

HALT! ACTION FRONT! WITH LONG AT COLENZO

Darrell Hall

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Maps, photographs, illustrations, appendices

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South African born Darrell Hall (1928 - 1996) joined the British Army in 1946 and retired with the rank of major in 1968. During his 22-year career in the British Army he served in both the Royal Artillery and the Royal Marine Commando and saw active service in the Suez Canal and Borneo campaigns. Returning to South Africa after his retirement from the British Army, he devoted much of his time to his passion for military history. He soon became a well-known authority on the battlefields of KwaZulu-Natal and served as Chairman of the Gunners' Association, the South African Military History Society and the sub-section British War Graves of the National Monuments Council. He has written three books on the Anglo-Boer War. The first was the title under discussion, of which the first edition was published in 1991 and a second edition in 1994. His second work, entitled *Long Tom*, deals with the history of the famous 155mm Creusot siege guns of the Boers. His last work, *The Hall handbook of the Anglo-Boer War*, was published posthumously in 1999 under the editorship of Fransjohan Pretorius and Gilbert Torlage.

Darrell Hall commences his book with a brief description of the mobilisation, organisation and arrival in South Africa in November 1899 of the three batteries (7th, 14th and 66th) of the 4th Brigade Division, Royal Field Artillery. This is followed by a short exposition of the technical data and tactical features of the 4th Brigade Division's 15-pounder guns, as well as the six 12-pounder naval guns under Long's command. He concludes this introductory part of his work with brief biographies of the British commanding officers in Natal, namely Generals Buller, Clery, Barton, Hart, Hildyard, Lyttelton and Dundonald and Colonel Long, as well as a summary of the Boer forces in Natal and a short biography of the Boer Commander, General Louis Botha. Hall then sketches the military situation in Natal in December 1899 and the operational plans of the opposing commanders at Colenso, General Redvers Buller and General Louis Botha, before turning his attention to the main theme of the book, the loss of ten of Colonel Long's 15-pounder guns during the Battle of Colenso. Hall subsequently goes on to give some detail on the decorations won and the casualties suffered at Colenso, the fate of the captured guns and the battlefield today, before coming to his final conclusion on Long's actions at Colenso. (The interruption of his discussion to dwell on the decorations, casualties, etc., is a bit obtrusive; those aspects could have been addressed after his conclusion.) To substantiate his conclusions, Hall includes extracts from the *Report of his Majesty's Commissioners on the War in South Africa (1903)*, the *Battery Histories* of the 14th and 66th Batteries, Royal Field Artillery and other relevant sources as appendices to this second edition of his work. These includes, *inter alia*, the testimonies of Buller, Long and Hildyard with regard to the loss of Long's guns.

In his attempt to penetrate the Boer lines at Colenso on 15 December 1899, Buller ordered Colonel Long to assume command personally of the two 15-pounder batteries (14th and 66th) and the six 12-pounder naval guns, which were to prepare the way for the 2nd Brigade's crossing of the Tugela. Long, by his own admission, and blaming the deceptive early-morning light, deployed his two 15-pounder batteries too close to the Boer lines and came under severe rifle and artillery fire, suffering heavy casualties among both his men and artillery horses. With no sign of the advance of the 2nd Brigade and his two 15-pounder batteries running out of ammunition, Long temporarily withdrew his gunners to take shelter in a donga to the rear of their positions until his ammunition could be replenished. Buller, apparently thinking that Long had abandoned his guns and believing that "any attempt to re-open fire was out of the question" (p86), turned back the ammunition wagons, leaving the two 15-pounder batteries impotent. With Major General Hart's attack on his left flank a total disaster and Long's guns pinned down, Buller decided to call off his effort to cross the Tugela. Three gallant attempts to extricate Long's 15-pounders resulted in only two of the 12 guns being saved, with several officers, men and horses being lost in the effort.

Based on the available evidence Hall comes to the conclusion that Long's two 15-pounder batteries (14th and 66th) went into action at Colenso strictly according to the *Manual of Field Artillery Drill 1896*. In a novel approach he therefore uses that manual and the *15-pounder Gun Drill*, complemented by available accounts of the events, to reconstruct Long's actions at Colenso. His experience as an artillery officer enables him to guide the reader step by step through the unfolding disaster at Colenso, detailing every move Long's guns made and indicating the influence of Buller's hand on the course of events.

Admitting Long's mistake in deploying within the reach of the Boers' devastating Mauser fire, Hall concludes that, contrary to Buller's claim that he was 'sold by a damned Gunner', it was rather Long who was 'sold by a damned General!'. He argues that Long's actions were by the book and in compliance with Buller's orders; he did not even deploy that much further forward than the artillery manuals of the time prescribed. He also points out that Long was a victim of Buller's poor reconnaissance, which failed to reveal that the Boers held Fort Wylie and indicated that they were deployed further back on the northern bank of the Tugela. He further argues that Buller should not have ordered Long to take command personally of the 14th and 66th Batteries and the six naval guns; Long's place was with Buller, from where he could have exercised overall control of the artillery. That way he could have dealt effectively with the ammunition problem. According to Hall, Buller apparently did not know the difference between withdrawing the men (temporarily) from the guns and abandoning the guns; Long should have been at Buller's side to point that out to him, preventing him from turning back the ammunition wagons and rendering the 15-pounders impotent. Hall further blames the lack of action by the infantry (Buller never ordered the 2nd Brigade to proceed with the main attack) for the loss of the guns. He also points out that Buller refused offers from officers of two separate infantry battalions to stay behind and protect the guns until they could be withdrawn under cover of darkness, which in his view could indeed have saved the day. He rejects Buller's claim that the infantry was too exhausted to remain on the battlefield and beat off any Boer effort to capture the guns during the night. This is perhaps unfair, since it was only 11:00 when the attack was called off and

the infantry, short of water and pinned down under an extremely hot sun, would have been exposed to heavy Boer fire for several more hours before nightfall.

A weakness of the work is that Hall does not give enough information on the broad course of the Battle of Colenso. His discussion is thus somewhat out of context. Although Hall rather convincingly shifts the overall blame for the loss of the guns from Long to Buller, he perhaps underplays Long's mistakes in outmarching the infantry (which he does not explain satisfactorily) and deploying the guns too far forward. Whatever mistakes Buller had made, the fact remains that Long misjudged the distance to the Boer lines, allowing his 15-pounders to be pinned down helplessly under Boer fire with no chance of rescuing them without severe loss of life.

Although of definite interest to scholars and students of military history, the book is obviously aimed at the general reader and battlefield enthusiast. It does not burden the reader with too many facts and makes it easy to follow the sequence of events. The photographs and accompanying notes on the battlefield today will be very helpful to those setting out to explore the scene of Buller and Long's mutual demise on that fateful day in December 1899.

Lt Col G.E. Visser, Department of Military History, University of Stellenbosch