

**Thord Hallström, Cape Mounted Riflemen (CMR) – before he changed his name to Ivor Thord-Gray. Thord enlisted in the CMR on 24 May 1897. The photo was taken on 9 June 1898, just over a year before the start of the Boer War on 11 October 1899.**



## CHAPTER III

# SOUTH AFRICA TO THE END OF THE ANGLO-BOER WAR, 1895–1902

AFTER leaving the ship in Cape Town on Boxing Day 1895, I walked along the street as fast as I could, without running. I jumped on a tram and gave the conductor the sixpence fare. He said something I did not understand so I pretended not to hear him. He probably asked me how far I wanted to go. After a while the tram stopped and everybody got off. It was the terminus station. I started to walk along a broad road. Around 9 pm I came onto a narrower road. I had barely begun on that when somebody came trotting by on a horse. That worried me, because I thought he was a mounted policeman, but he rode past without a word.

Around a mile ahead I met two mounted policemen who seemed to block my path. I nearly jumped into the bushes, because Bill had warned me, ‘Don’t open your mouth to speak to anybody.’ I started to sing the melody to *La Paloma* and in this way almost danced past them.

My cap was pushed far back on my head, and when I passed I lifted my arm in some kind of salute, like any boy would have done. They were barely out of sight when I jumped onto a small path and ran fast to get to safety in case they changed their minds and came back.

Towards midnight I came upon the outhouses of a farm and found an empty wagon in a shed. As I was exhausted, I climbed up and got an hour’s sleep after killing a lot of mosquitoes. I woke up with a start. A rooster stood on the seat close to my ear crowing loud enough to wake the dead. I rushed out into the dark. Later on, at about four in the morning, I started to feel hungry. The sun rose around five and I was forced to slow down by the combination of hunger and exhaustion.

I walked across sand dunes with freshwater ponds scattered among them and arrived at a farm around seven o’clock. Here I was given some coffee and bread and the family showed me the road to another larger farm. Once there I was offered a good breakfast by a middle-aged lady who seemed a bit too well dressed for that

early hour of the morning. She asked me a lot of questions and then sent me along with an employee to another farm, whose owner was a Dane called Larsen. There I was thoroughly questioned about my motives for wandering alone around the countryside.

The upshot was that I went back with the employee to work on the lady's farm for a salary of fifteen shillings a month. I did not understand how little it was, and as I was tired I was just happy to get a place to sleep. The farm owner was Miss Dürr de Vrede, address Mowbray Flats, Cape Colony. Miss Dürr was around thirty or forty years old and not bad looking. She seemed to have taken a liking to me and I became a kind of bodyguard. She was obviously afraid of something. I also tended to the hedges in the garden, weeded here and there and, best of all, was responsible for her horse. She was a bit peculiar in that she only rode it once while I was there. I took it out every morning for a short ride in my free time before work started.

After putting up with the old dear for a month I was invited by Mr Larsen to come for lunch at their place the following Sunday. His wife, a German woman, was very friendly and her twelve-year-old daughter was a pretty child. During the lunch he asked how much I was being paid and was appalled when I told him it was fifteen shillings a month.

'I'll be damned,' he said. 'I want to give you twenty shillings a month. You will eat with us and have your own room in the house.'

This was, of course, much better. I accepted because I was bored with the lack of freedom at Miss Dürr's place.

When I returned to tell Miss Dürr she became upset and offered me £2.10 per month, but I had to say no, as I had made an agreement with Larsen. However, if ever there was a case of 'out of the frying pan, into the fire', this was it. As soon as I returned to Larsen's farm, he produced a work schedule. At four in the morning I was to milk ten cows, then get fresh drinking water to the house from a dam – situated about eight hundred metres away – in two twenty-litre tin containers carried with a yoke. These weighed more than forty kilograms, and I had to walk through deep sand for more than half the way. Then at breakfast I was allowed to eat as much maize-meal porridge as I wanted. Thereafter I had to go out to cut stones from a chalky limestone bed in the ground with a pick and a heavy shovel. Every stone had to measure one foot high by one foot wide and two feet long, and all the stones had to be transported for storage before dinner was served.

No slave or convict ever had such a task! He intended to build a new barn and a new house with the stones. After supper there were the cows to milk again. Larsen always talked about how much he had worked, but I never saw him in the quarry, and he had a siesta every afternoon for two hours.

The Hottentots, the black workers, and I, never had a chance to sit down before nine in the evening. We worked for sixteen hours a day six days a week – and we had to milk and feed the cows on Sunday. For that we got twenty shillings a month! All the time I had been studying Dutch and was helped by the coloured people who spoke the language. This was how I soon became aware that a white

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man never got less than six pounds a month, and I was being paid only one pound. One day I brought this up with Larsen, who responded by threatening to report my presence to the police as a runaway sailor. This settled the matter. I determined I would immediately go north to the Kimberley diamond fields. When I asked Larsen for my salary, he said that I would get very little as my food and board had to be deducted.

I told Mrs Larsen this, and the dear old soul gave me an old revolver with twelve cartridges and asked me for God's sake not to tell her husband. The weapon was to compensate for the deducted money, which she knew was part of my salary. He was notorious for being a miser.

On 8 April 1896 I rose at two in the morning before Larsen got up. His wife, who had guessed my intentions, sneaked out of bed, prepared a small breakfast for me, and gave me a sandwich for the road. When I was ready, she gave me a motherly kiss on my cheek. I quickly went away from Mowbray Flats as I did not wish to have a discussion or fight with her husband. He had refused to pay me my hard-earned slave wages so I felt no obligation towards him.

The distance to Kimberley by road was about 725 miles, calculated from a very old map, and I thought that I could manage twenty miles a day and get there in thirty five days. It took me one day to get to Stellenbosch. That evening, tired from walking about thirty miles and chopping wood for two hours, I lay down to sleep in a broken shed. The next morning I was up before the rooster. My goal was now Worcester, so I followed my map though the terrain to Helshoogte (Hell's Heights). There I was advised to go eastwards to Franschoek, instead of north to Paarl as I should have done.

Taking this bad advice I moved into rugged terrain. I had a strong feeling that I should return to Helshoogte and go north, passing Paarl, but being young and optimistic I trusted that I would arrive in Worcester. I started my journey along a dried path in a valley.

About half way down the valley I set up a shelter with some stones and camped for the night. Not far from the camp I saw some small buck (antelope), which did not seem afraid, but they were too far away for my revolver, and I had to go to bed hungry. The following evening I arrived at a big vlei, a kind of lake, which gave the impression of being an inhospitable place. A few buck were visible in the distance, but as they seemed to be alert and scared, I continued and arrived in Worcester that evening, a very tired and hungry youth.

That evening a man gave me some food without my having to work for it, but I promised to do so in the morning. I got a roof over my head and a sort of a stew to eat. (The man seemed surprised when I turned up for work and gave me a good breakfast.) I wanted to stay a day in Worcester because I was having trouble with one of my shoes. Here I realised for the first time that a young man wandering along the road, or through a city, carrying only a bundle, automatically becomes a suspicious character. This made me feel awful and compelled me to move on.

It was of course necessary every now and then to stock up my meagre food supplies by working. Sometimes I was met with shotguns and curses, but just as

often with kindness. Usually the farmers let me work for my food by chopping wood or performing other heavy duties. The wives were usually kind and gave me food such as maize-meal porridge before I was given my tasks. One woman asked me to wash and brush her pet, a six-month-old calf. Another very sympathetic middle-aged woman offered me work in the house taking care of her, because she lived alone. I soon started to feel apprehensive and left quickly. When a farmer had extra work for me I made a deal to get more than one meal. That way I was able to bypass some of the farms.

To shorten the trip I thought it a good idea to take shortcuts along some of the Hottentots' paths, which were everywhere. This was interesting, but the paths led me to heights and mountains. I often starved and water was scarce. I learned a bitter lesson: Never take a shortcut you do not know, as it can cost you extra days of walking, in addition to thirst and hunger.

On one occasion I took a shortcut that did not lead me anywhere, but there were some buck around. I was hungry so I sat down behind some large stones and waited. One of the small buck came within ten feet of my hiding place. I shot it with my revolver and ate venison for two days, but I went on my way when the meat turned bad from the sun. I enjoyed this feast and at the same time I got a good rest.

After Worcester my goal was Touws River, approximately sixty-eight miles northeast. I did not like the look of the road that some people in Worcester had pointed out to me. I started at nine o' clock in the morning without knowing anything about the terrain in front of me. I went to the east of the Hex River Mountains; it was a cold, wild, and windy landscape. In one place I took what seemed to be a clear shortcut around high mountains. It started to rain and a storm rose with heavy thunder and lightning, which struck several places around me and held me back on my journey. I tried to make a shelter of stones but to no avail, as I did not have a raincoat or a fire. Hyenas in the area gave me a nerve-racking concert with their howling and barking. Other animals made growling and strange mating calls, which did not really rock me to sleep, especially as I did not know what kind of animals they were.

I reached Touws River in four days. There I met a somewhat talkative man who seemed to be out hunting. He advised me to go eastwards for three days and then to the north, because there were stocks of game there. To me it looked to be a very inhospitable region. I did not like the idea but did as he said as I was keen to shorten my journey to Kimberley. After three days' hard march I got tired of the miserable nature of the landscape and turned north. Finally I arrived quite fatigued at a railway station. There I met the station master, who was Danish and very friendly. He gave me food and water. He seemed very interested in my three-day journey and warned me not to go to Kimberley. When I had eaten he advised me not to continue north but to return to Cape Town. He would, he said, give me a letter to a friend in Cape Town, who was an officer with the city's police. Then I confided in him that I had abandoned ship and did not feel like getting arrested. He laughed and wrote the letter, which he gave me together with free tickets to

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Cape Town and advice that I should improve my Dutch and English. Once I had accomplished that, then I could journey northwards again.

About ten miles from Cape Town the conductor informed me that my 'free ticket' wasn't valid any further, so I got out, walked into town, and went into a seaman's guesthouse. It was a stinking place filled with creepy-crawlies, and I wished that I had not returned south.

The following day I went with a racing heart, I have to admit, to the police headquarters. Apparently the police were recruiting people for the Chartered Company in Rhodesia (a private company set up by the diamond magnate Cecil John Rhodes to colonise and exploit the territory, which came to be called Rhodesia and later Zimbabwe). The troops were needed either for control of rinderpest (a cattle disease that raged through Southern Africa at this time) or for the war against the Matabele in Rhodesia. I did not show my letter from the station master but went instead to the Swedish Consulate to get my *Abraham Rydberg* grades translated into English. I did not want to inform them that I had left a ship in the way I had in fact done. This translation was apparently not necessary, as the Cape Government had a great need of men and did not care at all how they came to be in South Africa. The consulate, though, had my name on their books as a deserter.

