

THE ACTION AT ZOUTPANSDRIFT, 31 October 1914

Background

Nine miles west of Brits, and five miles east of Bethanie, between Pretoria and Rustenburg, the Crocodile River flows past the Langberg. There are several drifts in the vicinity and of these Zoutpansdrift has given its name to an encounter between Government and rebel forces which ended in the surrender of 100 Government troops.

The countryside between Rustenburg and Pretoria saw a great deal of rebel activity.

Southwest of Rustenburg is Lichtenburg, a rebel centre in its own right. It was in the approximate area of the triangle Pretoria - Rustenburg - Lichtenburg that General Beyers originally operated and here also Jopie Fourie made his greatest mark.

General Beyers arrived with his commando at the farm Commissie Drift, six miles south of Rustenburg, on 25 October 1914. Here he was attacked by General Botha on the 27th, and taken by surprise.¹ Beyers' com-



Members of the Rustenburg Commando, 1914

mando broke up into small independent groups, and Beyers himself decided to trek south to the Orange Free State.²

Not all the survivors of Commissie Drift rallied around Beyers again. Some of them moved east to Zoutpansdrift under command of 'General' J. Pienaar.³

The Rustenburg Commando was sent to expel the rebels from Zoutpansdrift.⁴ There follows now an account of the action, based on reports by three officers of the Government troops, Capt E. Johnstone and Lieutenants D. and P. A. M. Brink.⁵ Both Brinks attached sketch maps to their reports but comparison with a modern topographical map shows many inaccuracies, which is not surprising since neither officer was acquainted with the area and had not reconnoitred it.

The action

Capt Johnstone, the two Brinks and Assistant Field Cornet Steyn left Elandsdraai, twelve miles southwest of Zoutpansdrift, at approximately 1900 hours on 30 October with 100 men. At 0530 hours the following morning the squadron reached the knoll (A) at Snymansdrift on the west bank of the Crocodile River.

