

# **‘There is nothing new under the sun’: an early Australian coalition operation, South Africa, 1900**

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## **Introduction**

From May to September 1900, a large proportion of Australian colonial troops serving in South Africa in the ongoing war against the Boers did so as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Mounted Brigade during Lord Roberts’ march to Pretoria. The successful conclusion of this large-scale offensive marked the end of ‘conventional’ operations on the veldt and the beginning of the ‘guerrilla’ phase of the war. The operational experiences of this brigade have not figured largely in the history of Australia’s involvement in this war.

Yet they are important, not least because the brigade itself was composed of not only Australians but Canadians, New Zealanders and British regulars. It was in many ways a microcosm of imperial military cooperation—a ‘multinational coalition’, to use contemporary parlance, writ small. Like all such groupings of various ‘national’ contingents brought together for an operational purpose (then as now), the importance of international (in this case intra-imperial) politics, the appearances of unity at the front and at home, and the intricacies of cooperation between very different, yet interoperable forces in an expeditionary role were all borne out on the veldt more than a century ago.

The aim of this article is not to provide a forensic analysis of such issues but rather to offer some historical context. Contemporary discussion of such factors within Army, the ADF and the wider community may loom large but, as always, it is worth bearing in mind that ‘there is nothing new under the sun’.<sup>1</sup>

## **The raising of the 1<sup>st</sup> Mounted Infantry Brigade**

After a very brief command of a British militia brigade stationed at Kimberly, on 30 March 1900 Major General Edward Hutton received a telegram that he was needed in Bloemfontein immediately. Hutton was an officer of wide colonial experience. He had previously commanded the military forces of NSW (1893-96), acted as the General Officer Commanding the Canadian militia (1898-1900) and was destined to become the inaugural commander of the first post-Federation Australian Army.

Hutton reached his destination on the morning of 1 April, just as news of the mauling of the British 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Brigade at Sanna’s Post was received. Initially, he could find no one to tell him why he had been summoned. Not even Kitchener could enlighten him, although an appointment was set for 10am the next morning. Hutton could hardly contain himself, convinced he was to receive command of a newly-raised division of Canadian, Australian and New Zealand volunteers as befitted his colonial expertise.

He was, however, offered command not of the new division, which was given to Major General Ian Hamilton, but rather one of its two brigades. If Hutton was initially disappointed, it did not last long, writing home to his wife that his new command was ‘really a division and numbers between 5 and 6000 men’, and that it ‘realises my dream of the last 10 years’.

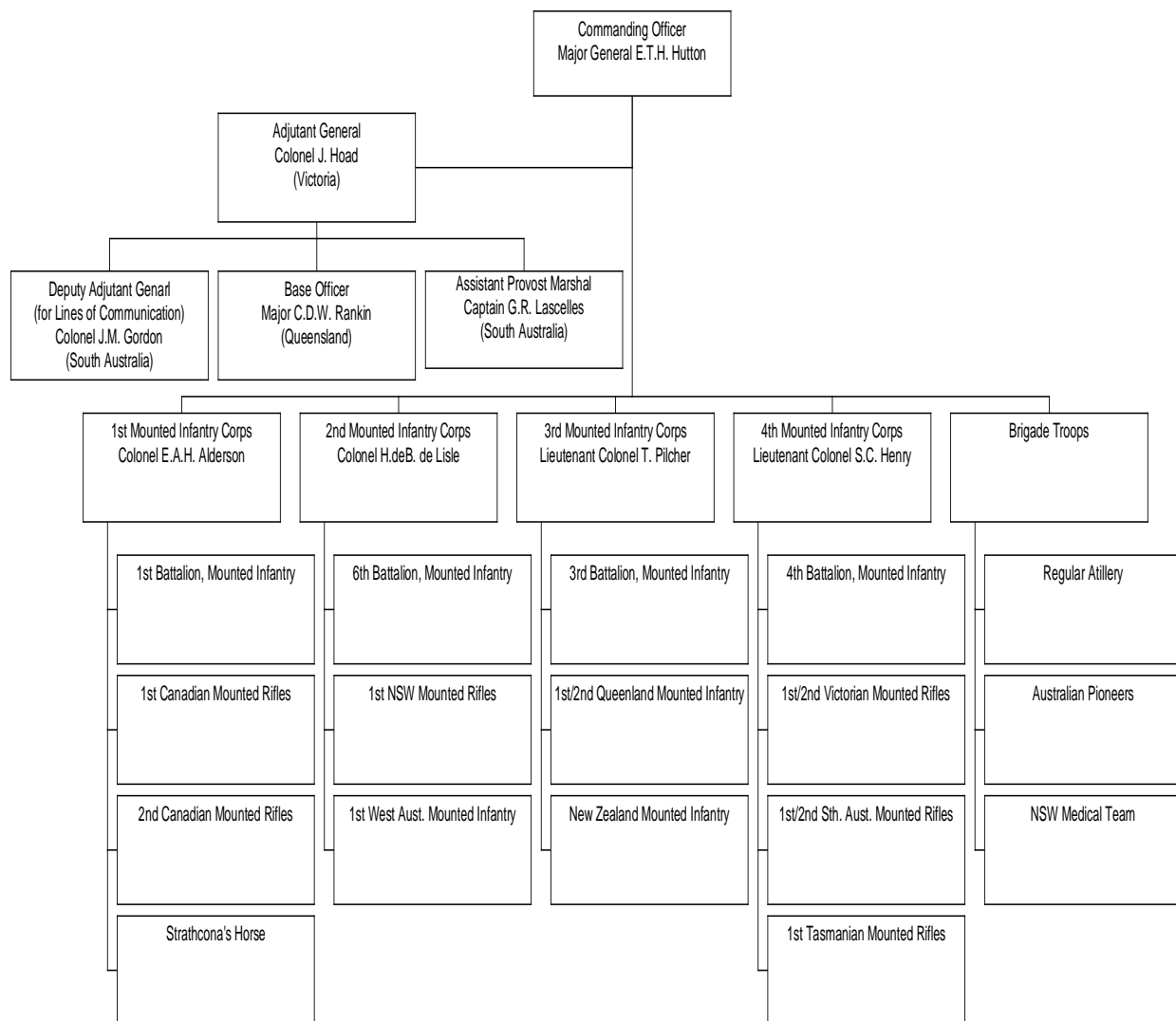
Hutton was further thrilled that the commanding officers within his brigade were all men who had served with him as mounted infantrymen in earlier campaigns or at the mounted infantry school at Aldershot he had established in 1888. ‘There is no doubt that when the advance of the Army takes place’, he mused to his friend Lord Minto, Governor-General in Canada, ‘much must depend upon the work which the M.I. [Mounted Infantry] Division are able to accomplish’.

