the begining, however, most officers relied on the heliograph, a method of signalling with mirror-directed sunlight, which depended on the weather and could be seen by the Boers. Transport was a problem in the veld. Steam engines were tried but were of little use when operating far from a water supply. The army even brought out to South Africa a number of hydrogen-filled balloons for reconnaissance, but their full potential was not realized. For instance, observers could have been trained as photographers and used cameras with telephoto lenses.

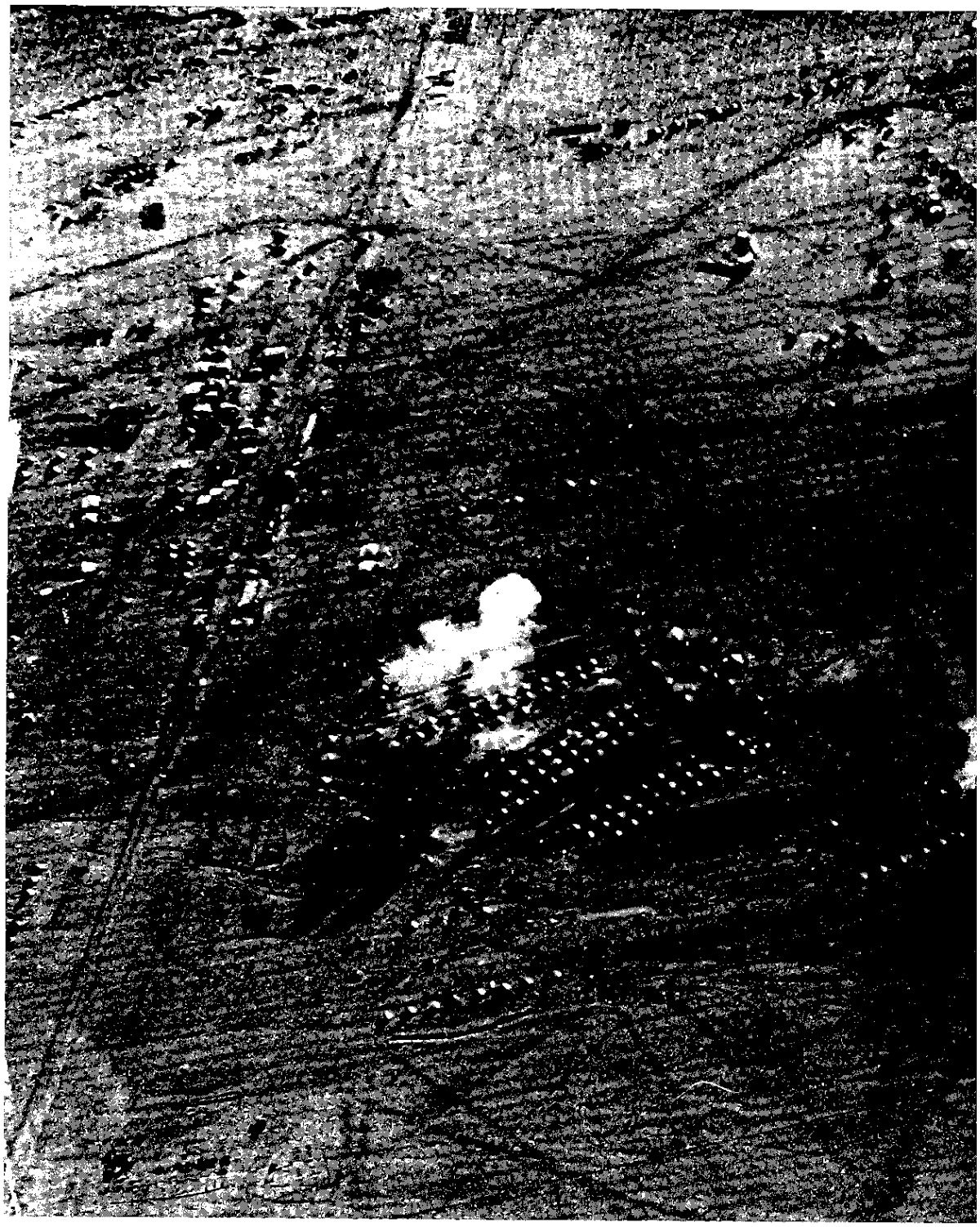
13 (*below*). Signalling with a heliograph.

