

# Plumer's Column: The Northern Front in the Anglo-Boer War, July 1899 - May 1900

By Graham Winton

## Abstract

The North West Frontier campaign has unfortunately been dominated by Colonel Baden-Powell and the siege of Mafeking, to the near exclusion of his subordinate, Colonel Plumer and his field force. Tensions ran high along the frontier territory of British Bechuanaland (Botswana), Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and the Transvaal Republic [ZAR]. The Transvaal Boers, due the Jameson raid of 1896, feared another back door "invasion" and British settlers feared a repeat of the bloody tribal revolts of 1896/7. Baden-Powell raised two regiments of mounted rifles, The North West Frontier Force, in preparation for a raid from Southern Rhodesia into the Northern Transvaal, in the event of war. Reminiscent of 'a la Jameson raid'. The Force was to defend British borders and contain a sizeable force of Boers in the north, keeping them away from their main forces, and 'keeping the natives in order' should hostilities break out. Probably the first act of the war took place in Bechuanaland when Boer troopers severed British communications with the Cape Colony.

When Baden-Powell moved into Mafeking, Plumer crucially remained in the field with his Rhodesian Mounted Rifles and members of the British South African Police, to defend the 500 mile long borders of British territory from Boer incursions. Captured Kruger telegrams highlight the anxiety raised by Plumer's column, commenting "Watch Plumer at all costs" and questioning, "Where is Plumer". Plumer moved to Fort Tuli on the Transvaal border where his forces were bested in a number of small actions; although ultimately frustrating any further Boer incursions across this border. Moving his force to the Gaborone region, he was engaged in a number of actions mainly around the strategically important railway line from Mafeking to Bulawayo. His force was again bested at Ramathlabama close to Mafeking, before taking part in its successful relief in May 1900.

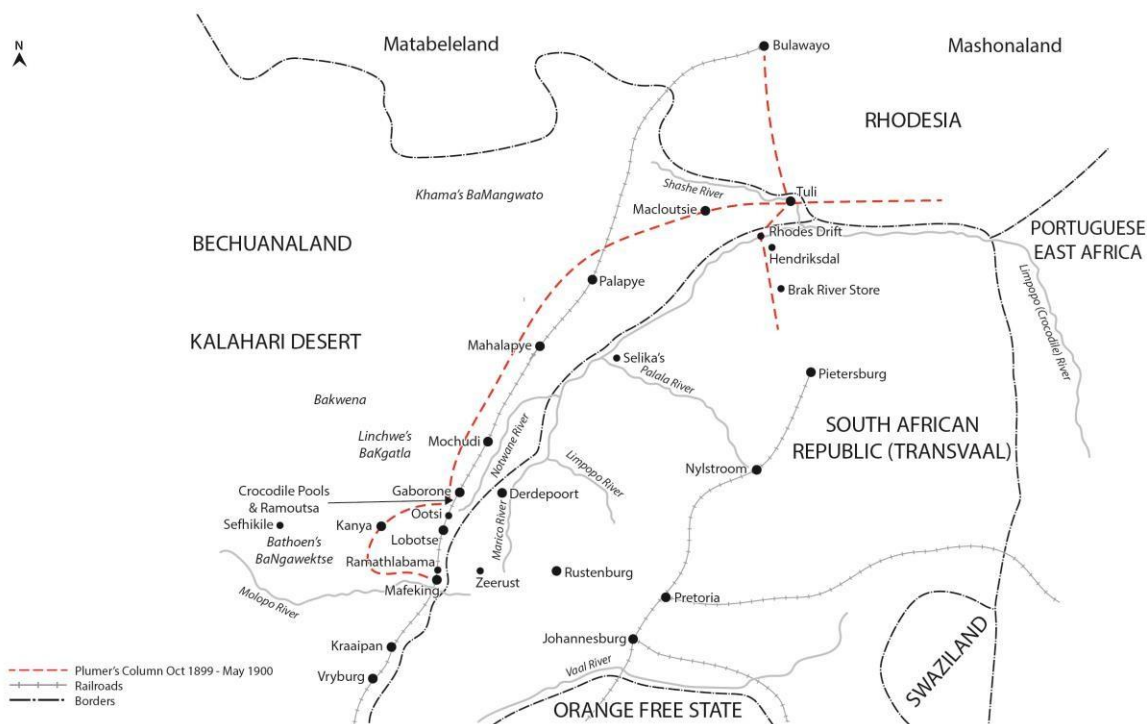
## Paper / notes

Brevet Colonel R.S.S. Baden-Powell and the siege of Mafeking have dominated interest in the northern Anglo-Boer War.<sup>1</sup> This has resulted in the near exclusion of his subordinate, Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert Plumer and his field force. Baden-Powell [B-P] was posted to South Africa to raise a North West Frontier Force in preparation for a raid into the Northern Transvaal, reminiscent of 'a la Jameson raid',

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<sup>1</sup> Baden-Powell was promoted to the substantive rank of lieutenant-colonel October 1900.