Hutton’s 1<sup>st</sup> Mounted Infantry Brigade, of the 1<sup>st</sup> Mounted Infantry Division, was raised officially on 7 April 1900 and organised into four mounted ‘corps’, each made up of two or three Australian, Canadian or New Zealand mounted units, with the addition of a regular British mounted infantry battalion. The brigade also contained its own medical support and pioneer troops to be used to find water on the march,

cut or repair railways, and to prepare fords over rivers. A small detachment of scouts was also soon added to the formation.

Hutton set to organising his brigade with gusto, in the process taking the unusual step of using colonials as staff officers on his headquarters. Although these men clearly lacked experience and training compared to the British regulars he selected to command the fighting corps, Hutton was personally familiar with their strengths and weaknesses, telling his wife that she ‘will smile when you read the names of the staff ... and find you know nearly all of them’.

**Figure 1. The 1st Mounted Infantry Brigade, as initially formed, April 1900**



From the first, Hutton was well aware of the professional and political significance of commanding a composite, imperial formation of mounted infantrymen. Already concerned with British military ineffectiveness and imperial defence arrangements more generally, here was an opportunity to test the potential of intra-imperial military cooperation at an operational and tactical level. This was a force born of the Empire, deployed far from home, for the purpose of defending the greater whole. ‘I must make my command a success under Providence’, he wrote home, describing his responsibilities as ‘quite as much political and Imperial, as it is military’.

To Joseph Chamberlain, Colonial Secretary in London, Hutton mused, ‘this happy association of selected representatives from the self-governing Colonies ... will exercise no small effect upon the future military consolidation of the defences of the Empire’. He predicted to Minto ‘the success which it achieves will to a very great extent depend on the feeling of the Australian and Canadian Troops and through them the

Colonies whom they represent towards a Military Co-operative system of Defence for the Empire'. Hutton was also cognisant of the domestic political ramifications of his formation. He made certain to write, for example, to the Australian Premiers, and to Wilfrid Laurier in Canada and Richard Seddon in New Zealand, to let them know how relieved they ought to feel that one such as he, with a wealth of colonial empathy and experience, commanded their troops.

## The advance to Pretoria

By late April, Lord Roberts' long-expected march to Pretoria was almost ready. The overall strategy for the British advance was reasonably straightforward. Opposing the obvious and imminent British operation, the 3000 Boers in the area, under General Jacobus Herculaas (Koos) de la Rey, were expected to defend at the Vet, the Sand and the Vaal Rivers where they crossed the railway line linking Bloemfontein with Pretoria. The basic British plan was for mounted elements, such as Hutton's brigade, to flank these positions and cut the Boer line of retreat so they might be crushed by Roberts' advancing infantry.

Hutton began his advance to the initial objective of the town of Brandford early on 3 May and, from the outset, was forced to fight forward against 'somewhat stiff' resistance offered by Boer skirmishers and delaying positions. Nonetheless, by 12.30pm, with his brigade stretched to the northwest, Hutton was able to order his reserve into the town, which was occupied without resistance. By this time, the Boers were withdrawing, thanks to British infantrymen having broken a determined resistance to the northeast.

By late afternoon, Hutton found himself six-and-a-half kilometres east of Brandford, on the main line of Boer retreat, on a ridge parallel to the Bradford-Ladybrand Road. At that point, with only 250 New South Welshmen close at hand, he was unable to prevent 'the rear guard of the enemy passing out of sight, wagons and all'. Nonetheless, in its first operation and after losing only nine wounded and after 12 straight hours in the saddle and under intermittent fire, the 1<sup>st</sup> Mounted Brigade had done well.