Luckily I made contact with a kind person on the consulate staff who himself had the heart and soul of an adventurer. He introduced me to the Swedish consul-general, who owned a large brewery in Cape Town. He got me to tell my story and offered me work in his brewery. I was grateful for the offer but rejected it, explaining that I wanted to join the mounted police in Rhodesia. He advised me to be careful before signing any contract about rinderpest control.



**Thord in the uniform of prison guard on Robben Island.**

## ROBBEN ISLAND

WHEN I returned to police headquarters, I showed them my letter from the station master and found that the man I was seeking was a Swedish lieutenant in the police force and a very fine person. He also advised me not to go to Rhodesia immediately. He wrote a letter of recommendation to Commander Norton on Robben Island, seven miles offshore from Cape Town. I liked the look of the island and signed an employment contract for one year as a prison guard. My salary was three pounds a month and everything else was included. Because I have a lot to write about, I should skip my year on Robben Island, but I find that difficult. The foundation of my military career was laid there. First I should mention that Mr Norton, the commander of the police, received me with great compassion and friendliness. When he learned that I wanted a military career, he let me register for all the military courses that were run on the island. One of the first things I did was to acquire books on Mathematics

and English grammar. Then I contacted the teacher at the community school for white people. (Education, like many other social activities, even churchgoing, was segregated.) After about six months of intense study, mostly at night, my difficulties in mathematics seemed to disappear like an early morning fog.

In an attempt to make the police a more efficient body, Mr Norton replaced the usual monthly inspections with daily training. Most of the men were middle-aged, and they grumbled about this.

Norton understood that the police had become stuck in a bad routine, and he introduced hard field training for all personnel. This forced many to ask for their pensions, as they were too old or too fat to continue. Within one year we were a totally new and skilled company.

Most of the prisoners were Zulus, Bechuanas, and Matabele, but there were also some Hottentots and two Bushmen, all of whom had lengthy prison sentences. The guards were specially trained in how to enter the fenced yard when the prisoners were there and how they should escort them to their quarters in the evening. Some of these prisoners were without doubt bad cases, and the order was 'shoot to kill' those who tried to escape. This seemed a little harsh to me at first. Later on I found this order to be absolutely necessary, because of the presence nearby of a female leprosy and psychiatric hospital and, of course, for the security of every white woman on the island.

Examination of the histories behind the sentences usually revealed some political or religious background. Many prisoners were in for murder, but was it murder in reality? For example, we had two Zulus – the finest physical specimens of the human race to be found anywhere. These men had been taking part in a tribal feast in their homeland, dancing in front of a mysterious and sacred artifact. Some fanatical European missionaries interrupted the ceremony for being heathen and removed the artifact. When one of the men tried to salvage the valuable symbol, an idiotic missionary pushed him aside and deliberately and without any justification smashed the object into pieces in everybody's presence.

The two Zulus, excited to religious madness through song and dance, turned violent and killed the missionary on the spot. They were arrested, sentenced to thirty lashes with a cane, and a lifetime of imprisonment. The judge who sentenced them must have realised how extremely provoked they had been, since he did not sentence them to hang. In my opinion these Zulus did not commit murder. Zulus, Matabele, Bechuanas, Pondos, Basutos, Sekukuni, and so on, all speak Bantu languages, which are spoken across most of Sub-Saharan Africa. Local white people called them kaffirs, a word originally derived from Swahili and Arabic, meaning an unbeliever in Islam. The term later came to be used by white colonists as a racial slur against all black people.

In a few cases, as with the Zulu nation, strong leadership created kingdoms and even empires, but they were usually organised in clans or tribes based on kinship – each tribe taking orders from its own chief. In the view of many whites they were physically and intellectually far superior to Hottentots and Bushmen, the brown-

skinned nomads who were the original inhabitants at the Cape when the Dutch first settled there.

## THE CAPE MOUNTED RIFLES

THORD'S twelve months and twenty days' service at Robben Island came to an end. Superintendent Norton despatched Thord's top grades and a recommendation to a major at the Cape Mounted Riflemen (CMR), a local cavalry unit. With two chests filled with clothes and a few pounds in his pocket the youth left the Cape, travelling by rail for three days to King William's Town in the Eastern Cape Province and from there in ox-drawn wagons to Umtata. His service in the CMR began on 24 May 1897, and from that day he became a British citizen, which was a condition of service.

At that time a CMR force was fighting an uprising in Bechuanaland. The new recruit would have to undergo training before being allowed to join the combat. Twenty comrades were sent to the front on 3 July 1897.

'I would have gone too, but the big men were taken out to train for the artillery.' And as Thord measured 73 inches around the chest, he was one of those chosen to stay for further training.

By the end of July the revolt had been put down.

The recruit had to pay for his own horse, saddle, and uniform, which Thord calculated at £56. This sum could be paid off at £4 per month. He does not mention his salary.

The daily routine was as follows: 5–7 o'clock, caring for the horses; 7–8 riding school; 8–9 breakfast; 9–10 foot exercise; 10–11 free time; 11–12 exercise and gymnastics.

The rest of the day was given over to free time, during which there were daily gatherings and enjoyable games: football, fencing, and mounted contests using sabres to slice oranges, and sabre and lance to peg pieces of wood, twelve by three inches, driven into the ground. Thord's companions, most of them English, were pleasant and amiable. By 5 September 1897 he had passed the sabre and carbine exercises, the riding school, and the examination as a Maxim machine gunner, which entitled him to a sixpence increase in salary per day. Thereafter he trained in operating a seven-pounder field gun, passing the examination on 30 October.

There were seldom more than fourteen days between the letters home to his parents and brothers. Yet it became more and more difficult for him to express his thoughts in his mother tongue. This was especially evident in his spelling. He had not spoken Swedish for a long time. His mother was the most diligent in answering his letters and in sending newspapers, etc. When there was a long pause in his father's letter-writing, Thord became concerned and asked if perhaps Father disliked his profession. At that time he expressed doubt about what he was doing and about the future.

**At this point in the narrative Thord's own writings end. The story is taken up by the author, AG Hallström, using Thord's letters and journals as the basic source.**

‘My ideas go beyond what I am doing at present. Young Swedish blood rushes fast and it is not easy to stop when it overflows. Young and strong, I went forward with my own hands, worked hard, had luck, and happened to meet benevolent people. As a wandering adventurer I am nothing, but I never lose faith. I grow more and more and face the future, however black it may be. I will return one day, but not until I am a man, independent of others. That shall be my life’s aim. It is destiny that has thrown me on this warrior path and I want to follow it,’ he wrote to Gunnar.

A few weeks later: ‘In three years I will leave the CMR. I shall see all of Africa.’

During this first year of training there was tension between the soldiers and the local black people:

‘Here in Pondoland, the negroes think that the whites poison their drinking water to kill their cattle. Skin diseases ravage terribly. They gather and make a noise whenever a white person rides to the river to water his horse.’ At the time the whole of Southern Africa was being ravaged by a cattle plague called the rinderpest, which caused the death of millions of cattle and brought poverty and devastation, as a large proportion of the rural population, both black and white, lived off cattle farming.

In a letter dated 20 November 1897, Thord stated that he would not stay much longer in Umtata. Later, however, he found out there would be no movement while they were awaiting the arrival of new field guns.

On 18 December he mentioned the plan to deal with the blacks if they did not calm down in time for Christmas:

‘We are burning with fervour to fight them. They have done us a lot of harm, including the loss of large numbers of horses. Two men on their way out of camp almost got killed. It is not out of bloodthirstiness that I wish to fight. It is to study combat against a black enemy. I have stood eye to eye with one or two natives, but I still haven’t seen how they fight as a troop. At times, maybe a thousand pass the camp, but they keep a good distance.

‘All ride small ponies and carry spears and rifles, some of them muskets, and others the latest models of shotgun.’

In January 1898 war broke out in Basutoland. In the first week in February the artillery left Umtata to go to ‘the small outposts’. Thord was transferred after nearly eight months in Umtata to a place called Bizana in Eastern Pondoland, one hundred and forty miles away and thirty-five miles from the sea. Bizana seems to have offered better opportunities to use free time in a more varied way than before. That Thord’s basic training was completed also meant that he had a lot more free time than before. At the time of enlistment he had thought himself to be in command of the English language. But now he felt a need to improve and took English lessons with a Mrs Sprigg, wife of the district magistrate. He reported home that he mingled with prominent people and mentioned that he spent time with the chief of the regiment, Captain Dalgety, ‘almost every evening’. He had also met Lord Montgomery, a member of the House of Lords.

His delight in storytelling was evident when in his letters he described encounters with the natural world. During a training march, his platoon had encamped and he and some friends were given three hours leave. He related how they visited a deep gorge in the mountain, and described the animals they discovered there. The description included a battle between a hawk and thousands of pigeons that forced it to drop its prey.

On 13 October 1998 he described an antelope hunt in which two whites and two hundred natives participated, together with the latter's chief. When the drive started the whites, the chief, and his entourage mounted their horses, rode ahead for about five miles, and were in position ready to shoot when the animals were driven between a couple of hills into open landscape. Thord especially admired the chief's son for his skill in handling the spear. Thord shot four out of the fourteen animals killed that day.

At the beginning of November 1898 Thord was given five days' leave and used it to ride to the coast for hunting and fishing. He took pleasure in seeing the sea and said he felt 'like jumping out of his own skin' with happiness.

He met an old Englishman, married to a black woman, and following his directions found a cave system where the old fellow had lived thirty years earlier while on the run from persecution.

Thord engraved his name and the year 1898 in the cave.

The catch from the hunting – and fishing in the sea and nearby Umzamba River – was satisfactory. It included pigeons, duck, oysters, and mushrooms.

It was not all pleasure. To Gunnar, who was doing his compulsory military service in Göta Livgarde, he wrote on 24 November:

'What do you think of field life? You should be down here for some time and you would get to feel what it is like to be out on patrol during the rainy season; cold as hell, the water freezes in the water flasks at times. But most of the time it is rather good, entertaining ourselves with lawn tennis, cricket and football. Sometimes we have conversations or a ball, the latter at the end of every month.'

Inspections were done from time to time to ensure that military skills were kept up to scratch. On 23 February 1899 the inspection (done by an outside officer) involved shooting with a Maxim machine gun (350 rounds) and a seven-pounder field gun as well as marching drills. Praise followed. Thord took first prize in both carbine and revolver shooting. He was chosen as one of ten to shoot for the Eastern Pondoland Government Cup Team.

On different occasions Thord told a story from that time in Pondoland. It was related by Birger Hultstrand in greater detail than here. A black nanny in the service of a white family had accompanied a six-year-old boy in a pushchair when she was surprised and surrounded by a troop of screaming baboons. The girl panicked and ran home. The pram was found empty. Beside it lay a dead baby baboon. Thord's platoon searched for the missing child but was unsuccessful. A few years later Thord was out on a new mission in the same area when one of the junior officers returned from a scouting mission with a dead boy, light-skinned, very dirty, and unkempt with long, tousled hair and claw-like nails. The junior

officer said that his platoon had scared a troop of baboons, which climbed a slope. One of them was light and hairless and tried in vain to follow the others. A female helped and encouraged him but he whimpered and seemed afraid. In the end he slipped, hit his head on a rock and died. The troop of baboons expressed their grief with high-pitched screams.