and to defend the Protectorates of Bechuanaland [Botswana] and Rhodesia [Zimbabwe]. Although probably of no strategic advantage to the Boers, their first acts of the war took place in Bechuanaland when they attacked British communications. When B-P moved into Mafeking, Plumer crucially remained in the field with his Rhodesian Mounted Rifles and members of the British South African Police and volunteers. Kruger's telegrams highlight the anxiety raised by Plumer's column, commenting "Watch Plumer at all costs" and questioning, "Where is Plumer" and "Watch Ramathlabama".<sup>2</sup> Plumer moved to Fort Tuli [Thuli] on the Transvaal border where his force was bested in a number of small actions; although ultimately his force frustrated any further Boer incursions into Rhodesia. He then moved his force to the Gaborone region [Bechuanaland], where they were engaged in a number of actions mainly around the strategically important railway line from Mafeking to Bulawayo. His force was severely mauled at Ramathlabama close to Mafeking, before taking part in its successful relief in May 1900.<sup>3</sup>

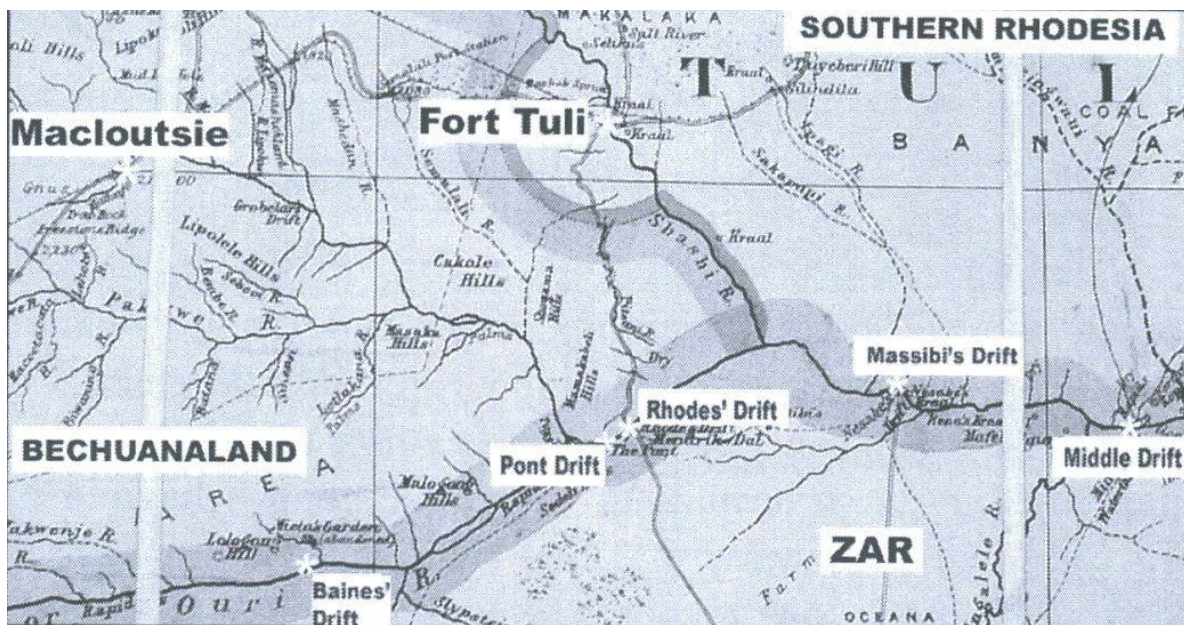


Plumer's Campaign 1899-1900. Map courtesy Helion Co Ltd

<sup>2</sup> Baden-Powell, *Letters from the Varsity of Life*, London 1933, pp. 201, 211.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Robert Burrett for sharing his extensive knowledge and research on the North West Frontier campaign and also to Tim Jeal.

It is about 500 miles (805 km) from the junction of the Rhodesian, Portuguese East African and *Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek* [ZAR] or Transvaal borders to Mafeking, with the Limpopo or Crocodile River forming the boundary. Defending about 200 miles (322 km) of frontier Plumer's campaign centred on Fort Tuli, Gaborone and Mafeking [Mafikeng]. Fort Tuli lay on the Shashi [Shashe] River about 80 miles (129 km) south of Bulawayo and 20 miles (32 km) north of the Limpopo. A possible launch pad for raids across the Limpopo drifts existed such as Baines', Pont, Rhodes' and Massibis'. Gaborone was a strategic point on the north-south railway line close to the ZAR border. Mafeking, only 160 miles (257 km) from the ZAR capital of Pretoria was a strategic, administrative, political, commercial, communications and psychological frontier hub for the Bechuanaland Protectorate and the north eastern region of Cape Colony. Significantly, Mafeking was also the centre of colonial administration for the BaMangwato, Bakgatla and BaNgawektse native peoples. Full of stores, equipment and railway material, Mafeking was an obvious target for the Boers.<sup>4</sup>



Fort Tuli, Shashi River and Limpopo Drifts. Courtesy of Rob Burrett

Patrolling the 500 mile (805 km) border was beyond the capacity of B-P's small frontier force. Following the Matabele rising of 1893-4 and the bloody Matabele/Shona rising