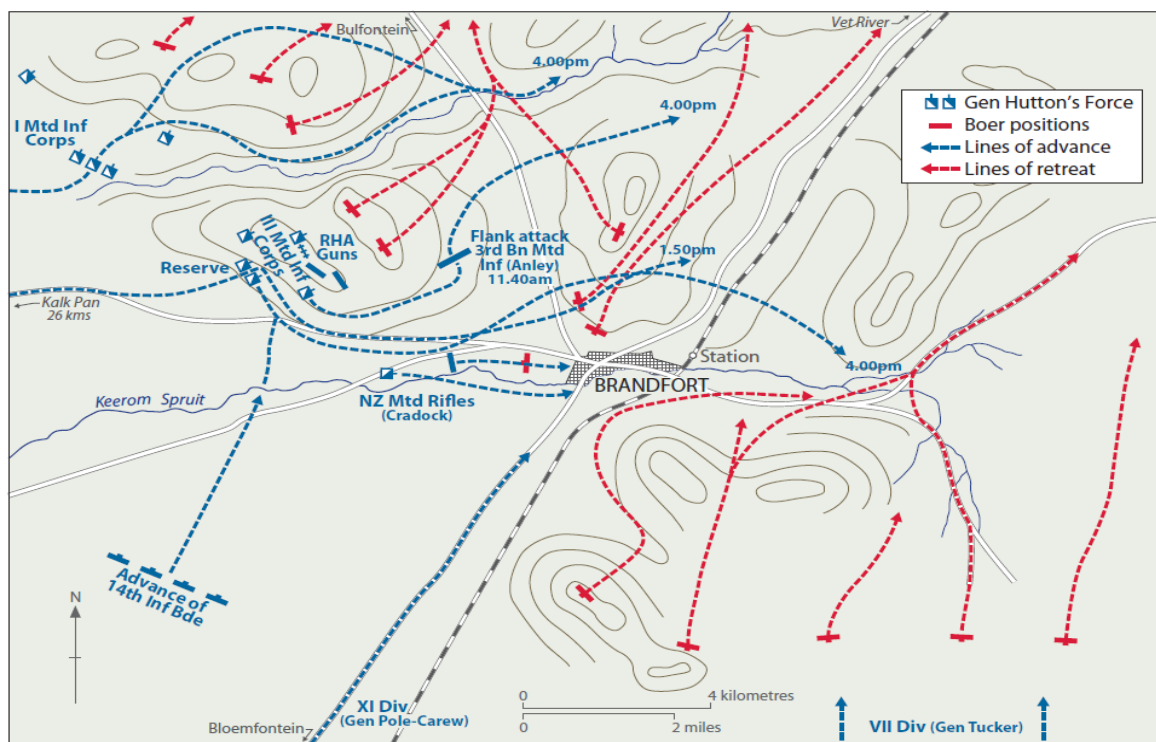
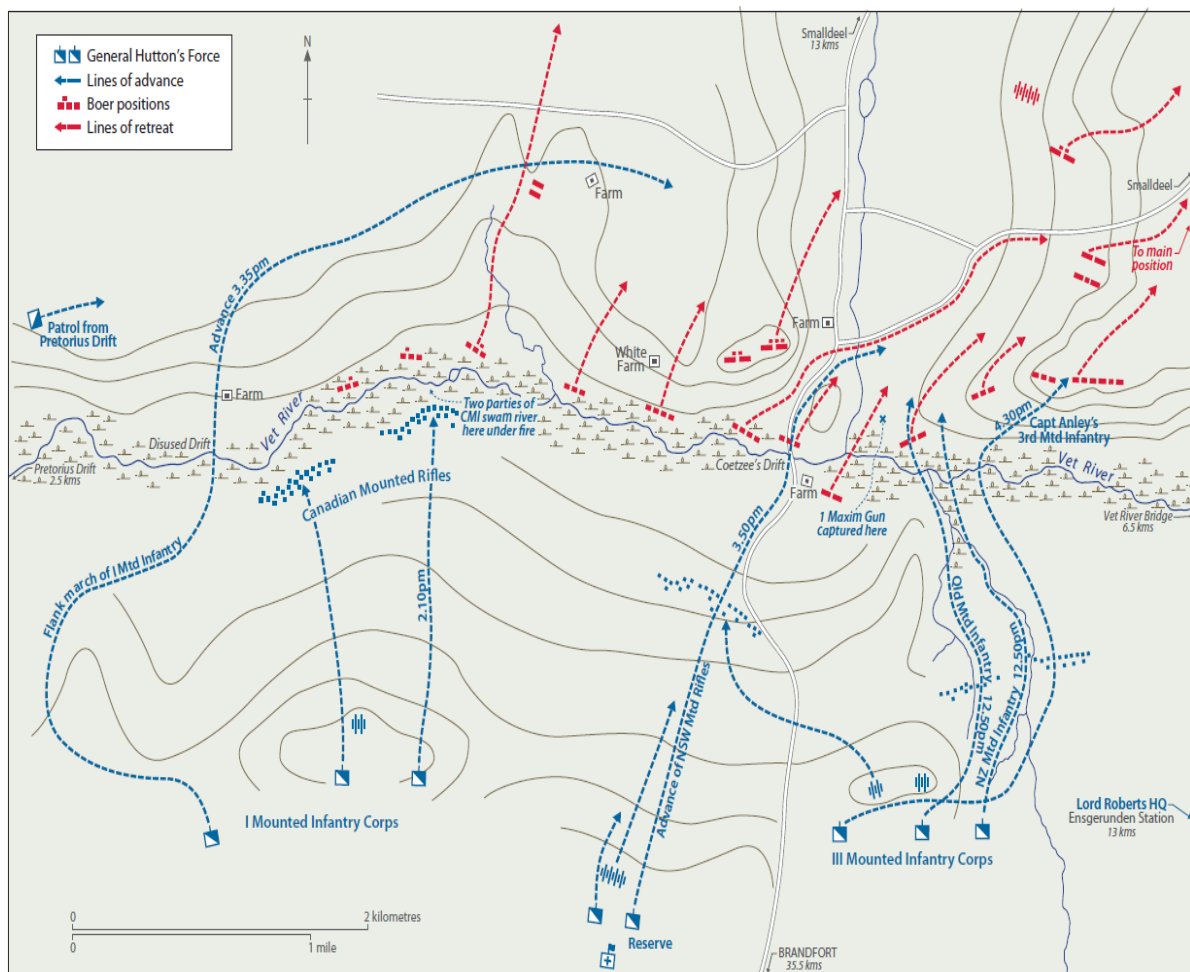


Figure 2: Hutton's force at Brandford, 2 May 1900

The next morning, the brigade began moving off towards the Vet River. After advancing around 13 kilometres, Hutton came upon 1200-2000 Boer troops, with guns, entrenched on hills to his front. With characteristic aggression he attacked, sending one corps to flank the defenders to the left while another pressed the centre of the Boer line. In short order, the New Zealanders took the centre kopje of the Boer position under heavy fire. The defenders retired to the Vet, while Hutton consolidated his position. The Boers were clearly intending to hold the river, and Hutton knew his next orders would be to shift them.