Thord examined the boy and took him to the village where the kidnapping of the baby had occurred. It was confirmed without a doubt that he was the missing boy. Thord later told the story to a journalist in Cape Town whom he had met at the Mount Nelson Hotel. More than twenty years afterwards he found out that the journalist had passed the story on to Edgar Rice Burroughs, who used it as the basis for his novel *Tarzan of the Apes*.

At the beginning of 1899 the mention of young ladies becomes more frequent in the letters home. A family called Brown was visited by three young ladies, a Miss Billingsley and two Cox sisters. The young ladies played the piano and sang. Thord and a friend, Taylor, kept company with the family almost every afternoon. On weekends they rode or went for outings.

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The week before Easter they planned a ten-day excursion to the coast, to the same area that Thord had visited in November of the previous year. As he had only five days' leave, he followed on horseback some days later. The rest of the group had travelled in ox wagons. Jokes and gaiety and quite a lot of flirting seem to have intermingled with swimming, fishing, and hunting.

At one time Thord had to carry the ladies over a river and this provoked extra gaiety and a bit of jealousy between the ladies in question. One of the ladies was saved by Thord from an attack by a five-foot-long black mamba. She rewarded him with the compliment that he was the bravest man she had ever met. The girls nicknamed him 'Diddums'. Others called him 'Bizana Lady Killer'.

On 27 June he wrote home: 'We are probably going to war with the Transvaal in a short time if the Boers don't give up. Forty thousand men under General Buller have travelled from England to South Africa, and 15 000 left East India at the same time. With the 10 000 to 11 000 men we have here already, we shall surely take on the Boers. They have calculated that about 70 000 men are needed to take the Transvaal if there is a war. All of us in the CMR are waiting for war. We are hoping for war.'

Thord sent home a description of the prelude to the war, which featured in the world press.

He had grown in stature and confidence from the boy who had jumped ship just a few years before. Just how much is illustrated in the following extract from a letter on the eve of the Second Anglo-Boer War in 1899:

'You are not to worry about me. I can take care of myself... Until now I have not met one CMR that can measure up to me for a long time with boxing gloves or bare fists. I am always in good shape. Without bragging, I am the strongest at the base. I am also the calmest and the most good-natured in this place.'

In his letters home Thord sent extracts from the press about the negotiations and troop movements that preceded the war. It is not possible to make a fair judgment from these of who is most to blame in this matter. On the face of it, the British wanted citizenship for their countrymen who worked in the Zuid Africaansche Republiek (the formal name of the Boer republic in the Transvaal). In response the Boers set conditions for citizenship that were too demanding. Underlying the citizenship issue, however, was the British Government's determination to control the massive and strategically vital gold reserves of the ZAR. The Boers, on the other hand, were fiercely determined to resist British imperialism and the swamping of their cultural identity and political freedom by *uitlanders* (foreigners) who flooded into the country after the discovery of gold.

The Boers were sure they could defeat the British should it come to a war, and they expressed this confidence in somewhat provocative statements.

A general mobilisation took place in the ZAR and its sister Boer republic, the Orange Free State, on 27 September 1899. Simultaneously an ultimatum was sent to the British to withdraw reinforcements dispatched from overseas to strengthen the British military presence in the region. By 11 October it was obvious that the British were merely playing for time and war was declared.

Thord tried to depict the British operational plan with a sketch. It shows an advance in three main columns. On the left Lord Methuen was to cross the Orange Free State's southwesterly corner (Belmont) with 17 500 men and advance on Kimberley. General Gatacre was to go up the middle with 4 000 men from East London via Queenstown and Stormberg to take Bloemfontein, whilst on the right General Clery with 9 000 men from the Durban area was to go via Ladysmith towards Pretoria. 'It was easier said than done,' Thord wrote on the sketch that he drew in the latter part of October.

It was in the middle column's operations that Thord was to get his first taste of war. On 30 October 1899 the artillery group received orders to proceed from Bizana to Umtata. From there they were to continue with two cavalry squadrons from the regiment, under command of Major Sprenger, and join up with General Gatacre's division in Queenstown. They arrived in that town on 8 November 1899.

'Our happy, carefree days had come to an end – and with the arrival of the second contingent from Pondoland began an intensive period of drilling to unite us into a six-battery mounted artillery unit.

'With the arrival of General Gatacre on 16 November the camp was seething with activity. It was common knowledge that the general was preparing an advance on Stormberg.'

The Boers had taken the offensive. On 12 October they had advanced into Natal with about 15 000 men. Another force had attacked Mafeking and a third Kimberley. From the Orange Free State came an even larger force, which went southwards and threatened King William's Town. It was the latter that General Gatacre's troops were to oppose. Important passageways from the north into the Cape Colony existed on each side of the Stormberg mountains: Bushman's Hoek

on the western side and Penhoek about fifteen miles eastward. Here the Boers' advance had to be stopped.

## PENHOEK AND DORDRECHT

ON 22 NOVEMBER 1899 the CMR marched off via Putter's Kraal and Sterkstroom to Bushman's Hoek. Incoming reports were that the enemy was advancing with the apparent intention of taking the pass, but nothing happened and the unit was ordered to return to Sterkstroom. On 4 December the unit was directed to Penhoek which, if taken by the enemy, would threaten the camp at Sterkstroom and control Dordrecht. In the beginning it was rather idyllic at the Penhoek position.

'We are situated at the side of a lake. There are thousands of wild duck, swans and other lake birds here. They do not seem too afraid.... It is a pity not to have a rifle.... [We have] moved camp higher up [and] have a magnificent view over the country. We have a fine position for our guns on the top of a hill. It is very cold at night here. We are about 6 000 feet above sea level. On this side of the lake we have an excellent place to swim and huge rocks to dive from.'

Renewed threats against the western passageway caused the command to send some of the defenders from Penhoek to Bushman's Hoek as reinforcements. The first time they marched it was a false alarm, and they returned to Penhoek. But the next time, on 9 December, they marched into the thunder of field guns and arrived too late. General Gatacre had advanced at Stormberg with 2 300 infantry, 200 cavalry and 12 guns. Unfortunately the general had advanced in darkness straight into the position of the Boers without regrouping the units for attack. The column was now in full retreat. The Boers did not take advantage of their upper hand but were satisfied with taking a few hundred exhausted prisoners. The situation stabilised and the garrison of Penhoek returned.

'I have changed my name. I now call myself Thord-Gray; I have the same given name as before....

'Although the artillery group was in position it had little to do, whilst the squadrons had an active time patrolling and scouting.



'The trouble was over for a while. Christmas was approaching and the CMR ease committee did wonders. The enemy left us in peace.' On 27 December 1899 Thord wrote: 'I was on guard on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, the best position for me to gather my thoughts. It was a splendid night. While I leaned against one of the guns, strange thoughts crossed my mind. Old memories of home resurfaced. What were they doing now? How were they? Was there a thought of me in the far-off land? It was all so vivid I felt tears in my eyes.

'The vision was interrupted by a suspicious noise and again I was in South Africa with all my comrades depending on me for protection. Crawling ahead I

could hear the same noise from time to time. A strange feeling came over me, lying with a loaded carbine and revolver and not being able to do anything. Once again I heard a rustle a short distance away. I was crawling ahead as quietly as possible... about five steps in front of me I could clearly see a human figure crawling on hands and feet up the steep slope. Before I managed to get up on my knees to aim, he disappeared in the darkness. I stood up and ran after him. I could see him at times but he was getting further away from me. When he reached the top of the slope he stopped – he was about a hundred paces from me. If he crossed the ridge I would never see him again. The sky was clear and he was silhouetted against it. I went down on one knee and sent a bullet towards him. He shrieked and then disappeared. The whole camp was now in turmoil and everybody had taken their stations at the guns. I ran to my position and explained in a few words what had happened. After a few quiet minutes I was called to the captain, who ordered me to take ten men to search the area where I had shot the enemy. The moon had come up. It was as clear as in full daylight. When we reached the place we found a big bouncer of a baboon, one of the biggest anyone of us had ever seen.

‘We have heard from captured Boers and other farmers that they fear the CMR. They would rather stand against a thousand soldiers from England, newly recruited, than stand against a few hundred men from the CMR. They believe we know the country, having been here long enough to stand the heat and other difficulties without effort. We also know our enemy’s way of living and fighting, of which the recruited troops have no clue until they adapt to the climate and other difficulties in this country.’

On 1 January 1900 he wrote: ‘We attacked the other day and killed quite a few Boers. They had to leave the field so fast that they did not have time to take all their dead and wounded with them. We found eight dead and five wounded and could see them loading many more into their wagons.

‘Not one on our side was killed and only four wounded, two rather seriously in the stomach.

‘One of my good friends and I nearly captured one of the Boer guards, but to our annoyance he escaped. We had tied up our horses about 500 paces from him and crawled closer, but his horse got worried when we came near and that’s how he managed to detect us. Twice a week my friend and I go out to capture Boers. We are called “The Boer Catchers” in the camp.’

On 3 January he wrote in a letter to Gunnar: ‘A battle is over and we were victorious. We were two hundred and the enemy six hundred. We met them outside Dordrecht. Our opening artillery barrage forced them to withdraw to a new position in the mountains. They had two fifteen-pounders but they fired badly. Out of eighteen shots only six came near us. None of them exploded. Twenty-five of our men got into a fix. The artillery and an infantry company mounted and galloped ahead, and the captain gave us the order, “Halt, action front!” We formed up and lay down covering fire, and under our protection the poor devils came out. It took fourteen hours to get them out. We then withdrew. They lost thirty-eight dead to only one on our side, a Norwegian, Gunter.

‘War seems an enjoyable pastime. I get on well with it and so far there has been no fear in the Swedish blood. At the same time you get a strange feeling when a bullet whistles by, although it soon disappears. What annoyed me most was that my sketchbook with fifteen sketches in it and my diary for the past two months were lost from my pocket, and I could not make a drawing of the battle as I had intended to.

‘I returned to Penhoek yesterday. We have heard the thunder from the big guns the whole day. A battle is taking place at Molteno, eighteen miles from here. I shall send a few sketches to the English Newspaper *Black and White*. All my comrades have asked me to do so.

‘Not one of them can draw and they want our actions and engagements with the Boers to be published in England.’

On 8 January 1900 he wrote in a letter to his parents: ‘I have heard that our men have not behaved as they should have outside Kimberley. [They] cut a wounded man who could not move into pieces... went into a house where wounded had been left behind, stabbed them with bayonets, and threw them into the river. The villains! Every day I see examples of how ruined from within the English Army really is.... English troops mutinied the other day when they were about to be led into battle by their officers. At Bushman’s Hoek, where the Boers made an attack the other day, the troops behaved so terribly that it is a shame and dishonour for the English Nation.