<sup>4</sup> Powell, G., *Plumer: The Soldier's General*, Pen & Sword Military, 2004, p.63. Will & Dent, 'The Boer War — as Seen From Gaborone', p.195 in *Botswana Notes and Records*, Vol.4, 1972, pp.195-209.

of 1896-7, Rhodesian settlers feared the removal of their defensive forces and the possibility of another rising taking place, as in 1895 when they were taken away for the Jameson Raid.<sup>5</sup> These fears meant that B-P took a significant risk if he moved his force away from the main areas of native settlement. He stated that what was "impressed upon him more than anything else" was to use these forces, "to keep the natives in order" should hostilities break out or become imminent, and discourage them from rising again and from supporting the Boers. The Jameson Raid engendered a fear in the ZAR of further invasions launched across their northern frontier. Lieutenant-General Sir William F. Butler, Commanding Officer for the Cape, stated that, "in essence the Boers position was one of suspicion ... that they were going to have a repeat Raid or series of raids, for which they had not been prepared in 1895-96. The Boers we knew were in a state of constant watchfulness and alarm all along that frontier at that time".<sup>6</sup> This fear was not to be misplaced.

Certainly, from May 1899 the War Office Intelligence Department had been 'enquiring' into the possibility of a "raid" into the northern Transvaal from Macloutsie [Motloutse] or Fort Tuli, seizing Pietersburg then Pretoria. By continually menacing the back door of the Transvaal a considerable force of Boers in the Waterberg and Zoutpansberg districts could be contained and prevented from moving south. B-P noted, "a little reminiscent of a la Jameson raid".<sup>7</sup> On 1 July 1899 the War Office Intelligence Department forwarded to the Commander in Chief of the Forces [Field Marshal Viscount Wolseley] a lengthy secret *Memorandum 'On the project of a raid from Southern Rhodesia on the Northern districts of the Transvaal in the event of war with the South African Republic'*. A note in the margin read, "Kindly avoid use of this ill omened word "raid". The project was probably conceived by Captain J. S. Nicholson, Commandant-General of the British South Africa Police [BSAP] and from 1898 Inspector-General of Volunteers in Rhodesia. He was directly responsible to Sir Alfred

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<sup>5</sup> In 1895 the territories of Matabeleland and Mashonaland became Rhodesia, modern Zimbabwe. BP served in the 1896 Second Matabele War as Sir F Carrington's Chief of Staff. Plumer served in Southern Rhodesia in 1896, disarming the local police force following the Jameson Raid and commanding the Matabele Relief Force during the Second Matabele War.

<sup>6</sup> B-P's Evidence before the *Royal Commission on the War in South Africa* [RCWSA], Cd. 1791, Vol.II, 19 March 1902, p.426, Q19825. Butler's evidence before the RCWSA, p.83, Q13585. General Wood's orders to B-P, 7 July 1899, The National Archives [TNA] WO 32/7852.

<sup>7</sup> B-P's evidence before the RCWSA, Cd 1791, Vol.II, p.424, point 4.

Milner, High Commissioner South Africa, for all the armed forces in Southern Rhodesia, both police and volunteers. The Intelligence Department recommended to Wolseley that B-P be ordered immediately to Bulawayo, landing at Beira, with Tuli or Macloutsie as the probable rallying point. Orders had already been issued through the Colonial Office to the BSAP to purchase horses and military equipment for the field force.<sup>8</sup>

On the 3 July 1899, B-P was appointed for special service in South Africa, accompanied by a small group of ultimately 25 Imperial Special Service Officers. He states that the duty of his force was to "hold the frontier on the west of the Transvaal from Vryburg in Cape Colony to Bulawayo in Rhodesia", some 650 miles (1,046 km), with two regiments of mounted rifles and about 400 police, but no regular troops.<sup>9</sup> He was to raise, equip and train a Special Service Corps of two mounted regiments of irregular horse under the Cape Colonial Forces Act. The Rhodesian Regiment were placed under Lt-Col Hubert Plumer and the Protectorate (Bechuanaland) Regiment, under Lt-Col. Hore. These regiments were to form the nuclei of stronger forces with the addition of Nicholson's BSAP and volunteers. All the armed forces in Rhodesia/Bechuanaland were therefore under B-P's command, a North West Frontier Force of about 1,000 men. B-P's mission was considered secret even though it had been reported in the local Cape newspapers. All special service officers were to wear civilian clothes rather than uniforms and to travel to Bulawayo under false names, keeping their exact destination and mission quiet, until reaching Rhodesia.<sup>10</sup>

From 14 August, special service officers recruited men mainly from coastal ports and main towns such as Graham's Town and King William's Town in Cape Colony, East London, Port Elizabeth, Kimberly and Cape Town.<sup>11</sup> Equipment was acquired from Army Ordnance and the BSAP. By the end of September, the regiments, each of about 450 men, had been recruited, trained and equipped. These men were engaged to the end of September 1900, when both regiments were disbanded. Plumer's Rhodesian

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<sup>8</sup> 'Memorandum on the project of a raid from Southern Rhodesia on the Northern districts of the Transvaal in the event of war with the South African Republic', dated 1 July 1899, prepared by Colonel W. Everett, for the Department Military Intelligence and Secretary of State for War, 1 July 1899, TNA, WO32/7852 - 079/8693.