On the morning of 5 May, Hutton met with Kitchener and Roberts to discuss the upcoming move against the Boer position on the Vet. By now, having learned the tactical lessons of the veldt, open formations and flanking manoeuvres would remain the British pattern of advance. Hutton was thus ordered to turn the Boer flank well to the west, while Roberts' main attack was pushed through near the Vet River Station. Hutton's brigade was at this point reduced to 2250 men—1500 short of its paper strength—with the best part of two of his corps detached.

Hutton's force departed for Coetzee's Drift, eight kilometres to the west, with a detachment of Canadians sent 15 kilometres further west to an alternate drift, should it be needed to cross the river. Around lunchtime, his scouts contacted the Boers entrenched in low, prickly acacia scrub on both sides of the river in the vicinity of Coetzee's Drift. Hutton faced a problem. The drift was the obvious place to cross the river but it was well guarded by defenders entrenched on the steep northern banks and among hills strewn with boulders. Boer long-range artillery was soon falling on Hutton's position. A frontal attack would be costly.



**Figure 3: The 1<sup>st</sup> Mounted Infantry brigade at Coetzee's Drift, 5 May 1900**

Fortunately for Hutton, at that moment a local farmer appeared and offered—for a 'pardon and free pass'—to guide a force across a previously-unknown drift only five kilometres to the west. Hutton ordered the Boer front be pressured by the Canadians to the left and Queenslanders on the right, while at

2.00pm, with the defenders distracted, he ordered the British regulars of the 1<sup>st</sup> Mounted Infantry Battalion across the new drift. Now Hutton directed his reserve, the New South Wales Mounted Rifles, to make a frontal attack to fix the defenders in place until they could be encircled. 'As we proceeded', recalled one of the New South Welshmen, 'little puffs of dust thrown up by the bullets could be seen all around us'.

When the New South Welshmen got near the wooded bank, they fixed bayonets and charged across the river bank and up other side. The Boers had had enough and galloped out of the river bed. By nightfall, the brigade was secure on the north bank of the Vet, with outposts overlooking Roberts' main advance. Major Henry George 'Harry' Chauvel of the Queensland Mounted Infantry described the battle as 'the prettiest and hottest bit of fighting we have yet seen'. Importantly, news of the brigade's success in battle quickly made its way back to the colonies.

After Coetzee's Drift, Hutton's men set off in pursuit of the Boer rearguard in the vicinity of the Sand River. As the brigade closed on its objective, his leading units found 'the whole Boer Army encamped on the north bank', with the last enemy wagons only just making their crossing. In another characteristically-aggressive move, and hoping to prevent demolition of a nearby bridge, Hutton again sent his New South Welshmen forward and by 4.30pm a serious fire-fight had developed across his front, while long-range Boer artillery shelled his rearward positions.

The Boers then counter-attacked on Hutton's right and re-crossed the river on the left in an effort to outflank his forward line. Despite checking these efforts, Hutton knew his position was precarious. He was 39 kilometres from Roberts' army and outnumbered, with the Boers showing no sign of having been broken. As the sun fell, he withdrew his forward troops. That night Hutton was ordered not to re-engage at the Sand until the British infantry could arrive. He grumbled that 'Roberts is cautious and determined not to run any risk', and claimed that if he had had his full brigade of 6500 men, instead of 2200, more might have been done.

## **Moving into the Transvaal**

During the night of 9 May, Roberts and Kitchener reached Hutton's position and issued orders for the next phase of the advance. Hutton was to link up with Major General John French's Cavalry Division for a wide sweep west of the Sand River to flank and turn Boer positions up to and including the town of Kroonstad. French was to command the new combined mounted force of 4250 men and 18 guns. The subsequent British attack by more than 20,000 troops against around 1000 scattered Boers on the Sand was fought mostly on the eastern wing by Hamilton's column, yet Hutton and French made an important contribution in clearing the prominent kopjes (Dirksburg and Vredes Verdrag) overlooking the railway.

As they approached, General Louis Botha, commanding the Transvaal Boers, dispatched 200 mounted troops to block their progress as he withdrew north along the rail line. During the fighting that followed, Hutton's mounted infantrymen were of great help to the cavalry in clearing the enemy from farms, walls, enclosures and other built-up positions. At one point Hutton, with only a small force of 500 at his immediate disposal, gained the high ground near Vredes Verdrag and could see the whole Boer force withdrawing to the southeast. The Boer line of retreat had been cut but Hutton's small force was insufficient to press the advantage. He once more lamented that with more men he would have 'been able to close with the enemy' and, if further assisted by the cavalry, could have taken considerable numbers of prisoners.

By the morning of 12 May, Hutton's formation was acting as a connection between French's cavalry driving to encircle Kroonstad to the north, and Roberts' infantry advance preparing to move against the town from the south. He expected a general engagement and stubborn fight for the town but was surprised to find 'the bird had fled' and that the Boers had abandoned Kroonstad the night before. Although there was some disappointment in that a decisive battle at Kroonstad might 'have gone a long way to finishing the war', Hutton's increasingly hungry and exhausted men and mounts were happy to rest (aside from the odd farm raid) for the next week in the vicinity of the town. Looting was, by necessity, widespread. 'We cannot get any food supplies', one of Hutton's men complained, 'everything is seized, either for the hospitals, or the ambulances, or the officers'.

Hutton and French received new orders on 19 May, the day Mafeking was at last relieved to much celebration across the Empire, for the next advance to the Vaal River. For this task, he was given the 2400 men of his 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps, with French commanding 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry brigades (1800 men). With French again in charge of the combined force, Hutton was to continue to operate in front of Roberts' main column against the Boer flank and rear.