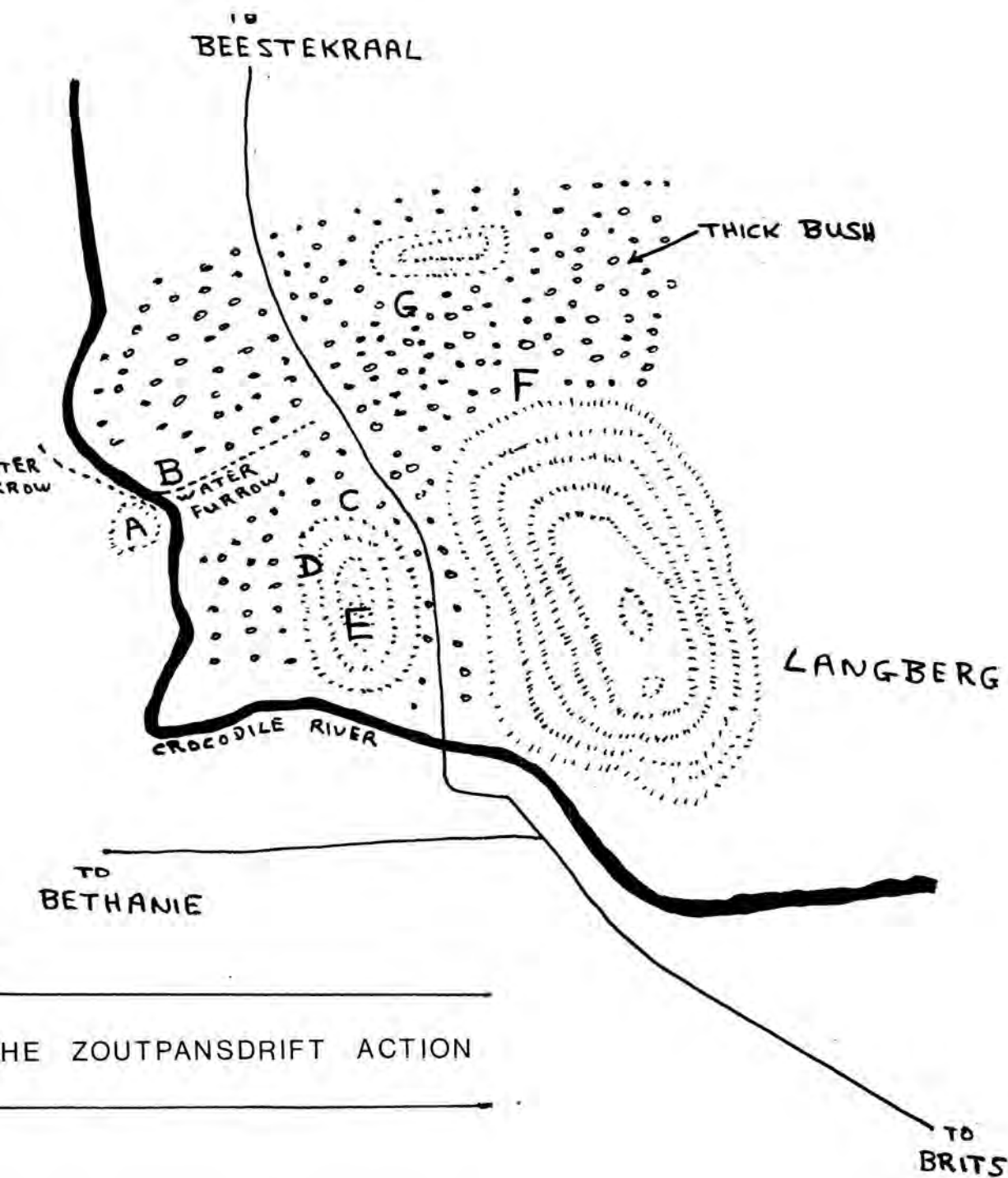
1. Report of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the Causes of and Circumstances relating to the recent Rebellion in South Africa (UG 46 — 1916), p 39.

2. Ibid, p 58.

3. See P. J. Sampson, *The capture of De Wet. The South African Rebellion 1914*, p 121. (London, 1915).

4. Ibid.

5. All three reports are in the archive of the Secretary for Defence (DC 9199 series), File G.126/310/9199. No further annotations are given as this file is the only source for the rest of the article and it is clear from the text whose report is being referred to at any one time.



Available evidence indicates that the rest of the Rustenburg Commando was nearby under command of Commandants Kloppers and Van Heerden. The general intention was to force the rebels off the high ground (Langberg) east of the river, and Commandant Kloppers was detailed to attack the Langberg from the east. Capt Johnstone, the two Brinks and Steyn were to secure a position

on the northwestern flank of the Langberg to cut off the enemy should they retreat from Commandant Kloppers' force.

Lt D. Brink crossed the river at B, with Lt P. Brink supporting his right flank and Assistant Field Cornet Steyn his left flank. His scouts reported the presence of rebels at C. Thereupon Lt P. Brink charged position D, left a detachment there and gradually marched up



The eastern kopje from the northeast. It was approximately here that the main attack was launched under Commandant Kloppers

the hill. Lt D. Brink simultaneously advanced and forced the enemy back to position E. Assistant Field Cornet Steyn attacked the eastern kopje F. Capt Johnstone was somewhere between D. Brink and Steyn.

Apparently at this stage of the action the two Brinks and Steyn became unable to further co-ordinate their efforts. It is impossible to interrelate their activities at all precisely, because none of the reports give any indications of time of day.

Lt D. Brink settled down to hold position E, where he remained 'for at least an hour'. Lt P. Brink eventually gained the summit of the western kopje whence he saw Steyn 'retiring in disorder'. It was probably at about this time that Lt D. Brink sent a man for reinforcements, whereupon Capt Johnstone came up with his men. Lt P. Brink felt compelled by Steyn's retirement to retreat in turn, and he pulled back to F 'under heavy cross-firing.'