<sup>9</sup> *Letters from the Varsity of Life*, p.201

<sup>10</sup> See for example *Queenstown Free Press*, 4 August 1899.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, *Cape Times Weekly Edition* 30 August 1899, 2 & 6 September 1899; *Queenstown Free Press* 16 and 18 August 1899.

Regiment was based in Bulawayo before moving to Fort Tuli; Hore's Protectorate Regiment was based at Ramathlabama, 18-20 miles (29-32 km) north of Mafeking in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, until moving into Mafeking.

B-P was aware that his total force would be too weak to achieve anything if scattered along the whole 500 mile (805 km) border and had requested additional guns and mounted men. This was refused. He therefore split his total force (totalling about 2,000 men) into three 'forces'.<sup>12</sup> On the 4 October, B-P personally took command of all forces in Mafeking, including the Protectorate Regiment. Plumer was at Fort Tuli until January 1900 when his Column moved to the Gaborone area and he took direct control of all forces outside of Mafeking; including the small independent 'Third Force' organised by Colonel Nicholson. This force, which included members of the BSAP and Southern Rhodesian Volunteers [SRVF] was placed by Nicholson under Lt-Col Holdsworth along the southern railway line down to the Gaborone area, along with Captain Llewellyn and the Rhodesian armoured trains. The last units to join Plumer, in May 1900, in time for the relief of Mafeking, were elements of the Rhodesian Field Force under Lt-General Carrington, which was raised and then later disbanded in 1900.<sup>13</sup> These forces were placed strategically at the most important points for holding the border and safeguarding the north-south railway line. Plumer, with command of the northern forces outside of Mafeking, was given responsibility for keeping communications open to the north and north-west. A display of strength was intended to induce the Boers to detail as strong a force to protect their northern district, thus blocking any attempted invasion of Rhodesia, and to create diversions in the north of the Transvaal, if necessary advancing into the Transvaal. No portion of his force was to cross the frontier until he received orders.<sup>14</sup> Boer commandos were issued with a

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<sup>12</sup> The Siege of Mafeking t/s by Captain the Hon Algernon Hanbury-Tracy, Nicholson Family Collection. I am grateful to the family for allowing me access to this collection.

<sup>13</sup> The Rhodesian Volunteers of about 1,500 men, were formed in late 1898 at Bulawayo. Commanded by Major P. W. Forbes, they served from October 1899 to the end 1902. The force was divided into the Eastern Division, based in Salisbury, and Western Division based in Bulawayo, later becoming the Southern Rhodesian Volunteer Force [SRVF]. As tensions rose along the Transvaal border, several local defence corps were established or strengthened in many of the small railway towns such as Vryburg, Mafeking, Lobatsi and Francistown. Burrett, R., 'Events in the Tuli Area', *South African Military History Journal*, Vol.12, No.3, June 2002. Stirling, J., *The Colonials in South Africa 1899-1902*, London, 1907, p.201.

<sup>14</sup> Powell, op.cit, p.59. TNA WO32/7852 - 079/8693, instructions signed by Wolseley 5 July 1899.

similar order. B-P ordered Plumer to "act for the best according to what news you receive from Natal etc" ... "and not await my orders. I will endorse your action".<sup>15</sup>

By the 11th October 1899 Plumer's Column, some 550 men, was located at Fort Tuli and on the various drifts on the Limpopo, to counter Boer forces at Hendriksdal and the drifts.<sup>16</sup> Plumer was disadvantaged in artillery for much of the campaign and out-gunned by the Boers. His column was supplied by Nicholson, via supply ships from Durban and Port Elizabeth to Beira, then by rail and ox-wagons to Bulawayo and Fort Tuli, over 1,500 miles (2,414 km). In advance of war breaking out Nicholson had stockpiled stores in Bulawayo and six weeks supplies at Fort Tuli.

From 5 October Boer commandos began concentrating on four main camps along the Limpopo River, with their railhead some 150 miles (241 km) distant at Pietersburg. Under the joint command of Commandant-General Frederik Albertus Grobler were the Zoutpansberg commando, about 1,287 men, under van Rensburg, and the Waterberg, 732 men, directly under Commandant-General Grobler. Under the direct command of General Pieter J. Cronje were the Rustenberg commando, 2,536 men under du Plessis and Piet Kruger and the Marico commando, 1,265 men, under Field-Cornet Pieter Daniel Swart.<sup>17</sup> The Zoutpansberg gathered on 11 October, at the Brak River Store some 31 miles (50 km) south of the Limpopo with their main camp at Hendriksdal Farm, 2.5 miles (4 km) from Rhodes' Drift. The Waterberg gathered also on 11 October, at Nylstroom, then around Selika's (opposite Ngwapa, now Groblersbrug) at the junction of the Limpopo-Palala rivers, confronting Kgosi Khama's BaMangwato people.<sup>18</sup> The Rustenberg commando was concentrated at Derdepoort confronting Kgosi Linchwe's BaKgatla people. The Marico commando were located in a number of small discrete encampments close to the border opposite Lobatsi, for example at Gopanistad [Maanwane], Ikalfenstad or Skalfienstad and near Malmani, confronting

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<sup>15</sup> Message to Plumer from BP via Nicholson, 20 October 1899. British Library (Manuscripts) *Weil Papers*, Vol.III 46850, Document 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> Rhodesian Regiment: 420 men plus 100 BSAP already at Tuli (with later additional reinforcements); 5-6 artillery pieces and eight Maxim machine guns.