Two days into the advance, Hutton's scouts discovered that Schoeman's Drift across the Vaal was undefended and he urged French to make a hasty crossing. French, however, chose to adhere to Roberts' instructions. Twenty-four hours later, Hutton's continuing agitation prevailed on French to deviate from his original orders and to march directly northwest for the river. On 22 May, the combined mounted force was drawn up in bivouac on both sides of the Vaal, with outposts clinging to the steep slopes of the surrounding kopjes, 'while the occasional shot from the outposts enlivened the scene'. Transvaal was entered and the imposing Vaal was crossed.

## **The taking of Johannesburg and Pretoria**

A week later, Hutton's brigade moved once more with the cavalry division through the strip of land leading into the Klip River Valley in order to flank Johannesburg from the west, while Roberts' main force approached from the east. Meanwhile, Botha prepared to defend on the surrounding ridges. Boer artillery began to fall and in the ensuing scramble to cross the Klip and clear the ridges, a degree of control and coordination between the cavalymen and mounted infantrymen was lost. By the afternoon, both French and Hutton were under pressure. While they held footholds on the north bank of the river, the Boers had superior numbers and artillery in the ridges overlooking them.

An expected Boer night attack did not eventuate but, from 8.30am the next morning, Hutton's men were pinned by heavy artillery and Vickers-Maxim fire. One soldier later recalled the scene as a 'sea of flowers of smoke, and black desolation'. The mounted infantrymen nonetheless held the Boers' attention while French marched northwest towards Doornkop, where Hamilton had begun a frontal assault on the Boer position. French eventually managed to turn the Boer right flank and Hutton was at last able to extract his men. By nightfall, Hutton's force rejoined French on the Witwatersrand ridge near Roodepoort. It had been a testing time for both Hutton and his brigade.

On 30 May, pressed by Hamilton's column on one side and Roberts on the other, Johannesburg finally fell. A detachment of New South Welshmen from Hutton's brigade was the first to enter the city, and its men were somewhat disappointed by its narrow streets and run-down appearance. Given the rate of illness, wastage of horses and lack of supplies across the British force, the city's newly-secured rail line was, however, a lifeline.

Meanwhile, by this time Hutton's main force had reached the summit of the Witwatersrand range and a 'seemingly endless succession of gold mines and works!!'. From this high point, just west of the Cavalry Division, Hutton could see Boer wagons retreating from Johannesburg towards Pretoria. He immediately ordered his brigade to the valley below and into pursuit. French rode down to meet him, demanding an explanation. Hutton, his blood running hot, replied that he intended to capture the departing wagons, only 7-8 kilometres away.

French was furious that such action would put the mounted infantry in front of the cavalry but, with 'much strong language at the slowness of his brigadiers', agreed to allow Hutton to proceed. Then 'we were all off like shots from a catapult' recalled Hutton, with one mounted infantry corps to the north to cut off the Boer retreat and another directly against the main enemy force. The Boer column was caught and engaged successfully with 12 wagons captured, along with a long-range French-made Creusot gun and 46 prisoners (including a German 'field cornet', Richard August Runck, a key member of a German Commando fighting with the Boers, who had been returning from a meeting in Johannesburg). French, despite the tension, basked in the reflected glory of Hutton's success.

On 3 June, the long, tiring advance towards Pretoria re-commenced with Hutton's brigade, like the rest of the British army, growing ever more weary and short on supplies. One of his men wrote home describing 'stumps of weary men march or ride on some conveyance, ill of wounds or fever, dysentery, sore feet, exhaustion, or other disease'. Hutton did his best to raise their spirits, forming up his command to tell them how proud he was of how they had fought thus far. There is little evidence, however, of much

success in this regard. Nonetheless, by the afternoon on 4 June, the combined cavalry/mounted infantry force had fought its way west and northwest of Pretoria, effectively turning the Boers from Roberts' main advance. The city surrendered that evening.

## Follow-up actions

The fall of the Transvaal capital did not, contrary to the hopes and expectations of many British officers, signal the end of enemy resistance. There remained around 6000 Boers determined to fight on in Transvaal under Lois Botha and Koos de la Rey. Roberts knew these remaining commandos must be destroyed but his troops were in poor shape. Few units could muster even half their strength and the loss of horses had been horrific. Nonetheless, plans were drafted.

Hutton received fresh instructions on 8 June to cooperate once more with the cavalry to turn the right flank and rear of the new Boer position astride the Middleburg-Delagoa Bay railway, while Hamilton marched against the enemy's left flank at Elands River Station. The claws of this pincer would be some 30 kilometres apart. In between them, British infantrymen would head straight for the Boer centre.

Hutton and French marched out on 11 June. Their combined force was a shadow of what it had been—700 exhausted cavalymen and around 900 equally worn-out mounted infantrymen (less than a quarter of those Hutton had set out with from Bloemfontein). With little intelligence or reconnaissance, Hutton followed French across Pienaar's River and entered the Kamelfontein valley. The Boers waited on either side of the cavalry advance and, once French's men were a few kilometres into the valley, they attacked, beginning a series of engagements with Roberts' advancing army along an almost 40-kilometre front.

The Boers were outnumbered but held their ground. On the right-hand side of the British pincer, the attacking troops found themselves pinned down. The situation on the left for French and Hutton, facing up to 2800 troops under de la Rey and General J.P. Snyman, was even more difficult. The cavalymen, caught in a valley, were taking fire from three sides. French ordered a general dismount and they held on in this location for the rest of the day and the next. Hutton tried to relieve the pressure on French but soon found his troops were themselves unable to move without drawing considerable Boer fire.