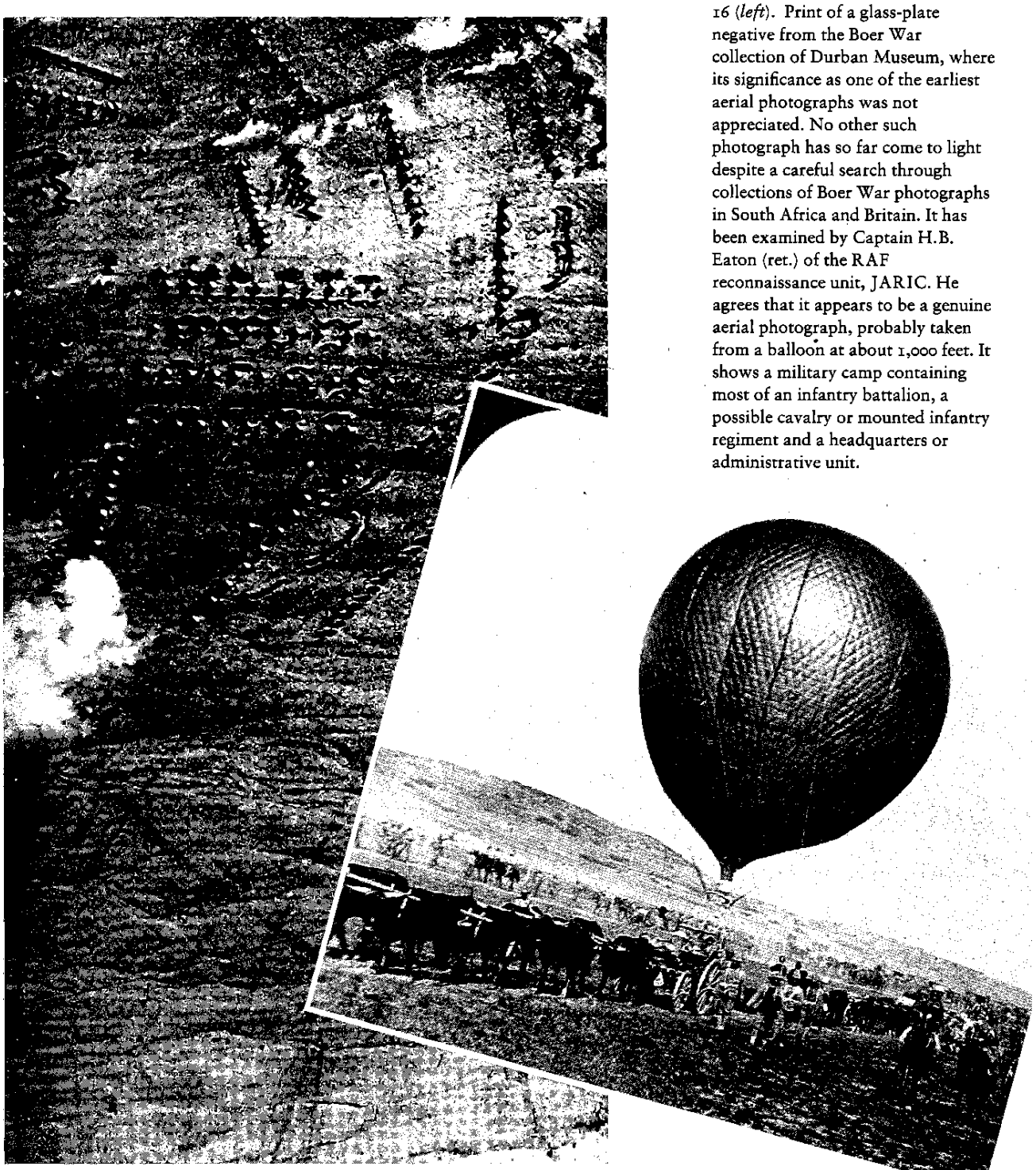
14 (*top right*). Military steam engine. The army took a number of steam engines to South Africa, but they proved to be of limited value because of the lack of water in the veld.

15 (*bottom right*). A rare sight in South Africa during the Boer War: a petrol-driven motor car. Away from the railway lines the British army had to rely on horses, mule-carts and ox-wagons for transport.