<sup>17</sup> Also with Cronje were the Potchefstroom, Lichtenburg, Wolmanransstaad and Bloemhof Commandos. Cronje later handed over command to Kootjie J. P. Snyman.

<sup>18</sup> BaSeleka: a small group who had historically straddled the Limpopo and who out of antagonism to the Ngwato had been Boer allies since the 1880s. Parsons, Q. N., 'Khama III, the Bamangwato and the British: with special reference to 1895-1928', unpublished PhD Thesis University of Edinburgh, 1973, Chapter 5, pp.184,187. Hickman, A.S., *Rhodesia Served the Queen*, Vol.1, Salisbury: Rhodesian Army, 1970, p.48. Burrett, R., op cit.



Gaborone and Mafeking. Estimates of Boer numbers fluctuate widely over the period of the campaign, as not all men were active on commando at any one time. A flexible command structure meant, for example, personal preferences and individual circumstances resulted in men swapping commandos and making home visits.<sup>19</sup> Probably a maximum of 1,500 burghers faced Plumer and around 6,000 in the Mafeking area, although this number could have been as high as 7-10,000 and as low as 3,000.

The opening events of the war on this frontier took place on the Bechuanaland border involving the 'Third Rhodesian' Force. With the declaration of war, 11 October, the first acts of hostility were two almost immediate Boer incursions (12th), cutting the Cape- Rhodesia telegraph wire just south of Mahalapye in Bechuanaland and capturing an armoured train at Kraaipan in Cape Colony.<sup>20</sup> Between 12 and 17 October, the Marico commando cut the telegraph line and ripped up the rails at Ootsi, and captured Lobatsi (15th). The Marico, with reinforcements from the Rustenberg commando and from Mafeking were to drive northwards to join the main Rustenberg commando around Mochudi then drive north joining the Waterberg commando before entering Rhodesia via Fort Tuli to link up with the Zoutpansberg commando, which was engaging Plumer.<sup>21</sup> However, on the 18 October, a few miles north of Lobatsi, one of Llewellyn's armoured trains (HM Powerful) attacked and pushed back the Marico commando. A similar incident occurred at Ramoutsa on the 21st. The Waterberg commando had been delegated the strategic and important task of capturing or destroying the northern section of the railway line, but failure to achieve this proved to be a serious strategic error.<sup>22</sup>

The 'Third Rhodesian' Force confined itself to keeping as much of the railway line open as possible, between Bulawayo and Mafeking, specifically with the use of several armoured trains crewed by a small independent force of police and volunteers. The

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<sup>19</sup> Godley Letters, 4 October 1899, pp 33-34, Lady Godley, Bulawayo to Major Godley, Mafeking. I am grateful to Brian Willan for loan of these letters.

<sup>20</sup> The 13 October. General Koos de la Rey , Potchefstroom and Lichtenburg Commandoes about 50 km south west Mafeking.

<sup>21</sup> Parsons, N., 'Not Quite All Quiet on the North West Frontier: Khama's Bangwato and the Waterberg Commando', *South African Military History Journal*, 41, November 1999, p.45 and Parsons, op.cit., 1973, p.186.

<sup>22</sup> Possibly the commando was waiting for the Marico and Rustenburg commandos to join them, or there was internal wrangling, or because of threats of resistance from Kgosi Khama, BaMangwato.



trains proved decisive in protecting the railway and spearheading Rhodesian thrusts southwards and supplying Plumer's Column in the advance to Mafeking. The armoured trains ran in pairs with one always in support, and the construction train close behind. The second supporting armoured train was therefore available to repair any damage to the railway. As there was only 75 tons of coal in Bulawayo, which was not used, fuel for the engines was entirely hardwood, cut as the trains went along. This gave off little smoke, reducing the warning time to the Boers. The trains halted at night at different places, such as bridges, and any other places threatened by the Boers.<sup>23</sup>