Although able to check local Boer counter-attacks, both men agreed little could be done until Roberts' main frontal attack was mounted. The cavalry and mounted infantry slept on the ground they held. Gloom set in for many. The next morning, an anticipated Boer attack did not unfold, thanks to a successful British infantry attack against Diamond Hill towards the centre of the Boer line. The Boers withdrew but a policy of caution at General Headquarters meant that the British mounted pursuit did not begin until the next morning, much to Hutton's chagrin. 'The same mistake is made every time of contenting ourselves with turning the Boers out of their position and not rapidly following them up', he fumed to his wife.

Roberts wanted to march east to round up Botha's retreating army and Paul Kruger's government-in-hiding but a raid by de Wet's forces at Roodewal the previous week showed that resistance continued in the Orange Free State. Dealing with the prospect of an emerging guerrilla war, capturing the Boer leaders thus became Roberts' immediate focus. Part of this strategy was the infamous 'scorched earth' policy, designed to intimidate or starve the Boers into submission. Hutton's brigade thus spent the rest of June in the vicinity of Pretoria conducting minor operations against Boer raiders and pillaging Boer farms and livestock. By 22 June, the brigade boasted only 400 horses 'which can even stand up'. 'We are very, very badly off for all necessities', he told his wife, 'and the men are almost in rags, poor fellows!'

The pace quickened once more for Hutton, however, on receiving orders on 2 July to move to Rietfontein to take command not only of his own brigade but 450 mounted troops and two infantry battalions under Brigadier Bryan Mahon, of Mafeking fame. From here, Hutton was to march his expanded command southwards to drive the Boers under Botha away from the railway to Johannesburg, and the country east of it.

At first light on 6 July, Hutton's main force started. He ordered Mahon to clear the country west of the Tigerspoort-Witpoort ridge, while he took up a new position on the Standerton Road only a few kilometres short of a suspected Boer concentration. The next day, Hutton instructed Mahon—with the bulk of the mounted troops—to make an encircling movement against another suspected enemy position at Bronkhorstspuit. During his encirclement, Mahon was ambushed by multiple Boer columns advancing

from the north and northeast. Communications was lost with Hutton and, with artillery falling, Mahon balked. By late evening, his whole mounted force had fallen back to Hutton's position, with the Boers in pursuit.

Encouraged by this success, Botha moved to surround Hutton, yet he hesitated to attack. Meanwhile, an anxious Roberts despatched 1000 cavalymen under French as reinforcements. By this time, however, the Boer force was thinning, with Botha thinking better of any immediate offensive move. Hutton took the chance to develop his own plans against known enemy positions in the Witpoort-Kafferspruit ridge area, with French, now the local commander, giving him full rein.

On the morning of 11 July, Hutton's attack began and by 1pm his main force was on the ridge south of Witpoort, driving the Boers before it. No sooner had Hutton taken the town, however, than a still nervous Roberts ordered Mahon and a large proportion of Hutton's force back to protect Pretoria. Hutton's remaining 2500 men, entrenched at Tigerspoort Pass, Witpoort Pass, Kafferspruit Pass and Rietvlei, now faced a new Boer line astride the Pretoria-Delagoa railway at Rhenosterfontein.

Meanwhile Botha, himself freshly reinforced, prepared for a last throw of the dice. He planned an attack to re-take Pretoria, timed to coincide with simultaneous uprisings in Johannesburg and Cape Town, which, it was hoped, would cut British lines of communication. Botha intended to advance directly through Witpoort and its surrounding areas, positions held by Hutton.

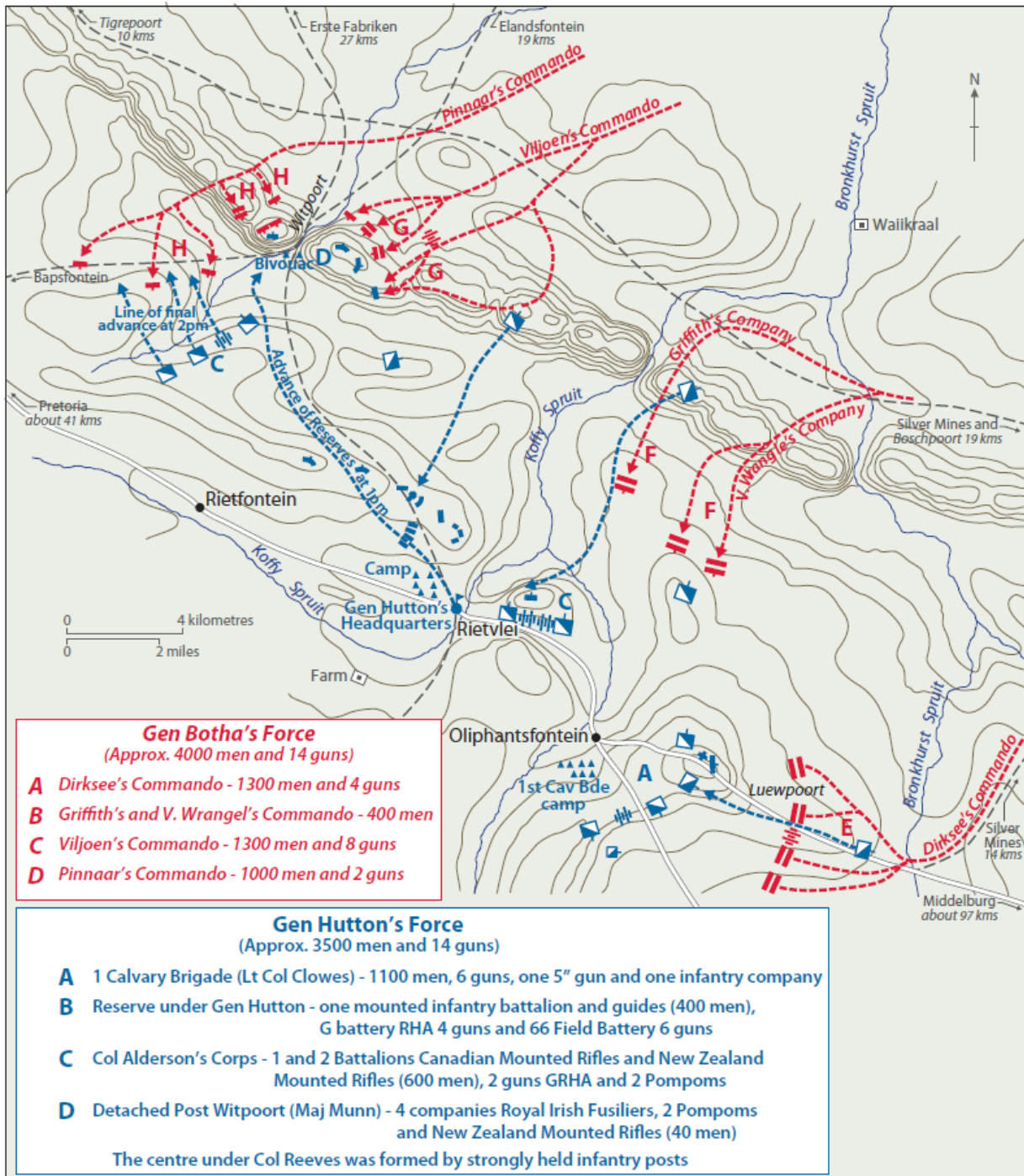
It was a sound plan, with Hutton considerably weakened by troops sent back to Pretoria. Thus, at dawn on 16 July, some 2500 Boers with 8-12 guns, under the operational command of General Ben Viljoen, began pressing Hutton's posts (and the nearby cavalry position) across more than 27 kilometres of front. The Boers first mounted a feint against Hutton's centre and then simultaneously attacked his right flank on the high ground above the cavalry position and the left flank where Hutton had established a strongpoint at an opening in a ridge of kopjes 10 kilometres north of his main camp, near Witpoort. All morning, Hutton worried that cavalry on his right might not hold and he shepherded his reserve.

