

B.-P. once spoke of the Boer War as a wretched affair. In his previous experiences of South Africa he had come to like the Boers and to respect their independent spirit and their deep love for the free life of the veldt. But for years trouble had been mounting up between the two peoples, British and Boers. Neither side was solely to blame. The opening up of a great country like South Africa to the settler, the prospector and the miner, some of them little better than self-seeking rogues, was bound to lead to clashes, and perhaps if either side had been less stubborn, war would have been avoided.

His knowledge of the country and of the people made B.-P. realize that the struggle would not be the easy business some people expected; he knew, for instance, that almost every Boer was a first-class shot and was a natural scout who would take every advantage of the nature of the country. But his warnings fell on deaf ears.

Soon after his arrival in England in June, 1899, B.-P. was summoned to the War Office, and there Lord Wolseley, the Commander-in-Chief, asked him to go out to South Africa as soon as possible and organize two regiments of Mounted Rifles for service on the north-western frontier of the South African Republic, or the Transvaal as it was usually called.

Here is part of their typical conversation:
"Wolseley : I want you to go out to South Africa.

B.-P. : Yes, sir.

Wolseley : Well, can you go on Saturday next ?

B.-P. : No, sir.

Wolseley : Why not ?

B.-P. : There's no ship on Saturday, but I can go on Friday."

At this Wolseley burst out laughing, and went on to explain the nature of the special mission which B.-P. was to carry out. War had not yet begun, but only a miracle then could have prevented it, and the Commander-in-Chief did not wish to leave anything to chance.

The map will explain the situation. Cape Colony and Natal would be the bases from which British troops could operate, but on the west of the two Boer Republics was Bechuanaland, and on the north, Matabeleland or Southern Rhodesia. It would be of the greatest importance that these should be well

guarded, not only to forestall any help the natives might give to the Boers, but to keep part of the Boer forces occupied away from the British Colonies.

B.-P.'s job was to raise these two regiments as quickly as possible, and to take up positions on the western frontiers in readiness for any trouble.

He arrived at the Cape in July, 1899. Here he met all kinds of difficulties. The authorities there were still hoping to avoid war, and did not therefore want to do anything to annoy the Boers any further; the public enlistment of men would obviously be regarded with suspicion. So B.-P. decided to go at once north and do his recruiting there. He selected as his two centres Mafeking and Bulawayo. When he had gone out to Matabeleland in 1896 the railway had ended at Mafeking, but by 1899 it had been constructed as far as Bulawayo.

This town was well away from the Transvaal frontier, but Mafeking was just inside the frontier of Cape Colony and just outside the Transvaal. In order to avoid trouble, he at first concentrated on Bulawayo. There he had, as his chief helper, Lieut.-Colonel Herbert Plumer, with whom he had worked so happily in the Matabele Campaign.

It was a stiff task he had to face. He had to recruit his men, train them, and organize the whole force within a few months. It was done by using the methods that had already proved so successful with his scouts in the 5th Dragoon Guards; the men were divided up into small groups each under a responsible N.C.O. There was not time for a lot of drill, so most attention was given to shooting and horsemanship, and the training was mainly carried out by frequent field days and sham fights. So well did this scheme work that within two months the men were ready for the field. By this time war was obviously only a matter of weeks. His own regiment, the 5th Dragoon Guards, had landed in Natal, and he hoped that he would be allowed to return to his command. But he could not be spared; had he done so he would have been besieged in Ladysmith instead of Mafeking.

In making his plans should war break out, B.-P. had decided to divide his forces into two; he put Plumer in command of one regiment to operate in Southern Rhodesia; he himself went with the other regiment, with Lieut.-Colonel

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Hore in command, to Mafeking. B.-P. knew the importance of this little frontier town, and the Boers also recognized it, for, as soon as war was declared in October, General Cronje with 9,000 men marched towards it.

Under modern conditions Mafeking could not have been held for a day; a few tanks could have gone right through it; but in 1899 there were no tanks and no aeroplanes, and the explosives used would now be thought primitive. The town had no natural means of protection. It lay on the open veldt (wild grassland) with a river, the Molopo, running through it. The population consisted of some 8,000 natives who lived in their own town, and about 1,800 whites. The garrison was made up of the Protectorate Regiment under Colonel Hore (489 officers and men), with a mixed force of B.S.A. Police, Cape Police and Bechuanaland Rifles (in all, 276 officers and men). The Town Guard numbered 300 men. Others were recruited, such as railwaymen and Cape boys (coloured). Altogether, B.-P. had at his disposal 1,250 armed men, but many of these were untrained and some of them were of doubtful loyalty to Britain. All through the siege there was trouble with spies; the natives could be used for sending out messages, as they could slip out at night and were very skilled in hiding any written note.