Crew of an armoured train from Bulawayo. National Archives of Botswana

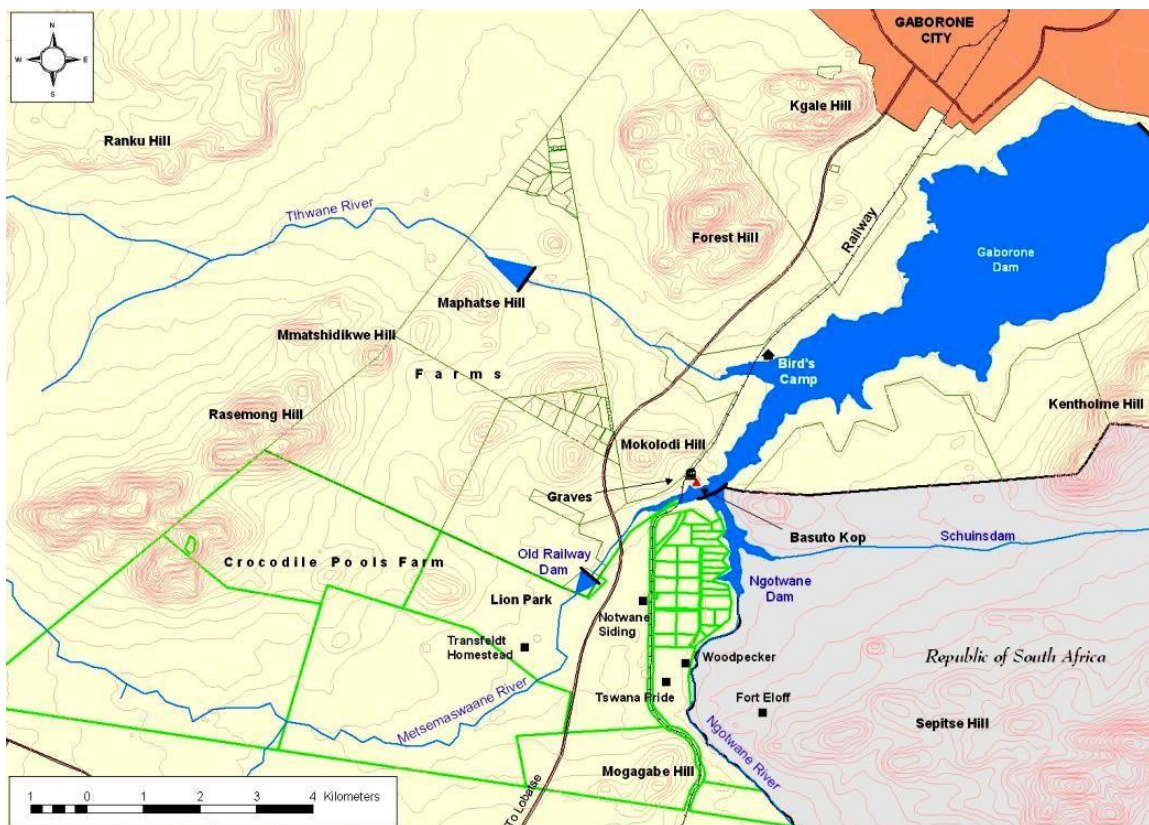
Much of the action during October and November took place along the rail line from around Mochudi to Gaborone and Crocodile Pools (Ngotwane Siding), involving two of the armoured trains and artillery positions on the fortified hilltop strongholds along Sepitsi Hill. The Rhodesians fell back on the 24 October to Mahalapye evacuating Gaborone and Crocodile Pools, which were then occupied by the Boers as was Mochudi station from 31 October to late November. Holdsworth gained a small victory north of Mochudi that finally persuaded the BaKgatla to join the British cause. In a

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<sup>23</sup> A total of six trains were built by the Rhodesia Railway workshops, Bulawayo. The first two trains were sent to Mafeking 2 October, the remaining four retained at Bulawayo. Each train consisted of an engine and a couple of wagons; one wagon had a mounted maxim gun and/or a 7 pounder gun on a raised platform. All rolling stock was protected with armour of steel rails and sheet metal, also often sandbags. See for example: BP's Evidence before the *RCWSA*, p.423-4, '1-Narrative of Organisation of Frontier Force'. Plumer's Evidence before the *RCWSA*, 12 March 1903, p.339, Q18046-98.

significant and controversial action on 24 - 25 November, Holdsworth and the BaKgatla invaded the Transvaal attacking the Marico Commando laager at Derdepoort, causing significant casualties.<sup>24</sup>

Following this action the Boers abandoned positions around Gaborone wrecking the important railway bridge over the Metsemaswaane River near Basuto Kop. The Rhodesians reoccupied Gaborone on the 12 December, repairing the damaged railway line before retiring to Mochudi. They continued patrols southward but effectively abandoned the Gaborone area until January 1900. Most Boer strongholds were probably erected about this time in the narrow pass near Ramoutsa Siding south of Crocodile Pools and along the prominent Sepitsi Hill on the Transvaal side of the border. The largest fortification was Fort Eloff, with several small outposts on Mogagabe Hill within the Protectorate itself. This blocked any Rhodesian advance towards Mafeking. Patrols and small-scale skirmishes continued during this period.



<sup>24</sup> There followed a bitter BaKgatla-Boer war in the Rustenburg District, conducted independently of British control, but invaluable in insulating the north-south railway from attack as late as 1902. Parsons, op.cit, 1973, p.189.



From 18 October to 25 November, Plumer's column was frequently engaged in skirmishes, mainly at the Pont and Rhodes' drifts between patrols and watering parties, and at a Boer stronghold on the Rhodesian side of the Limpopo between these two drifts. Initially, with aggressive patrolling Plumer was able to disguise the weakness of his column, discouraging the Boers from crossing the Limpopo in strength.



