

1998

Otter's Wound and Other Matters: The "Debate" between William Dillon Otter and Lawrence Buchan

Serge Durflinger

University of Ottawa, durflinger@sympatico.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>

Recommended Citation

Durflinger, Serge "Otter's Wound and Other Matters: The "Debate" between William Dillon Otter and Lawrence Buchan." *Canadian Military History* 7, 4 (1998)

This Canadian War Museum Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Canadian Military History* by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Otter's Wound and Other Matters

The "Debate" Between William Dillon Otter and Lawrence Buchan

A Selection from the Archives of the Canadian War Museum

Serge Durflinger

The manuscript archives of the Canadian War Museum are a treasure trove. Major efforts are now underway to improve the collection's organization and accessibility to researchers. Previously little known and under utilized, the collection contains a remarkable diversity of documentation to support research into Canadian military history. The manuscript archives include letters, diaries, logbooks, service correspondence, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and a wide variety of other material donated over the years by hundreds of former military personnel or their families. The Canadian War Museum also maintains technical and institutional archives, musical records, maps and blueprints. Complementing these holdings are a splendid military history library, a collection of nearly 20,000 photographs, hundreds of war posters, and, arguably, the finest war art collection in the world.



service in South Africa in 1900. One of Buchan's letters contradicts the received version of certain events in South Africa, such as the details surrounding Otter's actions at Israel's Poort on 25 April 1900 and at Doornkop on 29 May 1900. Buchan's correspondence also provides new information and a new perspective regarding the personal relationships

existing among Canadian officers of the First Contingent.

Following the outbreak of war in South Africa in 1899, Otter was named Officer Commanding the Canadian Contingent, the 2nd (Special Service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, and he requested that Buchan be named second-in-command. Their active service together in South Africa soured their once close relationship. The reason for their falling out seemed to be an irreconcilable personality clash compounded by differences in leadership style while campaigning on the veldt. These differences were also noted by the other ranks, who clearly favoured "Good Old Larry," easy-going and cheerful, over Otter, the aloof and dour disciplinarian.

Scholars, citing the Otter Papers, have commented on the strained relationship. Carman Miller, in *Painting the Map Red*, clearly illustrated Otter's disdain for Buchan.³ Desmond Morton, Otter's biographer, similarly noted Otter's view that Buchan was a "disloyal" officer. Morton further stated that Otter grew to "detest" Buchan.⁴ The feeling was mutual.

From time to time, *Canadian Military History* will highlight items from these archives. The approaching centenary anniversary of the South African War (1899-1902) has helped determine the following selection. In addition to the original collection of the William Dillon Otter papers,¹ the museum also holds a fine manuscript collection on Lawrence Buchan,² Otter's adjutant in the 1880s and his second-in-command in South Africa, 1899-1900. The Buchan collection, previously unexamined by scholars, contains a wide variety of material, including letters written by him while on active

However, Miller, Morton and, more recently, Brian Reid⁵ have relied heavily on Otter's version of events regarding his conduct in South Africa. Absent from the record has been Buchan's voice on these matters. What follows is "both sides of the story." For Otter's, we reproduce excerpts from letters written by him to his wife, the relevant extracts from his published report on his command in South Africa and a brief extract from his pocket diary. For Buchan, we present a remarkably frank and acerbic letter he wrote to his daughter on 2 July 1900. In this unedited letter, an embittered Buchan dismisses journalistic accounts of Otter's actions and wounding at Israel's Poort and denounces Otter's [in]actions at Doornkop.

The engagement at Israel's Poort took place early in Lord Roberts's famous march to Pretoria and helped secure the area northeast of Bloemfontein. Miller refers to this operation as the Canadians' "toughest battle since Paardeberg."⁶ The action at Doornkop, the Canadians' bloodiest since Paardeberg, helped sweep away the Boer positions guarding the southwest approaches to Johannesburg. Otter had just returned from a month's convalescence following his wounding at Israel's Poort and, as Miller and Morton already have pointed out, admitted to his wife that he had taken care to avoid injury at Doornkop. As we shall see, Buchan indicates that Otter's precautions at this time went far beyond what has been assumed by historians.

The Otter Version

Israel's Poort:

Excerpt from Otter Report, Appendix A 4, O.C. 2nd Battalion, RCR, to Chief Staff Officer, Ottawa, April 28, 1900.⁷

Sir,

I have the honour to report upon the action at Israel's Poort on Wednesday, April 25, in which the battalion took part...