16 (*left*). Print of a glass-plate negative from the Boer War collection of Durban Museum, where its significance as one of the earliest aerial photographs was not appreciated. No other such photograph has so far come to light despite a careful search through collections of Boer War photographs in South Africa and Britain. It has been examined by Captain H.B. Eaton (ret.) of the RAF reconnaissance unit, JARIC. He agrees that it appears to be a genuine aerial photograph, probably taken from a balloon at about 1,000 feet. It shows a military camp containing most of an infantry battalion, a possible cavalry or mounted infantry regiment and a headquarters or administrative unit.

17 (*inset*). Observation balloon on the march. The Royal Engineers took three hydrogen-balloon detatchments to South Africa in 1899.

There is an interesting sidelight on the balloons. The Boers knew a great deal about them – even President Kruger had gone up in one when visiting France. Amongst the back-velders, however, they caused some excitement and even fear. It was a source of considerable amusement in the British press when the Boers reported that Britain was using them to fly over the countryside and might even bomb cities from them. They were of course anchored with ropes. But there still remains a mystery. On 24 October 1899 an official telegram was received at Boer Headquarters: 'Balloons – Yesterday evening two balloons were seen at Irene, proceeding in the direction of Springs. Official telegraphists instructed to inform the Commander-in-Chief about any objects seen in the sky.'[3] On the same day numerous 'balloons' were seen all over the place, travelling in all sorts of directions. The official telegrams contain a number of such reports. In the early evening powerful 'searchlights' were seen moving about the sky. All telegraph officers were instructed to notify the authorities immediately

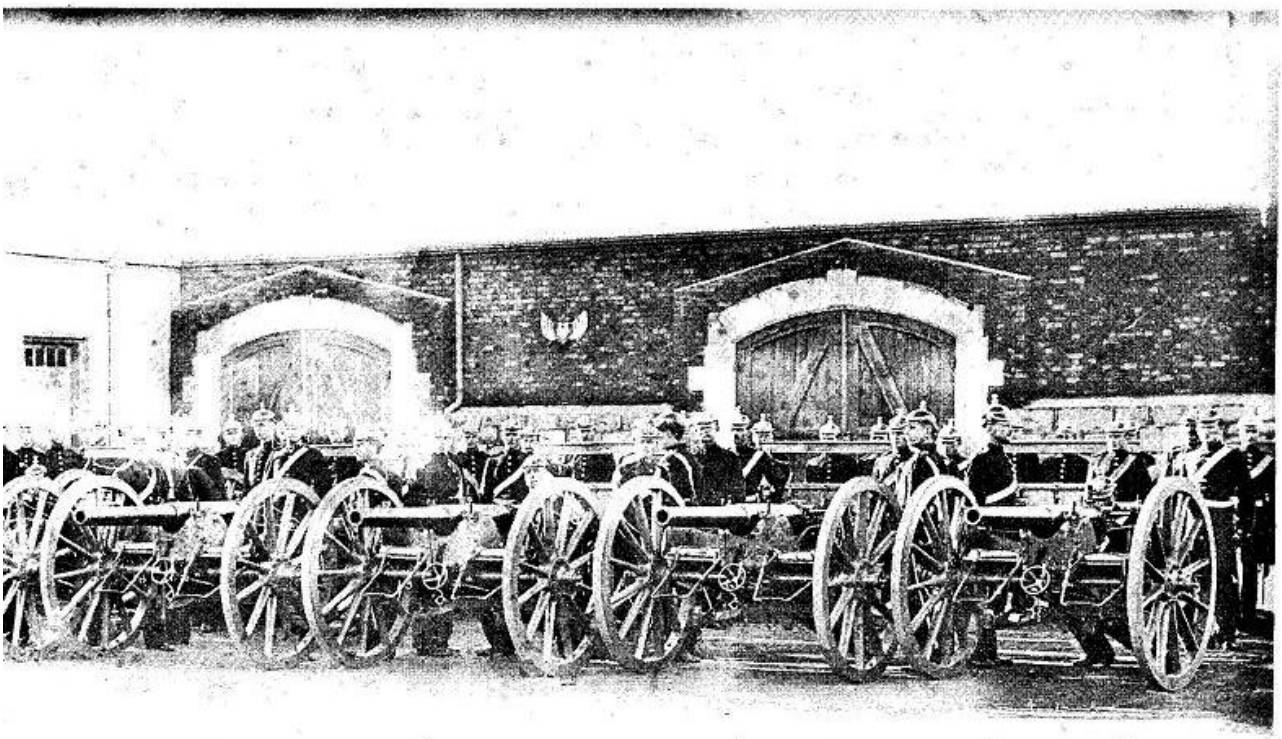
18. Young city Boers.