‘The Boers bombarded Bushman’s Hoek and because the defenders’ guns were out of range, the infantry had to attack to force the Boer artillery to retreat. When the infantry had reached half way, they lay down to catch their breath. After a while the command “march forward” was given, but not a single man moved. They threw away their rifles and refused to go forward. The officers tried on their knees, with threats, but all in vain. They did not move. They were afraid to face the gunfire. A light field battery came galloping up and opened up with such fire that the enemy had to withdraw. They have not said or done anything to the infantry troop. If I had anything to do with it, the whole heap should have been put onboard a ship and sent to sea.’



Talking about Gatacre’s debacle at Stormberg: ‘Can one believe that three thousand men under such an experienced general should be frightened like hares off a battlefield with the loss of only twenty-eight dead and about eighty wounded? It is true that the enemy had many thousand more men than us.... England believed that a handful of men could strut through Transvaal without resistance, but now they have found out that they have an enemy with modern weapons who understands how to use them. They also understand the importance of taking the fight outside their own country. No-one believed that the Boers would advance down into the Cape Colony, but it was a mistake, and so far we can only defend ourselves.’

On 21 January Thord's parents were informed: 'We shall storm Stormberg in a few days and this time with success. Do not worry about me. I trust in Providence and if I fall I wish it to be a warrior's death.'

'Towards the end of January 1900 it was decided to organise a Colonial Division. In accordance with this plan, all colonial units in the Eastern Province were ordered to assemble in Penhoek.

'By 3 February all the colonial units, which belonged to the division under Gatacre, will have been formed into one brigade under Brigadier-General Edward Brabant. It should comprise between three and four thousand men.

'The stay in Penhoek was coming to its end and the prospect of being transferred to a more active area was welcomed by us all. The first newcomers to the Colonial Division arrived at Penhoek on 9 February and until 13 February preparations were made for an attack on Dordrecht.'

In the meantime the Boers attacked but were repulsed.

'The fight went on from six in the morning to five in the afternoon. The Boers grouped 6 000 yards from here and opened an artillery barrage toward our entrenchment. This was returned by our artillery, and after the fifteenth shot we could see them disappear round the corner of the mountain. Since then no big detachment has been visible. Perhaps they will show up today. I am sending a small sketch which shows their position and how easily they can disappear behind the corner. The markings [on the sketch] are the Boers. They were not many, but they prevented us from sending help to our comrades who were in a battle at Bird River. I feel excellent with this making of war. It takes more than a man's weight in lead to kill him [referring to the consumption of ammunition].'

On 9 February to Gunnar: 'The farmers attacked us the day before yesterday but were beaten and forced back....' ['Boer' translates literally as 'farmer'.] 'In a short while we were intending to go up against the Boers, but we did not anticipate that they would attack us first. Therefore we will probably stay here for some time, if something else does not come into the general's mind.'

'Our brigade, under Brigadier-General Brabant, is called the Flying Brigade, because today we are seen in one position, and when they believe we are fifty miles away we are around the corner surprising the enemy. They are afraid of us. The Boer prisoners say that they would rather fight against a thousand guardsmen than against a few hundred of the CMR.'

Intense preparations were underway for an offensive against Dordrecht. Writing on 25 February to his parents: 'I am still alive and in good health. At last I have been in a really heated fight with the farmers, one of the most heated that has been fought in the Colony. We left Penhoek at 2 o'clock on 15 February. We made camp after riding for fourteen hours. The Boers' campfires were seen about five miles from there. Our camp was situated five miles from Dordrecht, a small town with about one thousand inhabitants.'

'At 9 o'clock next morning five hundred mounted infantry and the two fifteen-pounders advanced towards the western side of the town....'

‘[The enemy] opened fire at a distance of about seven hundred yards from our guns. The bullets whizzed right and left. One man fell nearby, next to a horse in its death throes. It was hot as hell. It did not take us long to open deadly artillery fire on them. They were under good cover of big rocks but we could see them falling over. Our shells exploded excellently. They directed heavy fire towards us, but it seemed as if God was with us at the guns, because not one of us was hit, even though the range was so close.

‘After we had bombarded them for six hours the infantry advanced, while we had to send for more ammunition. The infantry, which consisted of Cape Mounted Riflemen, Brabant’s Horse, and the Kaffrarian Mounted Rifles, advanced under the protection of our fire. The enemy started to withdraw. Then two cannon shots were heard in the distance and we discovered that two of our seven-pounders had worked their way behind and to the left of the enemy. From two sides the Boers now got all that they deserved. Flight and panic spread amongst them and now the rifle fire took a heavy toll. They took their dead and wounded with them. Only a few of them were left behind.

‘It was a very hot day; no water, nothing to eat and we artillerymen had hard work. The brakes on our fifteen-pounders did not seem to work as they should on the loose ground on which they stood. Each time a shot was sent, the gun flew backwards about six or seven feet, so that it had to be brought back to its right position again. Seventy-six rounds were fired from our gun, and after each shot we had to push it back into position.

‘We arrived back at the camp at 8 o’clock in the evening, counting eight dead and eighty wounded. By the time we had loaded fresh ammunition into our wagons the time was 10 o’clock and I could finally go to sleep after the first day of fighting. The next morning at 1.30 we were ordered to advance with one thousand men, two seven-pounders and two fifteen-pounder field guns to force the Boers away from Dordrecht. We formed up on the west side of the town. The two seven-pounders and two hundred men were sent to enter the town. When the troop was about two thousand paces from the town we spotted smoke on the mountain on the eastern side of the town. A few seconds later a whizzing and thunder could be heard. An artillery shell burst just a few yards from one of the guns. Another came in close behind. The captain gave the order “action – front”, and our shells started to whistle around them. The enemy salvo dropped one shell in the midst of my comrades and another one among the horses, the latter killing two horses and wounding two others.

‘The two guns could not stay there any longer but had to be brought back at the gallop. Then we opened fire with our fifteen-pounders and they returned fire. After the third salvo their guns were reduced to silence. Our two guns did a good job. The enemy had to leave their guns to find cover and we could see them through our binoculars when they tried to crawl back to the guns to aim at us. As soon as they were about fifty paces away, our guns thundered and they ran in all directions. From 2 o’clock in the morning we kept going this way for the whole day. It was

8 o'clock in the evening before we could get five minutes rest for ourselves. The Boers escaped from the field the same night and are now five miles from here....

'It will not surprise me if the war is over within three months. Lord Roberts with thirty to forty thousand men and one hundred and twenty guns has done good work in the Free State, and General Buller likewise in Natal.

'The war can have only one outcome and that is victory for the English. It is possible, however, that this will turn into a war of strangulation, and then it will go slowly, because as long as there is a cartridge some of the Boers will never lay down their arms.... For England the victory is hard-earned; honourable it is not, but surely they have worked hard for it.'

In this letter the young Thord shows remarkable insight into the nature of the Boer enemy and how the rest of the war will be played out.

In a letter dated 1 March, Thord responded to his parents' expressed fear that if he were to be taken prisoner he might be shot as a spy: 'That is easier said than done. I often go out to see how the enemy is doing. The captain told me that if something happened on one of my trips, he wanted nothing to do with it, because I go out of my own free will. It is a favour that I can go out at all.

'Now I can't go so far from our camp because the Boers are only just over a thousand yards from here. We can see them work on the mountains. We can also see their big guns. Britain now has about 192 000 men under arms in South Africa and needs an additional 25 000, because they need three or four soldiers to every one of the enemy and additional thousands of men to keep communications open behind our advancing troops.'



Reconnaissance showed that the Boers had taken up a strong position at Labuschagne's Nek. On 3 March the order came to attack this position.

'We started at 10 pm on a dark night and many of the newly formed units found it difficult to change magazines when mounted. Because of that a regrettable number of shots were fired in the lines before we even started.

'At dawn the main force was positioned directly opposite the Boer position, while another force under Major Maxwell on our right flank was ordered to storm a height which overlooked the enemy's camp. In spite of the height being occupied by the Boers during the day there was no guard at night. It must have been confusing for the enemy to find it occupied by our Colonial Division in the morning. But confusion also reigned on our own side. Owing to lack of communications, the main-force artillery unfortunately opened fire upon Maxwell's men. After this early morning action our infantry slowly but surely implemented a plan to surround the enemy camp. Assistance from the artillery was not needed until evening. Then one fifteen-pounder cannon pulled by an ox team was hauled up the steep hill. Once it opened fire the intensity of the enemy's fire was quickly reduced. We could now advance. Regrettably it started to rain and thick fog swept in over the battlefield. The fighting was interrupted until the fog lifted and after that we gradually won superiority.'

At Thord's gun two out of six were wounded, one shot through the stomach, and another through the shoulder.

'When the morning came the Boers forced their way in full retreat along the Jamestown road. Again the fruits of victory were lost, because instead of pursuing them we only bombarded them at long range. Nevertheless sixteen wagons were taken. The division returned to Dordrecht, from where the advance continued after a day's rest. Jamestown was taken on 9 March and contact was made with the enemy again at Aliwal North. All personnel could now be at ease for a couple of quiet days.'

The division had effectively retaken the area adjacent to the border of the Orange Free State.

## WEPENER

TOWARDS the end of March 1900, Rouxville, Zastron, and Wepener had been taken by the Colonial Division. When the Boers counter-attacked, the situation at Wepener gradually became serious and reinforcements were sent. They arrived on 4 April. First of all they had to secure the crossing of the Caledon River at a fordable place called Jammersberg Drift. Colonel Dalgety was in command and a fierce battle took place. A letter home gives an account of Thord's personal experience of the defence of Wepener. It is reproduced here. Thord also kept a 36-page diary, which he later mailed home.

'This morning (5 April) we took a position on one side of the Caledon River, which runs from east to west four miles north of the town. The fordable place is an excellent crossing over the same. It is said that the Boers are all around us and that a battle is forthcoming. The Boers are now (6 April) all around us and are pushing nearer day by day. The two farms here have been commandeered. The bigger one has been turned into a hospital. We are surrounded and have no way to get out. The Boers are supposed to be seven thousand men strong with thirteen field guns.

'This morning (8 April) we were expecting an attack, but still they are holding back. All are tensely awaiting what is forthcoming. Another day and we shall have to live on half rations.

'On 9 April at half past six the Boers opened artillery fire on us. Their artillery is coming from two sides, west and north. At 10 o'clock four of the five men at my cannon were wounded, amongst them Sundberg.

'He got a piece of an exploding shell in the eye (half an inch above the eye). It was bleeding awfully. Much blood gushed from the others as well. But like the men they are, they stayed at their posts. They have bombarded us with six cannons and the Cape Mounted Riflemen have lost nine dead and fifty-six wounded today.