Rhodesian Watering Patrol, Limpopo River, Tuli 1899. National Archives of Zimbabwe

The 21 October saw significant actions between patrols with a determined Boer effort to drive back Rhodesian forces, resulting in a number of casualties on both sides. Amidst rumours of a Boer thrust into Rhodesia from drifts along the Limpopo, on 22- 23 October, Plumer recalled his troops to Tuli and Macloutsie. However, fearing a trap, the Boers failed to push their advantage and abandoned the Limpopo Drifts, retiring towards the Brak River Store; others went south to Mafeking leaving only small manned outposts. Plumer misread this situation as following reports from patrols and

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<sup>25</sup> Brook, M. C., *Crocodile Pools Botswana - History and Biodiversity*, Botswana, 2011

local natives he believed the Boers would not advance in mass across the Limpopo. He therefore sent men back to the drifts where his patrols encountered significant numbers of Boers. However, Plumer still believed the majority of the Boers had retreated. He was proved very wrong when the two major actions of the Tuli campaign took place on 2 November at Plumer's advanced supply depot at Bryce's Store and Rhodes' Drift camp.<sup>26</sup>

The Boers launched a concerted attack with some 300-400 burghers, in two columns, across the Limpopo, to destroy the camp at Rhodes' Drift and take Fort Tuli. One column surprised the Rhodesians at Bryce's Store, who fled into the bush or surrendered. The Rhodesians at Rhodes Drift, informed of the attack on Bryce's Store, were given time to prepare. However, surrounded and after heavy firing and shelling for much of the day, they withdrew during the evening, making their way to Fort Tuli. Most of the Boer column under van Rensburg retired for the night back to Hendriksdal and so failed to push home their advantage on the defeated Rhodesians, although capturing much needed stores and animals. Failing to move on Fort Tuli was another serious tactical error by the Boers, one that probably cost them the war on this front.<sup>27</sup> Grobler felt he could take Tuli, although this was probably not a practical option with the coming of the rains and rising levels of the Limpopo. However, a divided council of war held back the initiative for an assault on Rhodesia. Grobler's plans were then turned down by Pretoria with the result that the North-West commando was reorganised, effectively abandoning the Northern Transvaal. A small force was left to guard the entire length of the Limpopo with the larger force recalled to Pretoria.<sup>28</sup> The force remaining on the frontier was divided into three main camps of 300 or 400 men each, the nearest to Fort Tuli being at the Brak River Store.

Concentrating his forces at Fort Tuli, Plumer launched a series of patrols along the flooded Limpopo especially in the direction of Bryce's Store, with occasional skirmishing. The last substantive action took place on 18 November when a Rhodesian patrol was ambushed on the Rhodes' Drift road. By late November, patrols

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<sup>26</sup> Powell, G, op cit, p.61. Moore, J, *Diary of Veterinary Captain J Moore*, 2 November 1899, courtesy of the Moore Family.

<sup>27</sup> Burrett, R., 'Events in the Tuli Area, Part 3, 'The Attacks on Bryce's Store and Rhodes Drift', *South African Military History Journal*, Vol.12, No.5, June 2003.

<sup>28</sup> These forces were considered better used elsewhere as Plumer's small Rhodesian force was not seen as a threat to the security of the ZAR.

found that Boer camps and fortifications had been deserted including Hendriksdal in the Transvaal. On 1 December, a strong Rhodesian patrol moved deep into the ZAR, some 50 miles (80 km) north of Pietersburg, but found virtually no Boers. Further patrols, again deep into the northern Transvaal, found a complete abandonment of the area. Despite this, the Rhodesians remained fearful of Boer attacks.<sup>29</sup> Ascertaining that the Boers had pulled back to Pietersburg and Pretoria, and that any invasion threat was minimal, Plumer departed from Fort Tuli, marching over 175 miles (282 km), to support operations in southern Bechuanaland, leaving a small force to guard the border.



Plumer with his Rhodesian Regiment, "Mochudi" (Molatwana) Station, 1900.  
National Archives of Zimbabwe

By 11 January 1900, Plumer's Column was north of Mochudi. Taking direct command of all troops in the field, he reached Gaborone on the 14th. Plumer could muster a maximum of about 1,000 men, including the sick, the lines of communication troops and men with the armoured trains. He remained short of artillery. He planned to take the offensive, drawing Boer forces away from Rhodesia and Mafeking, creating a nuisance value and probing towards Mafeking and its possible relief. The Boers retired from Gaborone on the 14th and on the 17th Plumer moved his men south establishing a base camp (Bird's) closer to Boer positions, occupying Fortress Kop and fortifying

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<sup>29</sup> Burrett, R., 'Gaborone and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902', *South African Military History Journal*, Vol.13, No.2, December 2004. Moore, op cit, 14 December 1899.