19. The Transvaal State Artillery in 1899 with Major Albrecht (left, with beard) in command.

one was sighted. Everyone seems to have been watching the sky and the sightings are usually considered to be the result of Boer hysteria. Today, in an age well used to UFOs, they would be given another interpretation.

THE BOER ARMY

Whatever the British thought of the Boer army, the Boers themselves had every reason to be satisfied with it. It had been carefully designed for the conditions of the South African veld. The Boers had an efficient mechanism for mobilizing their army which had its origin in the way men were sent on commando to defend the convoys during the Great Trek. Each state elected a Commandant-General. In 1899 the Transvaal had Piet Joubert, who had led the Boers in 1881. He was appointed Commander-in-Chief of both republican forces. Neither the Transvaal nor the Orange Free State possessed a standing army or a general



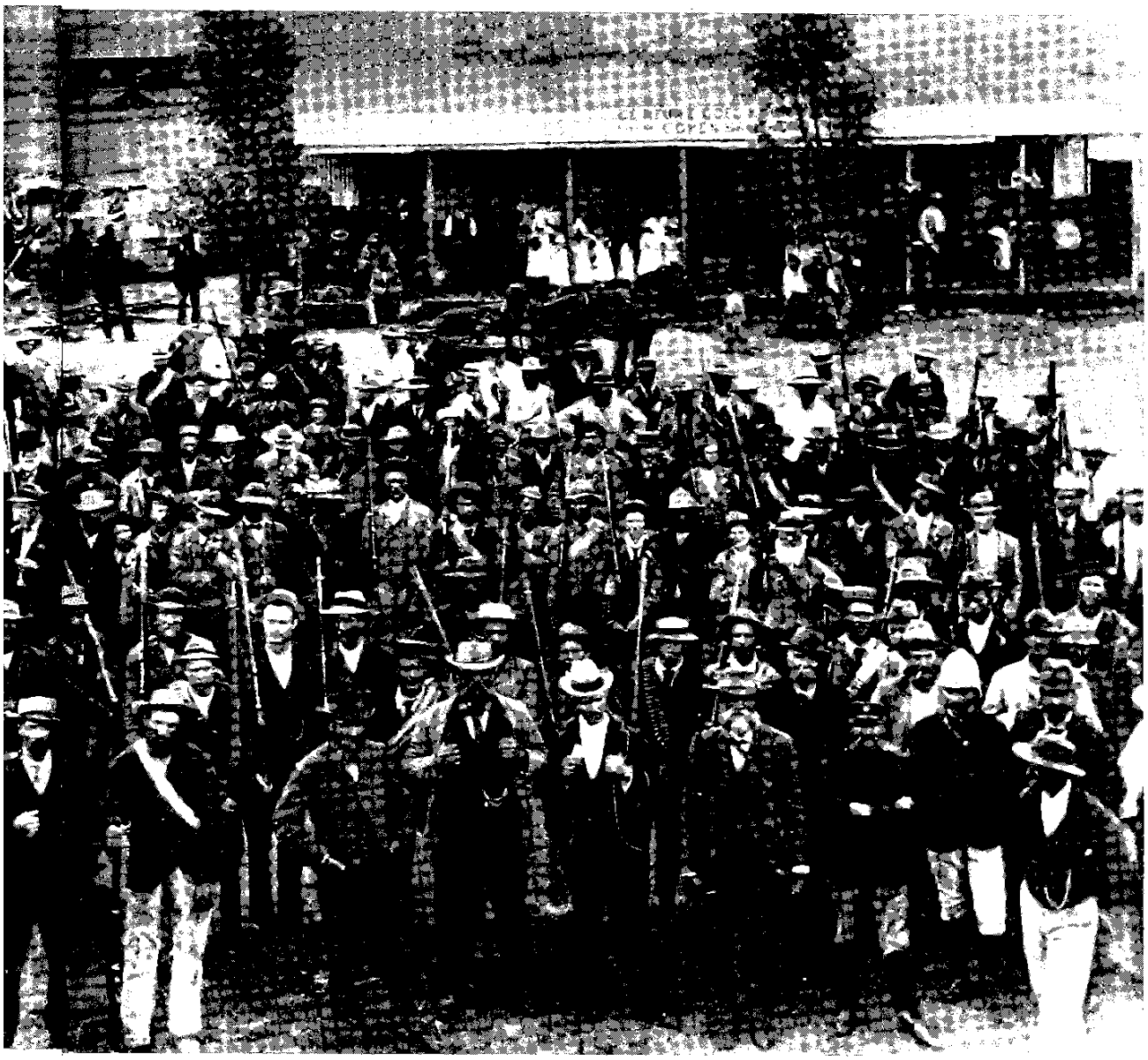
20. Father and son going on commando. Notice their small Boer ponies. The photograph was taken with an old camera which did not have an achromatic lens.