'The men that are wounded are counted as lost, being incapable of further active service. In the afternoon the Boer infantry advanced and grouped themselves about two thousand yards from us.

'They are lying along the whole river bed, hundreds of them only six to eight hundred yards from the CMR infantry lines.

‘Today (10 April) is Father’s 60th birthday. I wish him many happy returns. The Boers have got reinforcements today, amongst other things a new gun. During the night they grouped guns around us at all the points of the compass. They have a terrible weapon now, called a Vickers Maxim. It has a projectile that weighs one pound and shoots two hundred of them per minute. They also have an ordinary Maxim which shoots six hundred rifle bullets per minute. Our gun, which is pointing west, is opposed by three guns from the west, one from the east, one from south-east and additionally the Vickers Maxim (or ‘Pom-Pom’ as we call it) from the south. Last night we dug trenches and did other things to get a bit more cover, but as the ground is very hard and stony we could not get deep enough, but had to build a stone wall around the gun as well.

‘Sundberg’s face looks awful. He cannot see anything with his left eye. It has been hotter than hell all day, with shells whizzing and exploding all around and the thunder from our own guns, little or nothing to eat, men dying, and moaning from wounded comrades. During all this I feel in good humour. Many cannot face the terror of war. It seems inhumane to say so, but for my part I like it.

‘Yesterday (11 April) the Boers made a courageous but unsuccessful attack on us. Under the cover of darkness they came very near the CMR entrenchment. But they were discovered in time and a violent firefight took place. In spite of this deadly fire they advanced and reached within about fifty yards of us. Not one man moved from his post, and then Captain Cantwell with thundering voice commanded, “Bayonets on!” The steel springs made a ringing that went like an electric shock through the troops. The enemy stopped, turned their backs on us, and disappeared into the darkness, dragging dead and wounded with them. Our men who wanted to follow were not permitted to do so.

‘We lost many good CMRs this night. Our gun did not participate in this battle. We were placed a bit to the right of where the attack came. The Boers were about five times as many as we and only God knows what would have happened if they had succeeded in taking this position, because without it we could not survive. Today we lost our sergeant major (the most senior non-commissioned officer). A grenade burst three steps in front of him and went through his body.

‘The bombardment became very violent today. They now have two Vickers Maxims positioned here. The Boers direct their artillery fire with surprising accuracy. One of their shells hit our cannon, but fortunately it did not explode. It only took the sight and a few minor parts of the gun with it and exploded in the ground behind us. We were all under the gun at that moment.

‘It is reported that relief is on its way from Aliwal North and Bloemfontein. It is said that they will arrive at the latest on Friday. A heavy bombardment has taken place today (12 April). The Boers have destroyed a big part of our train. The Boers’ artillery fire is taking a heavy toll on oxen and wagons. The Boers infantry is advancing every night. There are hailstorms of bullets whizzing around us the whole day. We all live on half rations.

‘This morning (13 April) we only had a hundred and thirty six rounds for each cannon (two fifteen-pounders). Altogether we have seven cannons: two

fifteen-pounders, two twelve-pounders, two seven-pounders, and a Hotchkiss. Additionally we have four Maxims. Today we moved our gun to the southern end of our position. During this manoeuvre it was raining rifle bullets and four cannons played a magnificent music of bursting shells above us.

‘We arrived at our place and returned the fire. On this occasion we nearly lost our dear little fifteen-pounder. The mules galloped over the hill and down towards the river where their sharpshooters were lying. We managed to catch up with them and get them back over the crest again. It was really funny to see how the Boers tried in vain to overpower us. The fire subsided a little in the afternoon. Three of their field guns were out of action. It is said that the relief troops met the enemy forty miles from here. It takes a long time to come fifty miles, the distance to Bloemfontein, or eighty miles in the case of Aliwal North.

‘Many of the volunteers are tired of the war and I do not know what is going to happen if the Boers make another night attack on them. They have survived two heavy attacks, one during the day. I believe a third would be successful. Of CMR, which with the artillery is five hundred men strong, we have lost twenty dead and eighty-six wounded. The volunteers are altogether one thousand one hundred men and have eleven dead and forty wounded.

‘Our colonel is in command here. Mysteriously, the general was kept behind in Aliwal North. One of the CMRs in the moat went mad today. The mental strain of long hours in the trenches exposed to the weather became unbearable. He is now insane, the poor fellow.

‘It seems like most of the Boers have left us for the time being (14 April). There cannot be more than fifteen hundred men around us. The others must have gone to face the relief troops. The Boers are only firing a few salvoes every now and then. We have to be very careful with the use of our ammunition, since we only have forty shells for our Hotchkiss, eighty for each twelve-pounder, a hundred and ten for each fifteen-pounder, and a hundred and fifty for each seven-pounder.

‘The Boers think the Sabbath holy (Sunday, 15 April). They waited until the afternoon to send us a few dozen shells, which did not cause much damage. Two of them burst among the oxen and killed a few of them. It was raining the whole night yesterday and this morning.

‘At 9 o’clock this morning (16 April) during a heavy rain shower the Boers opened an artillery bombardment, and since then it has been going on the whole day. It is very seldom we can return fire. The field is full of dead donkeys, horses, and oxen. Thousands of different kinds of carrion birds are flying over us searching for food.

‘The last few days there has been a terrible smell here. The air is so polluted that at times it is unbearable. We can hardly move in the daytime. We get no food from sunrise to sundown... you have to make do with what you get. But I would not be surprised to see us marching to Pretoria within a few days.

‘Some – or more correctly most of the volunteers – are talking about going to Basutoland during the night. The cowards have no heart or courage to stay at the flags out of fear of losing their miserable lives.

‘The hospital quarter is full of wounded, there is nothing to bandage the poor fellows with and no instruments to carry out surgery. There are many with bullet wounds in the body and two with wounds in the head. Nothing can be done for the poor wounded.

‘It has been raining the whole afternoon and it has become rather cold.

‘Today (17 April 1900) is my twenty-second birthday. I wonder if they are aware of our situation at home? We cannot understand why it is like this. In Bloemfontein there are a hundred thousand men and Aliwal North is supposed to have ten thousand newly arrived men from England. We have now been under intense fire for eight days, the ammunition supply is nearly finished, and no rescue can be expected for at least three to four days. If the Boers make two new attacks like the previous ones we must surrender. It would be a disgrace in English history, which could never be covered up. We save ammunition as much as possible. The rifle fire goes on day and night.

‘It has started to rain again (18 April), a rain which is awfully cold at night. When one is wet through to the skin one doesn’t feel comfortable. I cannot understand how some of my comrades are going to make it through this siege. These sick, weak fellows cannot hold out if we do not get warm weather. Typhus and diarrhoea have broken out among us.

‘As we have no ammunition to waste, our artillery has been very quiet today. I took a rifle and went to the infantry, where heavy rifle fire was being exchanged. I arrived there unharmed and lay down to start firing down towards the riverbank. I found myself among a crowd of poor, wounded fellows. On my right side one man was lying with a bullet through his leg, on my left a comrade from old days with a bullet through his head, dead as a stone. This cannot continue.

‘With the help of other comrades I got them down to the sick quarter. Then we returned to avenge the two good comrades who had fallen. I have a good pair of binoculars and with it I can discover where the Boers are hiding. We are all ready – as soon as they can be seen – to give them a volley. This way four of them fell before darkness had set in.

‘Their guns were thundering after dark and did some damage.

‘In the morning a small artillery duel took place as usual (19 April). Signals from Basutoland are requesting us to hold out for another week. Within that time relief should arrive.

‘The food, which now has dwindled substantially, will be completely finished within a week, not to mention the artillery ammunition.

‘There has not been intense combat today (20 April), only a shell every now and then. Even the rifle fire has been rather quiet, but it is impossible to stand up straight without getting a few dozen bullets around you. They are watching each stone up there and they are awfully good shots. We have good weather to everyone’s delight. I am dry for the first time in a long while.

‘This morning (21 April) at 6 o’clock shellfire was heard south and west. At 7 o’clock the Boer artillery opened intense fire, which had to be returned. Many rounds from the rapidly dwindling supply were used with the hope that the

day would never arrive when we would stand at our beloved artillery without ammunition and must be put under the Dutch yoke.

‘The bombardment in the far distance has subsided this afternoon. Only now and then the rumble is heard from occasional salvoes. They must be about twenty miles from here. Our relief columns have now met the enemy, I hope they will be successful. It would be hellish bad luck if we were taken prisoner after fourteen days of hard defence. I cannot do otherwise but praise the Boers for their persistent and courageous resistance against British domination.

‘This morning (22 April) at 2 o’clock we got orders to move our gun to the highest point within our position facing north. The bombardment in the south and west has been going on but has not come nearer. The fire has not been that intense today. Most of the Boers must keep the Sabbath holy.

‘With sunrise this morning (23 April) they gave us “good morning” with their batteries and have kept going ever since. This evening we only have fifty-six shells left for each fifteen-pounder. The twelve-pounders have fifty each, the Hotchkiss only seven. Our relief column seems to be a bit nearer.

‘Our daily ration for eight men on our fifteen-pounder consists of two pounds of meat and three pounds of flour. At times we get a pinch of coffee and sugar.

‘Long before sunrise (24 April) the music started. I can see many of the new men suffering badly. Their faces are emaciated. They are exhausted body and soul from this long and heavy pressure on their nerves.

‘I myself feel as sound as a bell. It must be the Swedish blood, which now shows what it is. It is true that many a night I have felt dead exhausted. But after only a few hours sleep the Swedish warrior gets up healthy, as if nothing had happened. With shivers some of my comrades are anticipating (what they call) “the horrors of the day”. They do not seem to see that it is an honour for them to fight for their country and its flag.

‘At nine o’clock this morning intense firing could be heard from the CMR lines. Within a few moments the camp was in full combat with the Boers, who attacked on all sides. They pressed nearer and nearer. Each man felt that it was now or never if the Boers were to take our position. On the southeast side they advanced to a thousand yards from the trenches, jumped up and charged under a storm of bullets from the opposing CMR. It did not take long for the twelve-pounder there to open deadly fire on the Boers. It was impossible for them to come nearer. They returned after bravely holding the ground they had taken for half an hour.

‘They were six to seven times as many as we were. The attack on the other side of our camp was not so intense. They advanced to within eight hundred yards of our trenches, lay down and opened fire from there. Their fire weakened in the afternoon. By 4 o’clock only sporadic shots could be heard. But their artillery was still working. Bursting shells have been over us the whole day. Another one of the crew of our gun got a Mauser bullet through his leg this morning, but he is alive and well. We now have lost one hundred and ninety nine men.

‘This morning (25 April) each of us was standing at his post as usual. All was quiet and calm. The sun rose and one hour passed without a shot being heard.