Leaving Momema Kopje, which is two miles to the east of the Bloemfontein waterworks, on the Modder River, at 9 a.m., of the 25th, [April] the battalion formed the advance guard to the 19th brigade. After moving about six miles the progress of the infantry was stopped for over two hours, while the mounted infantry and artillery reconnoitred and shelled several kopjes on our front and flanks occupied by the enemy. At about 2:30 p.m. instructions were given for the battalion to move forward, with an extended front of about 1,200 yards, and obtain possession, if possible, of a small kopje and the lower slopes of two others on either side of it, which lay immediately to our front, while the mounted infantry and the remainder of the 19th brigade were to make a detour to our left and threaten the right flank of the enemy, who it was found were occupying all the kopjes in the neighbourhood.

Forming the battalion into four double companies in extended order, with intervals of twelve paces, and 150 yards distance between double companies, the advance was made at 3 p.m....The first line was in charge of Major Pelletier, I being with him; the 3rd and 4th lines under supervision of Lt.-Col. Buchan.

After advancing about a mile, and just as we reached a wire fence extending across our front, about 600 yards from the centre kopje, a hot fire was opened up on us, and everyone took the best cover available at hand...

In directing the disposition of the first line I was obliged to remain standing for a few seconds, and immediately on sitting down I was struck with a bullet on the right side of my chin, which also passed through the right side of my neck, causing a slight flesh wound, while another passed through the badge on my right shoulder, but the wound was not sufficiently severe to prevent my remaining in command for the rest of the day...

For three quarters of an hour the battalion lay thus, under fire, to which its first line kept up a well controlled response. Finding the enemy's fire abating, and hearing the remainder of the brigade engaged on our left, I determined to advance, so reinforcing the first line, we moved forward, under a spluttering and weak attempt of the enemy to check us and which soon ceased, until we occupied the ground originally designated, and where the battalion ultimately went into bivouac for the night.



Lieutenant-Colonel Lawrence Buchan (left) and Lieutenant-Colonel William D. Otter (right). This photo was taken in South Africa in December 1900. Does Buchan's body language reflect the difficult relationship between the two men?

In connection with this small engagement, which did not occupy more than three hours from first to last, I am glad to report the excellent conduct of all ranks, and would specially beg to bring before your notice, the great assistance rendered me by Lieut. J.H.C. Ogilvy, my acting adjutant, whose energy and coolness was most conspicuous...

I have the honour to be, Sir,
Your obedient servant,
W.D. OTTER, Lt.-Col.
Commanding 2nd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment

Letter from Otter to his wife - excerpt.⁸

Bloemfontein
28 April/00

My Dear Molly,

...We moved forward and as Major Pelletier was in charge of the first line and I knew his excitable temperament I kept close up to him. After moving for about a mile we came to a wire fence with white stone posts about 700 yards from the foot of one of the kopjes and the Boers opened on us pretty hotly - of course we all dropped to the ground but as we had but little cover some of the men began to run back for better shelter and fearing that such might be taken by the enemy for cowardice and by our own men in rear for a retirement I stood up and [stayed] them. I had hardly sat down, half lying on my left side and looking to the front when something hit me on the right side of my chin and I thought my jaw was broken - I began to bleed

like fun but my faithful Ogilvy who was near ran over and bound me up with his red bandana and I was able to continue to direct until the forces on the left began to take them in the flank, when we advanced and took their position which ended the thing. Our good little French doctor Fiset came up and dressed me [and] found that the bullet had entered my chin and came out on the right side of my neck narrowly missing the jugular... I am none the worse, my pulse never quickened. They made a great fuss and insisted on my lying down on a stretcher with an awning...I forgot to say that the bullet that struck me...spoiled the badge on my right shoulder.. .on analyzing my own wound I am much satisfied that there were two bullets, the one hitting me the other going thru' my shoulder badge and that my escape was rather a marvellous one...

With Love to all
yours
Willie

Otter's pocket diary - excerpt⁹

25 April

...About 3 minutes after the firing began LCol Otter was wounded in the neck...After about half an hours' firing the first line was reinforced and then the whole Batt advanced and occupied the kopjes from which the Boers retired, Col Otter remaining in command till the last...

Doornkop

Excerpt from Otter Report, Appendix A 6, O.C. 2nd Battalion, RCR, to Chief Staff Officer, Ottawa, May 31, 1900.¹⁰

Sir,

I have the honour to report upon the action at Doornkop, which took place on the 29th inst., and in which the battalion took part...

Moving northward for nearly four hours, and then somewhat to the east, the whole infantry force was halted about noon at Klipriversberg, the enemy being found strongly posted on a line of heights, and holding the cavalry of General French from a further advance on the west side of Johannesburg. At 1.45 p.m. orders were received for the battalion to form a line of attack in conjunction with the Gordon Highlanders, on that part of the ridge occupied by the left flank of the enemy while the 21st Brigade moved against his right. At 2.30 p.m. the battalion moved forward in four lines, with intervals of 25 paces between men, and 150 yards distance between lines; the Gordon Highlanders being in a similar formation on our left. Our first two lines were placed under charge of Lt.-Col. Buchan, while Major Pelletier had immediate supervision of the third and fourth lines. Our advance began at a distance of about 3000 yards from the enemy's position, and was made over rolling ground...