staff. The only professional units were the state artilleries. Although small, they were equipped with the most modern guns, and even had field telegraphs. The Transvaal unit was commanded by a Boer; the Free State's senior officer was a German soldier, Major Albrecht, who had been brought into the country to bring the Boers up to date in modern gunnery. Training was so good that the British were as surprised by their gunmanship as by the speed with which they moved into inaccessible positions. The Transvaal had another small professional unit for defence, the South African Police (known as the 'Zarps'). But their real military strength lay in having a citizen army: all able-bodied burghers between 16 and 60 had to be available for military service.

During an emergency burghers were ordered to prepare for military duty, known as 'going on commando'. Each man was

21. Group photograph of a small commando with Commandant Bosman (hands in pockets). Notice the lack of uniforms.

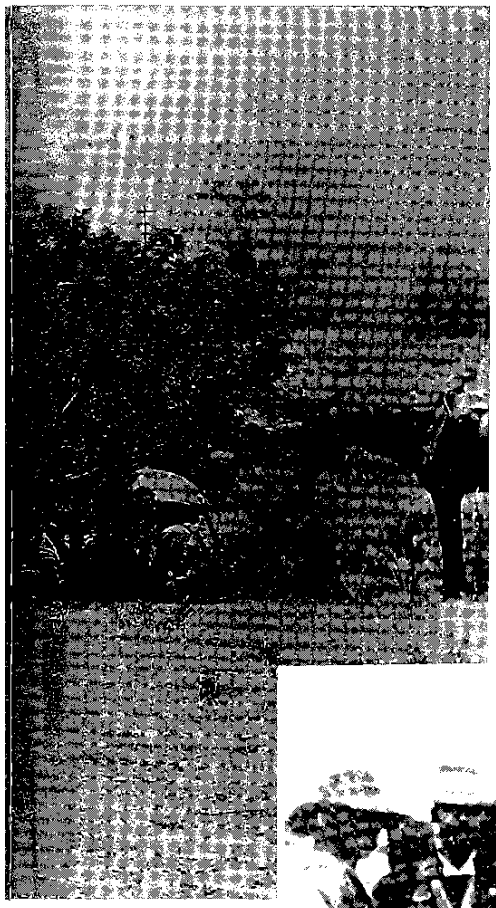
expected to provide himself with a horse, rifle, ammunition and sufficient food to last for eight days. Traditional campaign rations consisted of biscuits and dried meat called 'biltong'. If hostilities lasted longer than eight days it became the government's responsibility to feed and arm the men. Burghers expected to go on commando from time to time and were well prepared: they kept their rifles at home.



22. A *kriegsraad*, or pre-battle tactical meeting. The photograph shows Commandant Botha's *kriegsgraad* before the Battle of Colenso (December 1899).

Some burghers were exempt from commando service. These included members of the Volksraad, state officials, ministers of the Church, teachers, dealers (whatever that meant) and the only sons of widows. Others could be excused from duty if they found sufficient 'lawful and well-founded reasons' to satisfy the local commandant. The system was decentralized. Each region had its own commando which could be mobilized more rapidly than many a permanent army. These varied in size from 300 to 3,000 men, depending on the local population, and each made its own transport arrangements. At the beginning the commandos were the fighting units, but later in the war they were often broken into smaller tactical groups. Within the forty administrative regions, commandants were elected for five years. They in turn appointed one or two junior officers, called 'Veld-Cornets', who had the power to 'commandeer' anything the commando required. It was

23. Electing a Veld-Cornet.



possible for the government to call up foreign residents for commando duty (and a few British residents did volunteer), but the majority who remained in the Republics during the war were not called up. Often, however, supplies were commandeered from them.