Meantime Capt Johnstone and Lt D. Brink were experiencing difficulty in holding their position. They were under fire from the eastern kopje, which Steyn had evacuated, and were within 400 yards of other enemy groups. But because there was 'a good deal of firing towards our front at the other side of the kopje which indicated to us Com[mandant] Kloppers' force had come into action' (Johnstone's words), they held on. Strategic difficulties were compounded by difficulties

with a large number of Lt D. Brink's men. Subsequently Brink wrote:

I here very much regret having to report that only 11 of my men behaved well, two of the remainder, H. van Noorden and A. J. Coetsee, actually refused to fire. After being called up several times, I personally went back for these men, ordering them to come up to the firing line, which they refused to do. I then threatened Van Noorden with my revolver, he replied that he cannot fire upon his own people. I then disarmed them and returned to the firing line.

Brink did not receive further orders and remained in position for another two and a half hours. During that time both his flanks ceased firing — this was due to the withdrawals of P. Brink and Steyn — and the firing of Commandant Kloppers' force stopped as well. Johnstone and Brink thereupon decided to retire to avoid encirclement. They fell back to G. Brink says, 'we retired . . . and found that we were surrounded on all sides', and Johnstone says, 'instead of making contact with our support we ran into a strong ambush.' It was clear to both officers that they were confined to this one position.

Lt P. Brink was unable to come to their aid. After he retired on F no further orders were sent to him and 'afraid of being trapped I retired under cover of the River bank'. He crossed to the west bank at B and took up



Both Brinks mention the thick bush. This scene is just north of the Langberg. (Photograph taken in 1974)

position in a water furrow between the river and the knoll **A**.

From there he sent to Commandant Van Heerden for reinforcements and was told that the commando was retiring on Bethanie. Brink's report continues:

I again sent a report saying that Capt Johnson [sic] & Lt D. Brink were in difficulties & that he must send reinforcements & got instructions to retire on to Bethanie as they were not going to risk any more men.

Evidently Brink did not feel able to rejoin the commando as he later surrendered along with Capt Johnstone and Lt D. Brink.

Johnstone and Brink, pinned down at **G**, were approached by a rebel under cover of a white flag who asked them to surrender, failing which General Pienaar would immediately open fire. After discussion they decided to surrender, Brink because he could not rely upon his men and Johnstone because

I saw no hope of relief, having no water and Lieut Brink's men had decided to surrender en masse. The country was unknown to us & our only hopes of

escape seemed to be through the furrow and river, only fordable in two places which no doubt were strongly guarded by the rebels . . . I did not feel justified in the heavy sacrifice of life, which either the attempt to hold the position within 300 yards of the enemies [sic] trenches, or attempt at escape would have entailed.