A system of trenches with small forts was hastily constructed round the town, just in time to face Cronje's army. The Boer general was surprised that the British did not yield at once, for it seemed folly to attempt to defend such a place. He was not anxious to lose many men in direct attacks, and doubtless thought that in a short time the besieged would come to their senses, so he drew a cordon right round the town and sat down to wait for the surrender.

B.-P.'s reputation as a scout was well known to the Boers and they respected him for his skill, but they had yet to learn his other qualities - chief of which were his astonishing ability in inventing means of deceiving the enemy, and his way of inspiring all who came in contact with him, soldiers and civilians alike, with his own gaiety and determination. He was not content to sit still and wait for what the Boers might do; he knew that action was important for keeping up the spirits of his men, and that surprise moves would worry the Boers more than anything else.

The artillery at Mafeking was absurdly out of

date. There were four small guns, but the fittings were worn and the fuses so shrunken with age that they had to be wedged into the shells with paper. Two guns were added during the siege. First of all the railway workshops manufactured one out of the steam-pipe of an engine reinforced with some old iron railings melted down and shrunk into it; the whole was mounted on the wheels of a threshing-machine. This home-made affair proved most useful at night. It would be moved as near the Boer lines as possible, with its wheels wrapped in canvas to deaden any sound, and blankets hung round it to hide the flash when it was fired. Locating this mysterious gun became part of the Boers' regular time-table. It was christened 'the Wolf', and is now preserved in the Royal United Services Museum in London.

The second gun was found by accident. Major Godley (later General Sir Alexander Godley, of Anzac fame) noticed that a gate-post of a farm was an old 18th-century carronade; it was dug up, and on it were the maker's initials - B.P.! It fired a shot like a cricket ball, but it helped to keep the enemy at a respectful distance.

At the beginning of the siege good use was made of an armoured train. A few days after war broke out a party of Boers was observed approaching from the north. The train set out, and, supported by some troops, a useful small action resulted which heartened the besieged and discouraged the enemy. But this could not be repeated often, for soon the Boers had cut the railway line on each side of the town. One of the last exploits of the train was unintentional. There was a store of dynamite in the town which B.-P. felt was dangerous, as it might be blown up by a chance shell; so he ordered it to be loaded into two trucks, which were then pushed out of the town by an unattached engine to the top of the gradient. As the trucks slid down the line, the enemy opened fire; they thought it was another armoured train, and were considerably astonished when their firing blew up the whole lot. This made them more cautious than ever.

B.-P. called the siege a great game of bluff; he was full of ideas for ruses, and his example encouraged others to invent schemes for outwitting the besiegers. Thus a number of apparently explosive mines were laid all around the town. Notices were put up explaining that it was dangerous to go near them; B.-P. knew that this information would be quickly passed

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on to the Boers by spies. Then he announced that they would be tested, and he and an engineer went out and set one off. Actually the mines were boxes full of sand, and the one that went off was a specially prepared one - B.-P. pushed a stick of dynamite into an ant-bear hole, lit the fuse and then took cover. It produced the most satisfying explosion, and again helped to make the Boers more cautious of approaching the town at night. That was B.-P.'s main purpose, for he knew that darkness was his chief enemy.

Another ruse was invented by a commercial traveller in the town - anyone with special knowledge was soon enlisted in the defence. This man sold acetylene lamps, and he had a small store of acetylene with him. A lamp was fixed on top of a pole and a big reflector made with a biscuit tin. Then one night it was taken to one of the forts and suddenly switched on like a searchlight. It was then hurriedly moved to another fort, and again the light shone out. The Boers got the impression that there must be a whole series of searchlights, so they were still further discouraged from making night attacks.

B.-P. himself was the chief safeguard against such attempts, for he would spend most of the night scouting beyond the lines, peering into the darkness and listening for any sign of movement from the enemy.

Major Godley said:

"Had it not been for B.-P.'s amazing energy, personality and ubiquity, I think that there would have been a good deal of alarm and despondency in the garrison. But he was always thinking of various stunts to keep up our spirits, and there was nobody and no part of the defences that he did not visit continually. Frequently, after spending, as one did, most of the night wandering around and visiting the outposts, I have lain down for a little sleep, and have been awakened at daybreak - to see B.-P. sitting at the edge of my dug-out, having walked out before the sun rose. It really was a rather strenuous time, and it is curious to reflect that one never had one's boots off for eight months, except in the daytime."

And again:

"His courage was unbounded, his versatility was extraordinary, and his sympathy with all sections of the community most marked."