In the distance we could see Boers with wagons leaving in a hurry. Only parts of the rearguard could be seen here and there. This afternoon our relief arrived after sixteen days of siege. The siege of Wepener was raised. Of a total of thirty-three dead and a hundred and thirty three wounded, twenty-one dead and seventy-five wounded were from CMR. The delay in marching to the relief of the colonial troops was commanded by Lord Roberts....

‘On 26 April Sundberg and I took a rifle each to get a buck or other game. After about a mile of wandering we reached an abandoned farm. Everything was empty in the house but in the farmyard were a number of turkeys. We shot three big bouncers and a fine young hen.

‘On the top of a nearby mountain we could see a crowd of men on horseback. They were far too many for us, so we went back to our camp and, as you can probably imagine, we had a small feast at our gun.

‘The Colonial Division left Wepener on 29 April and continued the pursuit of the retreating Boers northwards to Dewetsdorp and Thabanchu, where they transferred to the command of General Rundle.

‘In Thabanchu General Rundle organised a splendid reception for the Colonial Division, the defenders of Wepener. The road to the village was lined by Rundle’s soldiers, who presented arms when we passed. It was a mark of respect that was appreciated by all who understood its significance.

‘Even Governor Milner, who visited Aliwal North, honoured the achievements of the Colonial Brigade in a speech at a military parade. Prisoners reported that the Boers had great terror of the “Flying Brigade”. Our columns had roved about in the country more than any other brigade’s. The consequence was that the poor animals were in bad shape, especially after the long starvation at Jammersberg Drift – seventeen days without anything to eat.’

On 31 May Thord writes home and gives thanks for letters and photographs. ‘Tears came to my eyes when I saw the hard little old man and the sound lads. If I had them here, I could take Transvaal with the small army. There is such a difference between them and the boys who are out here – pale cheeks, sunken chests, smoking cigarettes from the age of four or five years. No, Swedish boys have another style. Fresh air and outdoor games winter and summer make such a difference to their appearance.’



## THE PURSUIT OF BOER KOMMANDOS

WHEN the Eighth Division under General Rundle’s command left Thabanchu on 10 May 1900, the Colonials formed the vanguard. In Hammonia near Ficksburg, on 25 May, they learned that they would take part in a united attack with the intention of surrounding the enemy at his main position within the Brandwater Basin. The conditions were now tough. The winter was setting in but clothes and blankets had worn thin.

On 5 June a telegram came from Lord Roberts announcing that Pretoria had been taken. The large-scale operations were concluded, but the resistance was by no means broken. It continued in the form of guerrilla warfare for another two full years under the command of De Wet, Botha, and De la Rey, although President Kruger had left the country a few months after the fall of Pretoria.

The Colonial Brigade spent most of the latter part of 1900 pursuing free bands of Boers called kommandos, primarily the one led by De Wet. (Kommandos were highly mobile and resourceful units of mounted guerrilla volunteers.) The Boers had the advantage of being less dependent on transporting supplies over long distances, since they could survive on the local resources and get support from the local Boer population wherever they went. This greatly increased the mobility of the Boer forces in terms of speed and range. The support of the population also presented great advantages from the point of view of intelligence.

The following table gives dates, places, and actions of the Colonial Brigade (or rather the part of the brigade in which Thord served) during 1900:

25/5–22/6	Hammonia-Senekal	Patrol duty and reconnaissance
22/6–31/6	The Senekal district	Protecting a convoy in Hammonia-Senekal and relieving a surrounded British detachment
1/7–31/7	The Ficksburg district	Encircling Boers in the Brandwater Basin
1/8	Kroonstad – Rhenoster Drift	Dispersing bands of marauding refugees and pursuing De Wet
16/8	Fredrickstad – Elands River	Dispersing marauders
16/8	Magato Nek	Pursuing De Wet
23/8	Zeerust – Krugersdorp	Protecting convoys
8/9	Johannesburg	Protecting convoys
9/9–12/9	Elandsfontein	Reorganisation and new tasks
18/9 – 9/10	Vereeniging – Heilbron	Clearing plundering Leeuwspoort-Rhenoster marauders from south Vaal poort and pursuing De Wet
9/10–23/10	Rhenosterpoort	Reorganisation of brigade together with De Lisle’s column under Gen Knox
24/10 – 29/10	Potchefstroom	Pursuing De Wet at Rensburg Drift
1/11 – 9/11	Vrededorf – Wet Kopjes	Clearing the area of Beestkraal plundering marauders
9/11 – 28/11	Kroonstad – Lindley	Delivering sick and wounded
9/11 – 28/11	Heilbron – Frankfort	Protecting convoys and patrolling
9/11 – 28/11	Wolwehoek	Duty on the Vaal River.

British intelligence often faltered. It was strategically surprised on so many occasions. This played to the Boers’ strength, their capacity to skilfully exploit the terrain. Inadequate intelligence also manifested itself in frequent friendly-fire incidents among the British forces.

In his letters Thord describes six such incidents, among them a column of vehicles being fired upon by its own artillery for two hours. Thord’s comment on the British officers involved in this incident is withering. Communication was maintained mostly by dispatch riders. For longer distances heliographs were used

when terrain and battlefield conditions allowed. Stations were erected on high hills with commanding views, but these often had to be placed at great distances from the troops they served. Understandably, communications often faltered.

The artillery fire seems to have been only direct line-of-sight barrages using explosive shells. Only rarely in Thord's letters does he describe what kind of projectiles were used. Mostly he speaks of shells and their 'explosion', although he often identifies the artillery pieces by calibre or name.

The artillery's place in the marching column varied depending on whether and how they were expected to be deployed. In open terrain they often followed the advance guard. In covered terrain they would be further back and often with the rearguard. The guns and carriages were usually drawn by horses and mules. Oxen were used to get the artillery-pieces up steep slopes to get the best field of fire.

The long marches were arduous, especially for the draught animals. On 2 August 1900 after a day's march covering forty-five miles Thord notes that horses and mules had not had anything to eat for forty-eight hours and that many dead and dying horses lined the roadside. The Boers often burned the grass, which denied the British grazing for their animals. Sometimes they were able to capture wagons loaded with forage from the Boers.

Upon leaving Fredrickstad on 11 August they had eight horses in the gun teams and six each for the ammunition wagons. A few days later at Magato Nek they only had four horses or mules per cannon and the ammunition wagons were tied behind the ox-drawn vehicles. The CMR artillery's mule team usually worked well. Other artillery units were very impressed by the superiority in strength and perseverance of the mule team. 'But horse artillerymen always prefer horses, whatever the superiority of mules might be.'

When it came to a fast advance, which was often the case when trying to catch up with the enemy or come to the aid of a nearby brigade, the vehicle column had to be left behind. It then became an easy target for Boer snipers, who inflicted considerable losses from hidden positions.

Boers that had surrounded a British force often did not go into direct attack. They were satisfied with surrounding and pinning it down and could often do so with relatively small numbers that relieved each other. Snipers posed a deadly threat, a mobile and elusive one, often without even being visible to their enemy.

The attitude to the adversary varies between bitter hatred and grudging admiration. But Thord also sees and criticises faults among his own fellows. He appreciates the fact that the Boers to a great extent respect the Sabbath and holy days like Christmas. This often gave their opponents a welcome respite from battle. But he reacts strongly to the information that the Boers had taken captured Englishmen's shoes and forced them to walk barefoot from the battles on the south Free State border to Bloemfontein.

Thord speaks out more strongly against the forms of retribution that, with time, became more common in the war.

In settled areas the Boers often used the farms as quarters for the kommandos. The Boer farms were centres for intelligence gathering, rest, and maintenance.

When such a farm was visited by British scouts the result was often unpleasant and it ended with the farm being set on fire. Boers were required to swear an oath not to take up arms against the British. Eventually it became standard practice to burn the farms of all who refused to take such an oath or had broken their oaths not to take up arms – ‘a detestable task’, writes Thord.

‘The memory of women and children crowding together against the background of a burning homestead, often far away from others that could give a helping hand, is a memory of one of the most pitiful aspects of the war, for which De Wet has to take his part of the blame, because wherever we are we hear of his determination to find every Dutchman and force him back to the kommando bands, regardless of whether he has sworn an oath not to participate in the war.

‘Some Boer men chose to join the National Scouts (a unit formed by the British for Boers sympathetic to the British cause) rather than be forced to submit to such compulsion. But the National Scouts were not understood by the British soldiers. They called them “tame Boers” and despised them.’

The question of the spirit and morale of the CMR troops is often touched on in Thord’s letters. His own will to fight seems totally unimpeded. He obtains permission to go patrolling and capturing prisoners on his own or with a companion. Letters and diary notes are full of expressions of his self-esteem and confidence. He also appreciates and warmly commends brave achievements by comrades, rewarded or not. But he condemns actions of both troops and officers who in his opinion are incompetent or dishonourable, especially in his description of the early actions of the war.

The physical hardships of military service were at times considerable. The command regulated strictly what clothes and blankets troopers were allowed to carry with them. The mounted troops were allowed a big coat on the saddle, a blanket under the saddle, and a blanket on the wagon train. Tents could be utilised in special circumstances; when the situation allowed they were collected from the train. It was important to be as light as possible. At the end of May 1900, when the winter began after half a year’s field campaigning, both clothes and blankets had worn thin, and winter nights in the interior of the country could be bitterly cold.

As for personal hygiene, Thord records the soldiers’ delight at the crossing of the Vaal River on 9 August – as the rare opportunity to bathe and wash clothes.

At the pause in Elandsfontein in September an army order was issued that all junior officers and men should carry only one blanket and an extra shirt and pair of socks; all other clothing should be stored. In response the volunteers refused to march. In the end a compromise was reached and a maximum weight of sixteen and a half pounds of clothing and kit per man was allowed. Tents were also allowed for the volunteers. The CMR also got the same advantages. It was surprising that the volunteers won when Lord Kitchener was in command: he was not the kind of commander who gave in to demands. But it was thought that if he did not give in, recruitment in the Cape Colony would have been negatively affected.

The daily food ration was at times very small. In the middle of August 1900 it was one rusk, one pound of fresh meat, and a small amount of coffee per man per

day. ‘However small, it was sufficient while the excitement of the hunt remained, but when we rested at camp, there was no escaping our feeling of hunger,’ writes Thord. They were also issued with emergency rations. They were not allowed to be opened unless the person in question had been without food for twenty-four hours. They consisted of a small can of cocoa and a small can of dried soup, hermetically sealed in a tin. It was rather good and nutritious.

At least in part because of the hardships described above, the military command evidently had some difficulties in recruiting in the Cape Colony. They made a fundamental mistake when they drew up the contract for the volunteers. Instead of employing them for the duration of the war, they contracted them only for a year. When the year ended, the volunteers wanted to leave. The typhoid epidemic that swept through the British forces at the time was another reason many volunteers refused to renew their contracts. It soon became clear that the Colonial Division had also erred in not devoting enough effort to recruitment of new volunteers.



During the interval in Elandsfontein in September the CMR received reinforcements in the form of a detachment of recruits from Umtata.