Meanwhile, on the left, the Boers made determined and persistent attacks against the three companies of Royal Irish Fusiliers and 60 New Zealand mounted infantrymen (who subsequently lost their position) holding the Witpoort Pass. The attackers closed to within 100 metres, calling for surrender. The Irishmen, however, held on grimly until the early afternoon when Hutton, now confident the cavalry flank was safe, deployed a relief force of Canadians who subsequently drove the Boers from the area.

Thus, recalled Hutton, 'a very critical moment by the enemy was averted'. Had Witpoort ridge fallen, the Boers would have gotten between Hutton and Pretoria and severed the railway. As it was, by sundown the Boers were once more in full retreat. 'Through the haze of smoke', one of his men recalled, 'coloured heliograph lamps [were] flashing red, green and yellow'.

The cost of the successful defence of Hutton's position had been heavy, with 58 casualties. Yet his losses were offset to some degree for Hutton by the prestige associated with his success. Roberts took the unusual step on 18 July of wiring Hutton directly: 'Fight of 16<sup>th</sup> was most successful. I congratulate you and all concerned'.





**Figure 4: Hutton's defence of the Witpoort/Reitvlei area, 16 July 1900**

As Hutton was holding off the Boers at Witpoort, Roberts was preparing his large-scale advance to the east from Pretoria which began on 23 July. Again, Hutton and French were once more used as a mounted screen. The original plan, after crossing the Wilge, was to push quickly due east and seize a drift over Oliphant River, then move east of Middleburg, blocking the Boers' retreat by road towards Machadodorp.

Roberts, however, changed his mind mid-course, directing French against Brugspruit and Hutton to Balmoral, thus losing any chance of envelopment. 'Alas!', wrote Hutton, '[i]t appeared now to us that all hope of a successful coup, and of a summary termination of the war had vanished'. Hutton's brigade finished its advance at Middleburg, with the Boers having fled for Belfast, 56 kilometres further on. Hutton was given responsibility for the captured town, its anti-British inhabitants, and the surrounding area.

Throughout August, Hutton's brigade and attached troops stationed in and around Middleburg busied themselves patrolling while Roberts prepared for another push east, against Botha's new defensive line around Belfast. Hutton was disappointed to learn his column was to be left out of this last advance. 'The fact is', he confessed to his wife, 'I want to be in at the death of the Transvaal Republic'.

The battle began at Belfast on 24 August. Though successful, Hutton once more lamented that Botha's men escaped 'with all their guns and with little if any molestation in their retreat as usual'. Conscious of ever-dwindling British military prestige, '[s]hameful I call it!' he raged, '[w]hat will the military critics say?? Here we have some 30,000 men with quite 5000 mounted men held up by some 4 or 5000 wretched farmers—Dutch men—for whom in the old days we had so much contempt'.

## The final phase

After taking Belfast, Roberts hoped to sandwich Botha up against the border of Portuguese East Africa and, in the process, remove Transvaal's only access to a port at Lourenço Marques. The Boers could then either choose to fight or cross the border and be arrested by Portuguese police. British horses, however, were almost spent and Roberts' troops were more exhausted and ill than ever. Moreover, the terrain in the path of the proposed advance was daunting.

In this context, Kitchener sent for Hutton on 5 September and told him it had been reported as impossible to advance along the railway as initially planned, and asked for Hutton's opinion as to how he might solve the impasse. Claiming 'first rate local knowledge' of the country through his scouts, Hutton proposed to move his brigade along the watershed between the Eland and Komati Rivers, forming a link between a British infantry division 13 kilometres to the west and French's large column, reinforced by Hamilton, moving 30 kilometres to the south on Barberton.