It was during one of his night prowlings that

B.-P. found he was stalking one of his own scouts. He was reconnoitring the position of a gun, and as he lay hidden among some rocks, he noticed a man with a black face cautiously approaching. B.-P. froze, but as the man came nearer he recognized him as one of his own scouts who had blackened his face by way of camouflage.

During the day-time B.-P. spent much time on a lookout tower which had been erected near his headquarters. Here he would search the surrounding country with his glasses for any movements of the enemy, trying, as it were, to read the intentions of the Boers from any signs he could notice. When did he sleep? That was rather a mystery. He seemed able to do with a few snatched hours from time to time; and occasionally passers would notice him stretched out on a long chair on his veranda during a lull, but as often as not he would be sketching rather than sleeping. This constant wakefulness encouraged the inhabitants; they felt that as long as the Colonel was on the watch, they had little to fear.

The greatest source of danger was a 94-pounder siege gun which the Boers brought up towards the end of October. It was christened 'Old Creaky', and by a system of warnings from the look-out, the people were able to take cover before the shell arrived. Fortunately many of the shells did not burst, and then there was a rush for souvenirs.

In November Cronje made one determined attack from the south, but this was beaten off after heavy casualties on both sides. Soon afterwards Cronje withdrew with 6,000 men and left General Snyman in command with 3,000 Boers. The new commander was reluctant to risk lives in attacking Mafeking, but preferred to draw the cordon tighter in the hope of starving the besieged into surrender. Even by then the siege of this small town had been of great value to the British, for the 6,000 men who had been kept there for two months might well have made all the difference if they had been free to join the Boer forces in Natal or elsewhere.

Things were not going well with the British. There had been a series of defeats in the field, and Kimberley (with Rhodes inside) and Ladysmith were also besieged. The way in which Mafeking held out came as one of the bright spots in an otherwise gloomy picture.

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B.-P. knew the value of keeping people cheerful. His own habit of whistling popular tunes - sometimes done when he was feeling annoyed - was itself encouraging to others, but he also set to work to organize all kinds of entertainments and sports. By unwritten agreement on both sides, Sunday was observed as a truce. Even here a bit of bluff was carried out. It had been noticed that when the Boers came out of their camps, they carefully stepped over the barbed wire that surrounded them. The British had no barbed wire, but they went through all the motions of stepping over it just to make the Boers think that it was there !

In addition to sports of all kinds, there were competitions. One of these was for the best life-sized dummy figures representing men of the Defence Forces; these had to be equipped with mechanical arms. They were then placed in various forts, and moved from time to time to give the enemy the impression that all forts were fully manned. Actually some of the forts themselves were only dummies.

B.-P. himself took a leading share in these pastimes; he would play the part of a meditative coster, or his favourite role of a sergeant-major, or he would appear as a circus-director to organize a mock circus. Far from lowering his authority as commander, these very human activities added to his influence, and helped to spread confidence.

As the siege dragged on, with food getting short and little news coming from outside, there was need for encouragement. Every scrap of news was published in the 'Mafeking Mail'; this newspaper, 'issued daily, shells permitting', was another source of good fun. It had, for instance, a daily list of quotations for the price of souvenirs. As the time passed it had to be printed on an odd assortment of paper; but it managed to carry on in spite of bombardment.

In January, 1900, Lord Roberts, with Lord Kitchener, arrived in Cape Town to take over supreme command. At once a new spirit entered the conduct of the war. Roberts sent encouraging messages to Mafeking, but wisely did not raise false hopes. The little town was a long way from Cape Town and the main enemy forces were between the two. Relief would not be possible until these had been defeated.

On Boxing Day an attack was planned on one

of the Boer forts; spies, however, did their work well, and the enemy received full information of the scheme. The result was a bad setback for the defenders, but it did not shake their determination to hang on to the end.

Food supplies were carefully rationed. B.-P. and his staff lived on a smaller ration than the rest of the population 'to judge', as he explained, 'how little was necessary for keeping us going'.

One by one the horses, and later the donkeys, had to be killed for food. Nothing was wasted. The mane and tail were used for stuffing pillows and mattresses in the hospital. The shoes were melted down for shells. The flesh became sausages. The skin and hoofs and head were boiled for hours and ultimately became a kind of brawn. The bones were used in soup. Horses' oats were made into biscuits, and the husks after soaking became 'a paste closely akin to that used by bill-stickers. This was called sowens, a sour kind of mess, but very healthy and filling.'