A smaller increment of their own soldiers took effect when those who had been taken prisoner by the Boers were released when Lord Roberts took Pretoria. But even so the CMR force was drastically reduced due to epidemic fevers and combat losses. Almost all the regiment’s convalescents were sent to Transkei and were placed in the Transkeian Field Force when they were able to return to duty. There they were under the command of the regiment’s previous commander, Colonel Dalgety. Eventually Thord would also belong to this regiment.

Thord’s letters home describe a number of interesting actions during the latter part of the war.

‘After the Colonial Division had left Zeerust on 25 August 1900, it was decided that elements should go to Pretoria, while a detachment under Colonel Dalgety – six hundred men with four CMR field guns and two “Pom-Poms” – should escort a large convoy with wagons to Krugersdorp and there await orders. If the force was attacked on the way it should force its way through but not involve itself in a serious battle. The number of mounted men was considered to constitute a good combat force, although the convoy they were escorting could become a great handicap. The area that was to be passed was known to be strongly occupied by enemy forces. But it was expected that the column would get through to Krugersdorp without too much difficulty.

‘The hopes of a pleasant journey were soon disappointed, for the column ran into stiff resistance only seven miles from Zeerust. After three hours of combat on 26 August they were spared further fighting for three days, most likely owing to the bad weather, which made life out in the open as disagreeable for the Boers as for the British. On 30 August the weather cleared and the Boer snipers returned. We learned that a Boer kommando under Lambert, eight hundred strong and with three guns, had been ordered to stop our march.

‘The column started moving forward on the morning of 31 August. When the fog lifted the advance guard encountered sniper fire from a spur among the rocks to our left, which controlled the road. Counter-measures were quickly taken – two field guns of the Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) were deployed on a ridge to our right that controlled our forward advance, while The Border Horse under Major Robertson (CMR) advanced towards the ridge from the left. The forward advance would, if successful, be reinforced by two CMR guns with the intention to sweep the enemy position from the flank.

‘The Border Horse advanced well, but unfortunately Major Robertson was shot in heavy fire and his men forced to ground to get the best cover offered. They could not advance for the whole day and the situation was now that the enemy was behind the ridge and the Border Horse was spread out on the ground about two hundred yards from them, incapable of advancing, retreating, or opening fire. To ease the pressure the Kaffrarian Rifles were sent around to the left of us with a “Pom-Pom”. They soon also came under heavy fire. The enemy now revealed two guns to the left and started firing on the convoy with shrapnel. Under escort by CMR the convoy was ordered to divert to the right and move out of range of the enemy guns. We needed to get the convoy out of the way, because we were about to attack an adversary of unknown strength in the terrain of his choice. The enemy concentrated their guns on the convoy, but we managed to subdue them with returning fire and with the convoy’s disappearance the artillery fire ceased. At considerable risk the colonel now galloped around the deployment and saw the Border Horse still unable to move and the Kaffrarian Rifles in a similar predicament. Two CMR guns were sent to assist them, but the Boers were so well dug in that our shells had very little effect.

‘Dalgety’s force was now in an unmistakably nasty position. The whole force that was available for the firing line, about five hundred men, had been driven to ground and pinned down. Orders were sent out to hold out until dark and then retreat to the convoy.

‘At sunset the artillery got the order to retreat to the right side of the road. Detachments were delegated to stay and provide covering fire for the whole withdrawal. This movement was well executed but provoked an eruption of activity on the whole Boer front. Some men were very exhausted after their long and terrifying day. The enemy drove them away from their positions and came so close that they could shout insults. They brought their artillery-pieces forward to the crest of the ridge and opened fire with shrapnel on the road, which they knew we would have to use. It seemed strange that they could not see us. One round in the midst of us would really have been the last straw.

‘The colonel decided that it would be dangerous to delay the withdrawal any longer, so he ordered CMR to help the Kaffrarian Rifles, the Border Horse, and the field-guns to march with led horses under covering fire back to the convoy. It was a very sad retreat, because all were disheartened by concern for those men left behind. How many could escape being taken prisoners was the question in everyone’s mind as we marched away and seemingly left them to their destiny. Our

campsite was more than five miles away, and all night long these poor fellows came in from the firing line, totally exhausted.

‘We left forty dead and wounded on the field. The ambulances and doctors that were sent out were hindered by the enemy. The doctors were told that it was unnecessary for them to return, because the whole British force would be taken prisoner the following day. Our wounded were well treated. The following day, when the Boers moved to capture the troops remaining on the battlefield, they allowed the ambulances through for the wounded.



‘The previous day, 31 August, had been the most strenuous and agonising that the Colonial Division had ever experienced, Wepener included.

‘In spite of many concerns the end result was nevertheless providential. Had the Boers pressed home an attack on the retreating column and the convoy, nothing could have prevented a serious setback. Instead they won a skirmish of lesser importance. The situation was of course not good. I am certain that there was more than one prayer to the God of War asking for luck to remain with us the following day. When the march continued the next day, the night’s rest had done wonders. Everybody was in good spirit and ready. An attitude of “let them come, all of them” prevailed.’

In October 1900 the severely weakened Colonial Division was under the command of Sir Charles Knox, and the CMR was included in a brigade with De Lisle’s column. The column marched to Potchefstroom to relieve General Barton, who reportedly was surrounded by De Wet. On arrival on 26 October they found that Barton had freed himself and on top of that had given De Wet a fairly bad time. The column now united its force with Barton’s in an attempt to secure De Wet’s defeat and left Potchefstroom on 27 October. They came into contact with the enemy, whereafter a pursuit battle followed until darkness gave some rest to the severely pressured enemy.

‘The enemy abandoned a Krupps gun and some wagons. The British columns did some good work on the enemy’s rearguard. The chase after the enemy created a competition between the CMR’s mule teams and RHA horse-drawn guns to be first to get into position. CMR won the race to the new positions, but RHA’s gunners were quicker in laying down accurate fire. With darkness falling a powerful storm broke out and the chase had to be halted when De Wet managed to get his force across the Vaal River. Rensburg Drift was the only possible fordable place, and even then, not a good one. At this time it was almost impossible. The Boers left everything; they had no time to take their artillery. Our booty turned out to be five guns, ten prisoners, and three wagons with ammunition.

‘All the mounted crossed the river but the conditions on the Transvaal side of the river are indescribably bad.

‘The ford was congested with wagons and teams trying to cross. An especially comical character was a young officer who tried to regulate the traffic by calling to the coachmen, who were far too agitated to listen to him. One can only guess

what made him think they could hear his voice over the roaring storm, lashing whips and their own wild shouts, which in all created sheer hell. Fortunately one of the wagons overturned and blocked the path, so all activity ceased until the storm passed.

‘The following morning was far advanced before we covered the terrain. The horsemen had at midnight redirected their pursuit to Parys, but De Wet escaped and the chase came to an end.’

## MALARIA AND TYPHOID

‘I GOT a letter from Mother the other day. We were then at the Vaal River awaiting the Boers who were being driven towards us by troops under the command of General French. Then General De la Rey succeeded in sneaking around French’s flank and marched against Krugersdorp. The Northumberland Fusiliers under General Clements and other troops went to meet the Boers. A battle took place.... De la Rey’s Boer force of three to four thousand men lost one hundred dead and another hundred wounded, also taking four hundred prisoners. Our troops, it was said, were fleeing. The Northumberland Fusiliers lost six hundred of their muster of one thousand one hundred men. At the same time General de Wet, in command of another couple of thousand men, took one hundred prisoners and killed or wounded another forty-five.

‘Five comrades and I with our field gun have been with Brabant’s Horse lately. While our other friends went north to Klerksdorp, which is situated thirty miles west of Potchefstroom, we went down to the railroad to unload and Brabant’s Horse took the train without us. We stayed at Viljoen’s Drift for a few days, where it rained for four days without stopping. This resulted in two of us ending up in hospital with malaria fever. I had a strange feeling in my whole body for three or four days. We are now in hospital in Kroonstad. I have never had such a high fever, 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Tonight it is down to 98 degrees. Under no circumstances should you be anxious. The danger is over. The fever takes eight out of ten to the grave every day here.

‘The Boers are said to have taken up arms in the Cape Colony. They are stupid if it is true.’

On 29 December 1900 Thord writes that all danger is over and he is leaving the hospital the following day. He complains that he has neglected to write in his diary for two months due to the fever. According to letters home on 11 January 1901, he was discharged from the hospital on 6 January, but the doctor dissuaded him from returning to active duty for fourteen days. Preferably he should stay away for a month. Therefore he would be allowed to travel to East London if he wanted. He refused but maybe regretted it afterwards.

‘Almost all the troopers have been there and have been refreshed by sea air and salt water. I have to stay here to regain strength, it’s said, but I have not lost any of it, although I spent Christmas and New Year in hospital and was fed on warm milk

alone. I don't know where the CMR is at the moment. A serious battle against De Wet took place the other day just outside Heilbron. Our troops lost seventy-three dead, two hundred and three wounded, and one hundred and sixty taken prisoner. They thought that De Wet could not escape, but instead our own troops were taken by surprise.'

On 1 February he considers himself to be in excellent health and strong as an ox but cannot tell for how much longer the hospital will keep him 'imprisoned'. He has some friends in the city that he can visit in the evenings at times. Other than that he has nothing to do.

He reflects on the passing away of Queen Victoria: 'There ought to be political reform, as England at the moment is so far behind other nations.

'The Boers have been around the city for a few days and are sniping at the outposts. They have succeeded in capturing about nine hundred oxen and cows from us. Kroonstad is now in a tricky situation. At least a thousand to fifteen hundred men are needed to defend it.

'There are about four thousand people here at present.'

The forced inactivity gives him an opportunity to look beyond his own horizon. On 7 February 1901 he writes home: 'Lord Kitchener, who now is our military commander, shall with his fist of iron soon put an end to the war. Lord Roberts was too soft on the enemy. If they promised to lay down arms, he allowed them to go back to their farms. As soon as our men had left, they brought out their hidden rifles and attacked other smaller divisions of our troops. Lord Kitchener takes everyone prisoner – with or without passports – and shoots every man with a gun in hand or hidden on his farm.

'There is barely any farm in the Orange Free State that has not been burnt to the ground. This city is full of Boers, grieving widows, and children. The death rate among the children is gruesome. They cannot get the necessary nutrition. The government does not allow any railway transport for the civilians, only for troops. I do not know the movements of our troops at large. Lord Kitchener does not allow troop movements to be published in the press and nobody is allowed to write on the subject while the action is on. But when you look at the terrain that we have lived in over the last eight or nine months, it is understandable how difficult it is to capture an enemy like De Wet. At the same time our generals are so jealous of each other that they do not co-operate the way they should. Each one would like to be the one to catch him. Lord Kitchener has now given order that the generals who next succeed in surrounding De Wet and then let him escape will be held accountable.'