The Boer army was remarkable in many ways. Although burghers were legally obliged to take up arms when ordered, the government did not have the right to demand unconditional obedience. Authority was imposed by reasoned argument or persuasion. Even battle discipline depended on voluntary cooperation. If a man did not want to fight in a particular battle, he could (and often did) ask for leave. It was laid down that not more than 10 per cent of a commando could be away at any one time, but the rule was not strictly applied in the early battles. The idiosyncrasy of this army is most clearly demonstrated in the way it prepared for battle. A meeting of the commandants known as a *kriegsraad* was called. It was chaired by the most senior officer of the region in which the battle was to take place. The coming engagement was discussed and various tactics proposed. All commandants, whatever their seniority, had the right to make suggestions. Finally a policy was

24. Boers watching the fight at Dundee.

agreed by consensus. Commandants would then return to their commandos and explain what had been decided. Rarely, a commandant would disagree with the plan and advise his men not to take part in the coming battle, or sometimes the burghers themselves would decide that the tactics were poor and would refuse to fight. In some of the major battles, British troops saw armed burghers watching from suitable vantage points, some even accompanied by their wives. In spite of these remarkably military practices, the Boers were excellent fighters. If a man took part in a battle he did so with a thorough understanding of what was required and could be relied on to do his duty.

Another factor which welded the Boers into an efficient fighting force was the highly organized structure of their society. This is best illustrated by contrasting them with fictional film cowboys, who look so similar to the modern eye. The Boers too had crossed a continent in wagons, worked huge cattle farms in a 'Western' landscape, were constantly in the saddle and carried guns. But the similarities end there. Theirs was not a society of individualists. They saw themselves (and still do) as members of a God-chosen

race with close social and family ties holding them united against foreign enemies. Leaders were God-appointed; they trusted in Him for victory. Alcohol was forbidden; the image of the maverick was not venerated; age, experience and leadership were greatly respected. Today, men who fought for the Boer Republics are hero-figures to the Afrikaans nation. It was different at the time. The relationship between the men and their leaders was one of respect, tempered with a teasing familiarity. Even when discipline was tightened, camaraderie between officers and men remained close. De Wet and Botha often slept in the same tent as private burghers. There were no official badges of office or medals. It was a true citizens' army.

They fought as a team, not waiting for an official order to take advantage of an opportunity or to retreat when a position became untenable. Until the development of the highly trained professional soldier of today, no army had had such good marksmen. For fifty years they had relied on their own weapons, although their early muzzle-loaders had been notoriously inaccurate. They were trained to save ammunition, which was expensive and difficult to obtain in the veld, and their accuracy with the new German Mauser rifles was phenomenal. Although American gun experts said that it was impossible to aim accurately beyond 800 yards, there is overwhelming evidence that the Boers could pick off British officers at 1,200 yards and sometimes further.

The British official history of the war estimates the entire Boer army at just over 87,000 men. Boer sources say that the figure was nearer 60,000. They had no reserves. At the end of the war there were still more than 27,000 men in the commandos, although about 4,000 had been killed and 26,000 were held in prison camps. It required more than 400,000 British troops to win, and even then neither republican army was defeated outright. Boer tactics were designed to prevent casualties. Commandants preferred an ambush to other methods of attack. They liked to fight on ground which had previously been carefully studied and marked for distance – De Wet even fought one engagement on his own farm. They disliked hand-to-hand fighting: the traditional mode of attack was to lie in wait on a suitable koppie where they could hide behind large stones. When the shooting started (heralded by a signal shot from the commandant), their smokeless powder did not give away their location. If their position were threatened they would run to their ponies behind the hill and would soon be out of range. However, during the course of the war these tactics underwent considerable change.