Basuto Kop (Fort Butters).<sup>30</sup> The Rhodesians worked at repairing the Metsemaswaane River bridge only to have this work destroyed repeatedly by Boere shelling. Between 16 January and 26 February, Plumer's force was engaged in skirmishes between patrols and artillery duels near the strategically vulnerable Crocodile Pools area of the railway line, about 10 miles (16 km) south of Gaborone.

Particularly fierce fighting took place with unsuccessful Rhodesian night attacks, on 2nd and 12 -14 February, against Fort Eloff on Sepitsi Hill. Plumer sustained his most serious casualties so far in the campaign, with no known Boer casualties. The Boers strengthened their defences on Mogagabe Hill and with some 200 reinforcements from Mafeking planned a surprise attack on the Rhodesians, but this was aborted when they were discovered by a Rhodesian patrol. The Boers then evacuated their position on 25 February retiring southward to Lobatse, another miscalculation, abandoning the most serious barrier to Plumer's advance. The Rhodesians occupied Sepitsi Hill, completing repairs to the Metsemaswaane River bridge and railway line; allowing the armoured trains to proceed as far as Ramoutsa, taking Lobatse 6 March, but losing it again on the 15th.



Damaged Metsemaswaane River bridge. National Archives of Botswana

With reinforced Boer forces from Mafeking opposing him, Plumer decided not to risk further advances and moved, 16 March, his dismounted men, under Holdsworth, to Crocodile Pools. Plumer took his mounted troops about 30 miles (48 km) west of Lobatse to Kanye, capital of Chief Bathoen's country, away from the railway line,

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<sup>30</sup> Moore, J., Ibid, 18 January 1900.

where he had prepared a well supplied depot with a 1,100 mile (1,770 km) supply line back to Beira. On the 21st Plumer moved to Sefhikile about 30 miles (48 km) west of Mafeking.<sup>31</sup> On the 26th, he made an incursion into the Transvaal to within 12 miles (19 km) of Zeerust, in the hope of drawing forces away from Mafeking. On the 31st with a force of about 350 men, he reconnoitred to within four miles (6 km) of Mafeking, but was severely mauled near Ramathlabama by a superior Boere force and fell backon Sefhikile.<sup>32</sup>

During April, Boer forces around Mafeking probably numbered some 3,000 burghers. Plumer's weakened force played a static role during April, building supplies at Kanye for an exodus of some 1,200 natives from Mafeking. Plumer was only able to muster about 500 healthy men until receiving, by 14 May, some 150 reinforcements from the BSAP, from the Rhodesian Frontier Force at Bulawayo 100 dismounted Queensland Mounted Infantry, and a Canadian battery of four guns. On 9 May, a Boer force arrived at Pietersburg with the object of proceeding to Seleka's to cut the north-south line of Plumer's communications and his means of reinforcement. However, these orders were countermanded and the force turned back.<sup>33</sup>

On 12 May Plumer was informed the Mafeking Relief Column under Colonel Mahon, about 1,149 strong, was expected on the Molopo river by the 15<sup>th</sup>. On 14 May he departed Sefhikile with about 800 men (450 mounted), marching some 28 miles (45 km) to make contact with Mahon early on the 15th, about 20 miles (32 km) west of Mafeking at Jan Massibi's farm. As the senior officer Mahon took command of the combined force, which he split into two columns, one under Plumer. On the 16th, Boer forces under Koos de la Rey were defeated and the relief force formally entered Mafeking on 17 May 1900.

Plumer with his Rhodesian Regiment departed Mafeking on the 19th via Lobatsi, occupying Zeerust on 28 May and Rustenburg on 14 June. The greater portion of the Regiment accompanied Plumer during July, August, and September, when it was

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<sup>31</sup> Plumer's Evidence before the *RCWSA*. Moore, J., op. cit, 18 March 1900

<sup>32</sup> British Library (Manuscripts) Weil Papers, Vol.IV 46851, Folio 270-541, Document 310, 31 March 1900.

<sup>33</sup> Parsons, op.cit, 1973, p.190.



disbanded, operating to the east of Rustenburg and to the north of Pretoria in the guerrilla campaign against De la Rey and Grobler.



"E" Troop of the Rhodesian Regiment before Major-General Baden-Powell, 17 May 1900 on the Relief of Mafeking by Major A. Lindemere. National Archives of Zimbabwe

The campaign on the North West Frontier was small in the overall scheme of the war but one would argue one of the most interesting of the minor operations during 1899-1900. This is certainly the case with regard to the maintenance of Rhodesian supply lines and communications. Plumer kept his force mobile and active in the field. Generally at a numerical disadvantage and woefully short of artillery, a not inconsiderable number of Boers were held in the north and north-west, and the energies of the force against Mafeking dissipated. However, Plumer was not successful in his principal engagements with the Boers. Crucially, he managed to keep the support of the majority of the native peoples. There was no invasion of Rhodesia. Mafeking did not fall and the important railway line to Bulawayo did not fall into Boer hands, other than in the contested area between Mafeking and Gaborone. Making all due allowances for disagreements between Boer leaders and the difficulties which confronted them, Plumer's Column successfully performed the mobile role delegated to it by Colonel Baden-Powell, Commander in Chief North West Frontier Force.