On 1 March he reports that the doctor allows him to play tennis, so the afternoons are used for physical exercise, something he has long been waiting for. 'There are many good families here,' he writes. Among them the family he visits the most is the Hartleys, who have two very lovely daughters. They have a piano and the evenings are spent with song and music. Another family is the Cambles. Mrs Cambles is Swedish but came out to South Africa very young, so she cannot speak Swedish.

**'Lord Roberts was too soft on the enemy.... Lord Kitchener takes everyone prisoner ... and shoots every man with a gun in hand or hidden on his farm.'**



In the same letter he includes news about the war. General French, with his cavalry brigade, has shaken up the enemy at a place called Amsterdam, not far from Pretoria. From Kroonstad some days before, he reports, three hundred men marched to root out some Boers from bushveld not far away from the town. Instead they were surprised and driven back with the loss of fifty-three dead and wounded. Not a day passes without skirmishes with the Boers. The batteries are in constant motion. The commissioner in the town is leaving that day. He has sympathised with the Boers all along and informed them of British movements. A bullet in the head ought to be his salary, Thord thinks. Instead the government has let him go without further sanction.

On 7 March Thord is finally discharged from Scottish Hospital and departs the next day for Aliwal North in the Cape Colony to rejoin the ranks. He is pleased, as he is bored with Kroonstad and the hospital, but at the same time sad to leave many friends, who arrange a farewell party for him.

Rumours from the war speak of tough battles taking place with De Wet at the Orange River a few days earlier. De Wet does not seem to have artillery. All his guns have been captured.

Thord has not recuperated fully. When he arrives at Aliwal North on 11 March he finds that his regiment, the CMR, left town the day before. He feels very sick and is taken to hospital where he is diagnosed with typhoid (enteric fever) and must be admitted.

The next time he writes, on 3 April, his temperature has returned to normal, he feels better, and believes that he will be leaving the hospital in about three weeks' time. But his shaky handwriting makes it clear that his hand was unsteady when writing the letter. On 14 April he writes to Gunnar to relate how he was carried to the hospital and awaited death for a long time. One night, when they thought his end to be near, a priest and a nurse came to his room. The priest read from the Bible and wanted Thord to take communion, which he refused on the grounds that he was not prepared to die for some time yet.

'I did not like the face of the priest. Otherwise I would have taken what he offered me.'

He also reports that the typhoid had come to South Africa with the army troops from East India and that ninety-eight percent of the deaths caused by fever among the troops are caused by typhoid. His comments about the physiology of the disease reveal something of the flawed medical understanding of the time: 'The gastric membrane breaks and then only another very fragile membrane is left to cover the stomach. If a man with typhoid eats something like bread, meat or other hard things he is gone. The membrane breaks, blood gushes into the stomach, large wounds are caused to the stomach, and whatever one eats will pass out through these holes. Nothing can save you. Once this membrane has broken, all is lost. It is said that the first five or six days are decisive in determining whether the victim will live.

'The diet we get is milk, brandy and wine.'

When he writes home on 30 April he has left Aliwal North and arrived at King Williamstown, from where he and fifteen other invalids from CMR will be transported by ox wagon to Umtata – the route he took four years earlier.

## BACK UNDER FIRE

THE NEXT letter begins in Umtata on 31 May 1901. Being unable to post it in the meanwhile, Thord only completes it in Engcobo on 22 July.

During the journey from King William's Town to Umtata, Thord had taken a break half way for seven days. There he had met a Swede, Carl Carlson, who was an inspector for the government-owned forests and kindly took care of him.

Upon arrival in Umtata he requested the commander of the regiment to allow him to return to his brigade but was denied this.

During Thord's absence from the CMR they had had some hot engagements with the Boers and lost many men, seven dead and seventeen wounded in the last encounter alone.

The Boers were closer to the sea than ever before. A few days before (he wrote on 31 May) they had been in Lambert's Bay, only a few hundred miles from Cape Town, with the CMR at their heels. Thord considered himself to be as fit as before his illness and longed to join his comrades in the brigade.

He wrote to his parents that they need not be ashamed of his name. Thord-Gray was a name that was known and respected in the CMR.

'Sweden shall not have to wait long if she is in danger. Here is one of her sons that will rush home instantly. It is a pity that I did not live during the reign of Karl XII.' (Sweden was a dominant European power at that time and often at war with rival powers.)

On 3 June he received orders to leave Umtata and to travel fifty miles northwest to Engcobo. On 11 June he reported that they were forty-five men and they would be staying for a while. The Boers were back at Labuschagne's Nek and the CMR had recently arrived in Dordrecht.

The government was setting up a regiment of natives to defend the Kaffraria border. The staff was in Engcobo.

'Hundreds of them are arriving every day. Later they return home, instantly ready to report for duty when they are called.'

On 26 June the command in Engcobo ordered them to depart immediately to Maclear, a town in East Griqualand about sixty miles north. The town was encircled. The Boers had only the previous day taken thirty of the town volunteers prisoner. When reinforcements arrived on 29 June the Boers retreated and went up into the Drakensberg, where it was useless to follow. The British force regrouped in a position two miles from Maclear and stayed there for sixteen days without the Boers returning. Only their scouts were in constant motion around the position.

The unit was moved westward to Elliot and later to Novarre, where Colonel Dalgety was encamped with two hundred men. Here Captain Curtis, who was

taking command of two hundred men in Engcobo, asked Thord if he would like to join him and to become his 'galloper' (Thord later explained that a galloper was like an 'aide de camp'). Thord was pleased to accept the new assignment.

'Lately the Boers have become far too impertinent. They ride into town (Elliot) and take all that comes their way, horses, cattle and other things, so we located ourselves on a hill above the town. More than once have we met the Boers here... in smaller skirmishes, but the other day we fought a battle.

'On 23 September at 1.30 am we were called out. The Boers were on the march and had succeeded in surrounding an outpost of forty-eight men up in the Drakensberg. My unit of two hundred men under Captain Curtis was sent to their aid. We marched forward for approximately four miles toward the enemy. At five o'clock the advance guard came under fire. The captain and I were there. He gave the order to take up position on a hill within range of their hideout. Before long, heavy firing opened from both sides. At 10.30 am the Boers withdrew into the Drakensberg.

'It was impossible for us to follow with so few men. I enjoyed myself splendidly the whole morning, because as a galloper I saw everything from all angles. In four hours I exhausted three horses. There was a lot to do because we had fifty natives with us. The Boers must have seen them because they started to attack them and sent round after round towards them. Their lieutenant had his horse shot, and when they saw this, they ran away and left him in the lurch, jumping onto their horses and retreating towards the CMR. I was ordered to go to them, hold the place as best I could and reprimand the lieutenant because the group had withdrawn without being ordered to do so. Captain Curtis could not get a clear view of the event from his position with the main body. Off I went at full gallop, met with the fleeing natives and stopped them as best I could. I then heard that their officer's horse had been wounded and that he had been left in the lurch. They also said that the Boers had probably captured him, because when they left him the Boers advanced in great numbers.

'By threats I got them to return. At the same time their lieutenant came running towards us. He got a horse from the others and together we succeeded in making the natives resist. The Boers could not endure the fire and withdrew again. But the fire was also too fierce for the natives, I could see. Therefore I galloped back for reinforcements. The Boers thought me a good target and succeeded in cutting down my horse three hundred paces from the captain. Of course I fell but without a scratch. By the time I arrived on foot to report to the captain, the Boers had succeeded in forcing the natives from their positions for the second time. I explained to the captain that the natives could not withstand the firing and that they were in full retreat. It did not take long to get thirty CMRs on their horses to retake the position. The Boers had to leave their cover and at full gallop they disappeared into the mountains. Sending some well aimed volleys after them we dispatched another four of their men.'

By 26 October 1901, the position outside Elliot and the adjacent baggage camp had been occupied for about seven weeks. The force was four hundred strong, two

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hundred of them – and sometimes more – venturing out every evening on picket, patrol, and sentry duty. The Boers were all around and Thord told his parents in a letter that it would be only by good fortune if his letter got through the Boer lines and they received it.

‘The Boers are between eighteen hundred and two thousand men strong in the Drakensberg. They come down from time to time and take the post wagon with all it contains and anything else that comes their way. They plunder terribly in the whole region. We can do nothing but defend the town of Elliot from our entrenchments. Occasionally we go out but the Boers do not want any more confrontations and retreat into the mountains. We are too few to follow them up. During the nights they crawl forward and send occasional well-aimed bullets at the camp at close range; then they pull back and nothing can be done. In this way they have kept us awake for three weeks the whole night through. The men are exhausted and strained from guarding. Only during the days can they get a few hours’ sleep.’

At this time Thord was also giving some thought to the future. Captain Curtis held out the prospect that Thord could join one hundred CMRs that would represent the Cape Colony in England in May 1902. Yet it could also turn out that he would leave the CMR, as he would have completed his five-year service contract on 24 May 1902. He also had offers from several quarters to become an instructor in artillery and riflanship. If he went to England he could not accept such an offer.

On 21 December 1901 Thord recorded that he had been sent to Indwe, a railroad crossing near Sterkstroom, a transfer that took two days. There he joined eighty-five CMR troops under Captain Cummins, whom he had earlier met when he was still a lieutenant in Bizana. So far the official number of British dead in the war had mounted to 78 560. The ratio of dead to wounded was a disturbingly high 4.5:6.

The last wartime letters Thord sent home came from Sterkstroom on 30 March and 14 April 1902. Only in passing does he mention General Methuen’s defeat and capture by De la Rey at Tweebosch during March.

His thoughts were mostly centred on the family at home.

The action in which Thord participated after his return to Umtata is apparently connected with Kitchener’s plan to implement a ‘blockhouse system’ by creating a network of permanent defensive strongpoints to deprive the Boer kommandos of freedom of movement.

The British finally succeeded in crushing Boer resistance by implementing a scorched earth strategy and burning over 30 000 Boer farms to deprive the kommandos of their support base and break their resolve to continue the war.

Tens of thousands of Boer women and children, left destitute by the torching of farms, were also rounded up and interned in concentration camps. Mass internment had never been attempted on this scale before, and in fairness to the British it must be acknowledged that they had no idea what problems they would encounter. However, bad organisation, unsanitary conditions, and poor

nutrition in the camps caused thousands of innocent women and children to die of malnourishment and infectious diseases.

Thord's views on the conduct of the war were mixed, as we have already seen. He deplored the burning of Boer farms and lamented the plight of the women and children. Nevertheless he also believed that the deplorable situation was caused, not only by the ruthlessness of Kitchener and the British command, but also by the intransigence of the Boers and their refusal to surrender, even when it was clear that they had lost the conventional war.

On 2 June 1902 peace was officially proclaimed. Thord followed up on his plan to take leave. From his discharge certificate from the CMR, dated 15 July 1902, we can conclude that he had served the unit for five years and fifty-three days. He had been awarded the South African War Medal and a special war gratuity of five hundred pounds sterling.