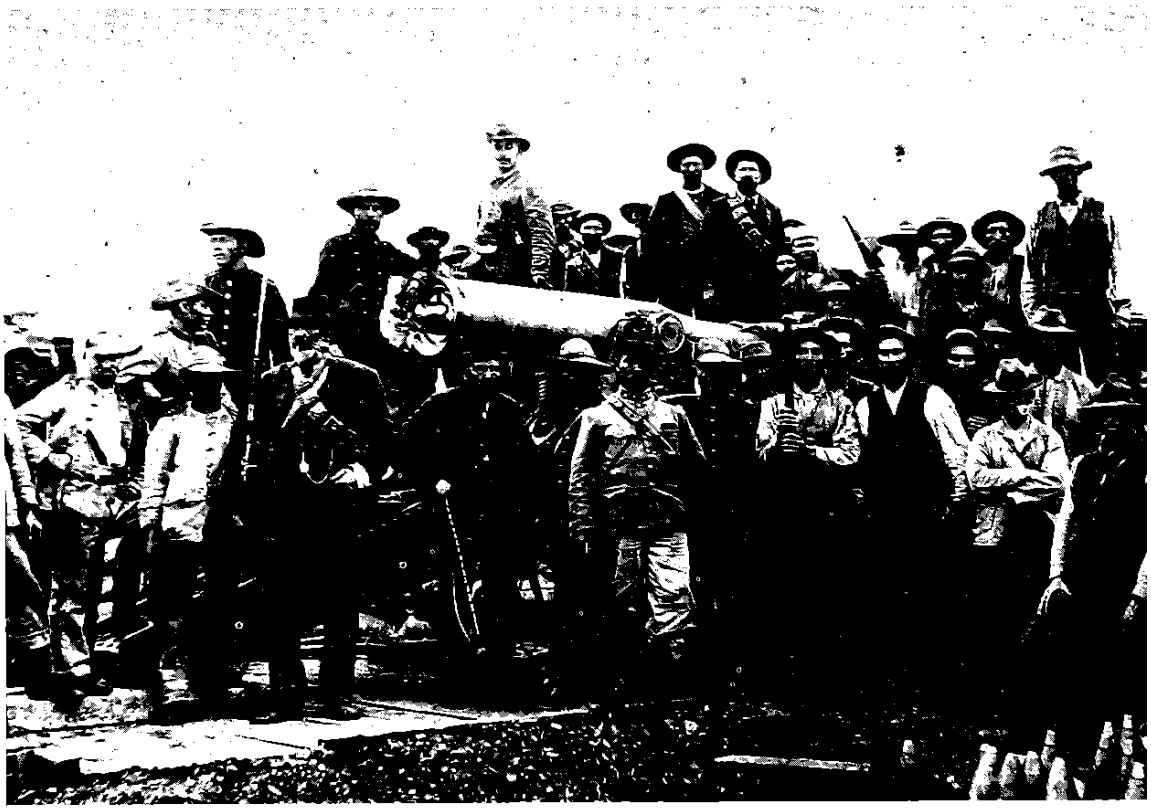
At the start of the war the Boers were in a strong position. It is possible that they could have achieved outright victory in the first few months if they had devoted as much attention to strategy as they did to tactical superiority. They had a numerical advantage

and greater mobility. The commandos were faster than the British units. Each man had at least one small, strong African pony, bred to withstand the harsh conditions of the veld.

The Boers were also better armed than the British. After the Jameson raid Kruger had spent a fortune on weapons, many of which were of British manufacture. Martini-Henry and Lee-Metford rifles were bought in England and imported through Portuguese East Africa in English ships. Some were even landed in Cape Town. Twelve million rounds of rifle ammunition were purchased through Beckett and Company of Pretoria, the Transvaal agents of Kynoch's of Birmingham. Some of the Boer pom-poms, or Maxim-Nordenfeldt guns, bore inscriptions showing that they had been made in London. Some of the the equipment which passed through British territory was labelled as agricultural machinery. (Perhaps this is the origin of the story which appeared in newspapers during the Falklands war, that South Africa was shipping arms to the Argentine in crates labelled as agricultural equipment.) The Boers' basic infantry weapon was the new German Mauser 303 rifle. Krupp cannons, also from Germany, proved to

25 (*below*). General Cronje (with whip) and his men manning one of the large 'Long Tom' siege-guns at Mafeking.

26 (*below right*). Boer 'pom-pom'.



27 (*overleaf*). A group of Boer photographs showing Boers just called out on commando. Note their old clothes and modern weapons.

be the best field-guns of the war and more than a match for the older weapons used by the British artillery. The Boers also had a number of large siege-guns, made by Creusot in France and known as 'Long Toms', which could out-distance any of the British guns. These were used to shell the besieged towns. By 1889 the strength of the Transvaal artillery had been increased to more than a thousand men. The Boers might have had an overwhelming superiority of weapons if Joubert, who opposed a war, had not done his utmost to prevent the Transvaal government from ordering as many guns as Kruger wanted. Delays caused in this way meant that more than 70 artillery pieces were prevented from landing in Lourenço Marques by the British navy, which blockaded the port as soon as the war started.

It was the spirit of the men which lay at the core of Boer strength; it was their arrogance which let them down. They considered themselves to be better fighters than any Englishman; they were better armed and better prepared to withstand a South African war than the British soldier; they were confident that they would 'push the troops into the sea'.