Money, too, was needed, so they printed their own bank-notes from a design drawn by B.-P. Then stamps were required for the town post. The first issue had B.-P.'s head on them, but this had been done without his knowledge and as a pleasant surprise for him. It was indeed a surprise; and although he had it altered to a boy riding on a bicycle, the legend still lasts that his head was used for his own glorification!

The boy on the bicycle is important, because he is one of the links between scouting for soldiers and scouting for boys. The manpower of the town was very fully employed in the defence, but the boys were organized by Lord Edward Cecil, the chief staff officer, into a cadet corps. They ran messages and did all kinds of odd jobs. Their leader was a boy named Goodyear - he might also be called the first Boy Scout. They were dressed in khaki, and wore either a forage cap, or a 'smasher' hat - that is, a cow-boy hat with one side turned up. For a time they used donkeys and bicycles, but gradually the donkeys had to disappear into the kitchens. They had competitions of their own, and the following one will be recognized by many a Boy Scout of to-day.

"Each cadet will receive a letter on the Recreation Ground. He will carry it to the Staff

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Officer; route via Carrington Street. He will there receive a verbal answer and return to the Recreation Ground to the sender, and repeat the verbal message to him in a loud, clear tone of voice."

The tide of war turned at the end of February, 1900, when Cronje surrendered to Roberts at Paardeberg. Kimberley had been relieved a fortnight earlier, and Ladysmith a few days later. Now all eyes were turned on the little town which was still besieged. Plumer was making every effort to reach it from the north, but his force was too small.

On the 1st April Queen Victoria sent the following telegram to B.-P.: "I continue watching with confidence and admiration the patient and resolute defence which is so gallantly maintained under your ever resourceful command."

In the middle of April more Boer troops arrived to join the besiegers; with them was a young Field Cornet, Sarel Eloff, a grandson of President Kruger. This young officer was eager to make an attack on Mafeking, but General Snyman was cautious. Eloff sent in a message to B.-P. suggesting that the Boers should bring a cricket team into the town to play the defenders. B.-P. replied, "Mafeking, in the game it is playing at present is 180 [the days the siege had then lasted] not out against the bowling of Cronje, Snyman and Eloff. Don't you think you had better change the bowling?"

At last, however, Eloff persuaded Snyman to launch a great attack. It started on 12th May. The scheme was for Eloff to attack from the west along the river and through the native town, while Snyman would at the same time attack from the east. Eloff carried out his part of the plan; he fired the native town and even captured some of the British. B.-P. was watching the battle from his tower, and calmly gave his orders as he saw how events were developing. His counter-attack ended with the capture of Eloff and his men, who were escorted into the town by the cadets who had been on duty all day. Meantime Snyman had carried out his share of the scheme in a half-hearted fashion and was repulsed.

That very day news at last came through from Lord Roberts that a determined effort to relieve Mafeking was to be made. A force of some 1,000 men was assembled at Barkly West, some

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200 miles south-west of Mafeking; this was to co-operate with Plumer's regiment, which was to the north-west. These two forces had to fight their way before they could meet; and then between them and their goal lay a strong force of Boers under one of their best commanders, Delarey. A hard-fought battle dispersed these, and in the evening of the 16th May an advance party of the relieving force rode into Mafeking. Amongst them was Major Baden Baden- Powell of the Scots Guards. He immediately went to greet his brother and, for once, found him asleep ! It was as if, feeling confident of the result, he had decided that at last he could safely relax his watchfulness.

The next day B.-P. rode out to meet the main relieving force and to bring it into Mafeking. The siege had lasted 217 days, and some 20,000 shells had been fired into the town. Casualties numbered 813, and half the officers had been killed or wounded.

The news of the relief was greeted with an outbreak of wild enthusiasm throughout the Empire, which reached its climax in London. Crowds assembled outside the house of B.-P.'s mother, and were not satisfied until again and again she had appeared in answer to their cheers. Then London went mad with delight, and the word 'mafficking' was coined to describe the scenes.

I was a boy at the time, but I vividly remember the news of the relief appearing on the placards - there was, of course, no wireless in those days. In honour of the event, boys wore a button badge with B.-P.'s portrait on it, showing him with the hat which will always be connected with his name. He became the hero of us all.

Queen Victoria sent the following telegram: "I and my whole Empire greatly rejoice at the relief of Mafeking after the splendid defence made by you through all these months. I heartily congratulate you and all under you, military and civil, British and native, for the heroism and devotion you have shown.

B.-P. received the C.B. for his achievement, and he was at once promoted to the rank of Major-General - the youngest officer in the army to be a general. He was forty-three.

Chapter VI, B.-P. The Story of His Life, E. E. Reynolds, Oxford University Press, 1943.