Hutton could thus 'turn the enemy's positions' in their efforts to hold both groups in the difficult valleys thorough which they were advancing. Roberts and Kitchener agreed to the plan but, according to Hutton, looked on his expedition with 'rather a forlorn hope as the country was considered by the Boers themselves to be impassable for our troops'. Yet Hutton recognised the significance of the operation and was determined to succeed. The general idea was for the various British columns to converge on and capture Presidents Kruger and Steyn at Nellspruit. For this task, Hutton was allocated a total of 1400 mounted troops.

The final advance of Hutton's brigade began on 8 September and, the next day, he fought a difficult action against around 400 Boers among the boulders on the highest portion of the watershed between the Komati and the Eland. Despite the precipitous terrain, Hutton's bold flanking attack soon swept the Boers from the ridge and into nearby valleys. Two days later, the brigade fought another skirmish but managed to make good its advance to the edge of the deep valley of the Godwan, which appeared an obvious barrier to further movement.

The problem was that Hutton's 'watershed' at this point had shrunk to a 'narrow serrated edge'. Nonetheless, on 12 September, thanks to his guides, a personal reconnaissance and a feeling the Boers were retreating, Hutton 'decided to risk it' and sent one of his corps by an almost impassable track into the Godwan Valley with orders to gain a foothold on the southern ridge of the Kaapsche Hoop plateau, opposite his current position, north of Tafel Kop mountain.

Meanwhile, French was under pressure, 30 kilometres to the south in the deep valley of the Komati, and Hutton knew if he could make good his foothold it would greatly assist the ongoing cavalry advance. 'I took up my position on top of the highest peak and as you may suppose with deepest anxiety watched with my glasses', he later wrote, with 'French's guns booming away in the distance'. By 10am his corps, after scrambling up rocks and gullies, had gained a foothold without much Boer interference. At this moment, Hutton yelled "'go" to the rest of my Mounted troops, and in a few minutes they were all driving into the deep recesses of the Godwan'.

The risk Hutton took in crossing the Godwan was considerable but ultimately justified by its results. By 3am on 13 September, he had taken a small mining town on the highest part of the Kaapsche Hoop plateau, which commanded all roads leading east and the railway from Machardodorp to Kaapumden. In part as a consequence of his movements, which were unexpected by the Boers, French and Hamilton were

able to cross the mountains in front of him and take Barberton unopposed. Moreover, had the Boers remained on the Hoop, they would have likely caused considerable difficulties for the British infantry's advance up the Eland Valley. Hutton called this last expedition as 'certainly the most critical, if not the most important of all which I have had the good fortune to have fall to my lot'.

By now, there was nowhere else the Boers could hope to halt or even slow the British advance. On 24 September, British infantry entered Komatipoort and seized its stores, as Kruger slipped across the border and sailed for Europe. Exhausted and ragged, Botha dispersed most of the commandos into the mountains to the north. At this point and despite his earlier fears, Hutton and a great many other British officers concluded erroneously that the war was won and all that remained was to form an army of occupation. With no further use for large field formations, Hutton's brigade was broken up in early October.

## Conclusion

Taken in total, the 1<sup>st</sup> Mounted Infantry Brigade had done well. Under and aggressive and capable commander, it had proven to all and sundry that troops from around the Empire might be quickly forged into an effective fighting formation. Though distinct in background, experience and—in some ways—military/professional outlook, the brigade demonstrated that British regulars and part-time troops from Canada and the Australian colonies could fight effectively under a unified tactical command.

The key had been a leader who was aware of and embraced the idiosyncrasies of the disparate troops under his charge. Moreover, even if such troops made much of the differences between them, they were, in operational terms at least, largely cosmetic. Under the surface were shared doctrine, procedures, operating procedures and equipment. Such standardisation was perhaps much more easily attained in the context of Empire at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than today. Yet many principles are enduring. And deep and meaningful reference to an army's past will always shed light on the dilemmas and issues of the present.

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*His publications include a history of the Army cadet movement in Australia titled 'The Torch and the Sword' (2007); a study of the first Libyan campaign in North Africa 1940-41: 'Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac' (2009); and an edited work on a number of common misinterpretations of Australia's military past: 'Zombie Myths of Australian Military History' (2010).*

*His more recent publications include a similar work in relation to the Anzac legend, titled 'Anzac's Dirty Dozen: 12 Myths of Australian Military History' (2012), a co-edited pre-World War 1 military history of Australia: 'Before the Anzac Dawn: a military history of Australia to 1915' (2013) and a co-authored account of Germany's invasion of Greece: 'Swastika over the Acropolis: re-interpreting the Nazi Invasion of Greece in World War II' (2013). His latest book, to be released in early 2015, is an investigation of Imperial defence prior to 1914 titled: 'Britannia's Shield: Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Hutton and late-Victorian Imperial Defence'.*

## SOURCES

The research behind this article is based primarily on primary records. The most important of these include a set of letters from Hutton to his wife, sent during his time in South Africa, now at the National Library of Australia (MS1215). A range of other important papers and correspondence was drawn from the 'Hutton Papers', microfilm copies of which are held in the University of NSW Canberra Library.

Records were also used from the State Library of NSW (B1680, MSS2105), State Records NSW (NRS1251, 4/7648), the Australian War Memorial (AWM1 2/22, MSS1406, MSS1406, 3DRL3310, PR82/149, PR86/126 & 261) and the National Archives (UK) (WO105/21, WO 105/7, WO 105/9).

Key secondary texts used in the preparation of the article include R. Lehane, 'Lieutenant-General Edward Hutton and "Greater Britain": late-Victorian imperialism, imperial defence and the self-governing colonies', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2005; C. Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War: the war in South Africa 1899-1902*, Oxford University Press: Melbourne, 2002; and C. Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902*, Canadian War Museum and McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal, 1993.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This is a biblical quote from Ecclesiastes 1:9.