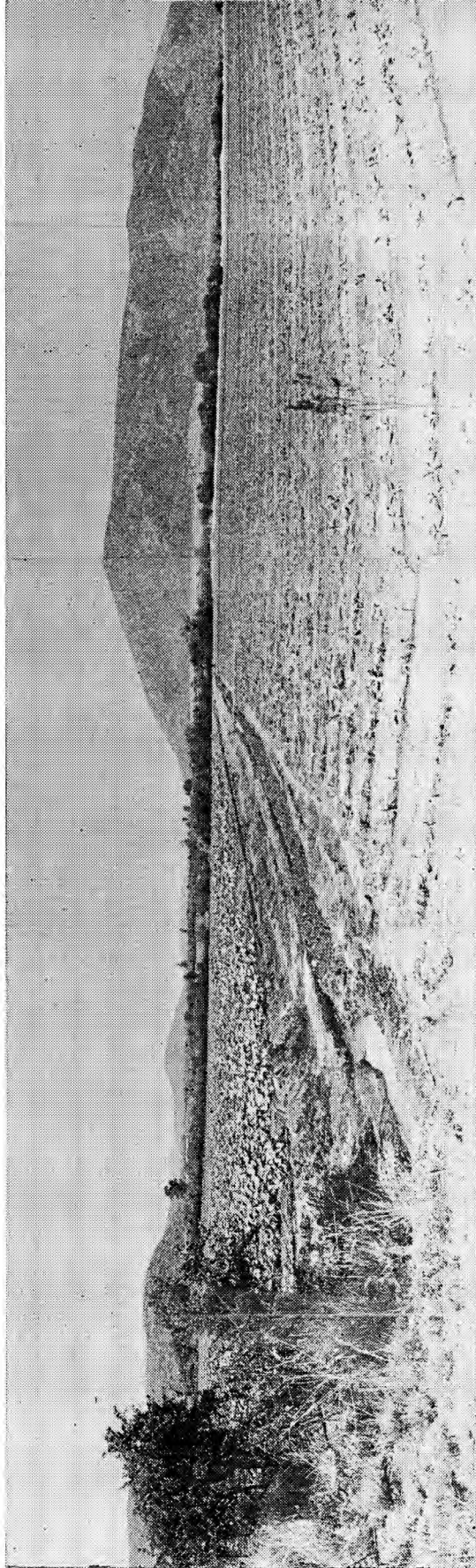
The troops were disarmed and allowed to find their own way to Rustenburg.

Opinions of the action

Lt D. Brink remarked that 'the whole movement was a very poor one from a military point of view, and in the opinion of several experienced men it would take at least 1 500 men with big guns to take the position the rebels are holding.'

Capt Johnstone expressed his feelings more strongly:

. . . it appears we were deserted in an untenable position . . . we had no force in support, & we were ordered to and took up a position which was a hopeless one if the simple military precautions of the support of our left flank & support in rear were neglected.



... in the opinion of several experienced men it would take at least 1 500 men with big guns to take the position the rebels are holding'. (Lt D. Brink). This composite photograph shows the eastern kopje and the surrounding area from the northeast. The point where Capt Johnstone and Lt D. Brink were pinned down and surrendered is is very close to the right-hand edge of the picture, where the terrain is actually quite uneven

Here Johnstone is under a misapprehension. His notion of an unprotected left flank is based on the contention that Steyn's force 'failed to take up that position.' Further he says 'we mistook rebels on our left for that particular force.' But since Lt P. Brink saw Steyn retiring from the eastern kopje, it is clear that Johnstone is mistaken. This also indicates that Johnstone's force did not participate in the original three-pronged attack of the two Brinks and Steyn, but came up much later, after Steyn had retired. The rebels on his left were presumably those who forced Steyn back.

Was Johnstone 'deserted in an untenable position'? It would seem that Commandants Van Heerden and Kloppers did not realize the strength of the Langberg position and staked everything upon the success of a frontal assault. When this failed they decided to sacrifice Johnstone and the Brinks with their 100 men rather than risk the entire commando. Viewed in this way the retirement upon Bethanie becomes a harsh but pragmatic decision and the blame for the disaster lies with faulty strategy. And Johnston's final

sentence lends support to this view: 'I think that any attempt on the part of Com[mandant] Kloppers to relieve us during the later stages of the action would have been costly in casualties.'

The tragedy of the Rebellion — divided loyalties — showed only too clearly in the refusal of some of Lt D. Brink's men to go into action. This was another factor leading to the decision to surrender. It is interesting to note that Capt Johnstone's men behaved in exemplary fashion, or in his words: 'The men under my immediate command behaved with great coolness under fire, many of them with considerable gallantry.' Lt D. Brink also commended them.

A further point of interest is Capt Johnstone's remark: '. . . many of my men were issued with Martini-Henry rifles with the result that a position cannot be successfully concealed.' That soldiers should in 1914 still be using an obsolete weapon and black powder cartridges may occasion surprise; but it is a little-known fact that Defence Rifle Associations, to which the men of the Rustenburg Commando belonged, were issued with black powder.