At about 2000 yards the enemy opened upon us with rifle fire, and one of our men in the third line was severely wounded. Continuing the advance, the fire became hotter.. .A Kaffir hut surrounded by a stone wall on the face of the hill, offered good cover for our men, and a rush was made by fully one third of the battalion for its occupation, which was effected, though with a loss of three *or four* men wounded...It now became apparent that an attempt was being made to outflank us on our right, and I detailed one of the Maxim guns to open in this direction. This was effectively done under Lieutenant Hodgins' supervision, and in half an hour our flank was safe...

I regret to report [7] casualties, although when compared with those of the Gordon Highlanders, sincerely congratulate myself that they were not very much worse.

The enemy evidently considered the retention of this point as most important, and made every preparation to hold it; while its possession by our forces, no doubt, cleared the way for the peaceful entry of Johannesburg by Lord Roberts on the following day with the main army.

I cannot speak too highly of the conduct of all ranks of the battalion at this engagement, it being most quiet, steady and intelligent. Very little time was occupied, it taking less than three hours from beginning to end, owing to the spirited and determined way in which the attack was carried out.

I have the honour to be, sir,
Your obedient servant,
W.D. OTTER, Lieutenant-Colonel
Commanding Second Royal Canadian Regiment

*Letter from Otter to his wife - excerpt.*¹¹

Johannesburg 31 May/00

My Dear Molly,

...I had a very hearty reception from the regiment...I was just in time in rejoining the Battn as...I led it across the Vaal River, the first infantry corps of the army to cross into the Transvaal and then I came in for the fight on the 29th inst which was a very important one and though we got out of it with only seven wounded our neighbours the Gordons who were attacking the same heights as ourselves got fearfully cut up. Personally I was very careful of myself...

*Letter from Otter to his wife - excerpt.*¹²

Springs 20 miles east of Johannesburg
14 June 1900

My Dear Molly,

... I am afraid that friend! B. was at his old tricks when I was away - of course it is only from odd hints that I gather this and consequently cannot take any action...but if ever I learn positively that it has been so-well! Was ever a man so handicapped as I have been - the one who should be my greatest assistance I dare not trust...

The Buchan Version

*Letter from Lieutenant Colonel Lawrence Buchan to his daughter.*¹³

Springs, S.A.
July 2, 1900

My dear little Dotter,

Since writing the Mater yesterday I received her letter of 17 May. I think this may catch the mail so I just enclose clippings from the "Mail" and "Globe" of 30 April about Otter's action at Israel's Poort - or Yster Nek as we call it - with some comments thereon by myself. The facts are these. According to O's system of things it was the left half-Battalion's turn to lead that day so as he could not very well direct me to take Pelletiers 1/2 Battn and go ahead leaving my own 1/2 Battn, Pelletier was sent ahead in the attack and O. followed in the second line for his first time. I following in the third line also for the first time behind the first line for me. When fire opened from the kopjes at about 1500 yds my 3rd line was up with O's and P's 1st and 2nd lines, which were both in a small donga with an ordinary wire fence crossing it. There were no

"entanglements" or anything of the sort. I and my men were on their left and up somewhat in advance of them. I saw them retiring and rushed my men up further to counteract this going back on their part and got hold of a good position to hang on to whilst my men got breath and kept up a steady fire on the kops. Whilst doing so, O's pet-puppy Ogilvie [sic - Ogilvy] came over to me in an awful state of excitement and fright telling me the Col. was hit and all was lost if I did not go over and stop the panic in their part of the line. After making a few further inquiries from him and finding out that the Col was practically none the worse beyond loss of blood and excess of funk, I told him to go back and tell the Col I would stay where I was until I deemed it time to advance when I would take the whole Battn on and rush the kops. Also, that everything was allright and I had the men well in hand. When the flanking movement by the rest of our Brigade had sufficiently developed on our left I ordered a general advance of our fellows giving directions for certain Cos. to take certain kops. I knew by this time the enemy would offer little further opposition so I went over to see the Col and found him excited and bandaged as to his chin but otherwise quite as fit as I was, physically, and sitting in the cover of some long grass in a little donga and quite safe. I told him I had ordered a general advance and was going on, so I left him there about 4.30 pm. I went on with the men. We took the whole range of kops. I reported to Smith-Dorrien when he came up as to results and that the Col was slightly wounded in the first fire early in the afternoon and I had left him in the donga about 1500 yds back. This was about dusk 6 p.m. About half an hour afterwards the Co! was carried into our bivouac on a stretcher. He could have walked as well as I did. That is the true history of how he was "twice wounded whilst leading a charge". The bullet that struck his chin glanced onto his shoulder strap. That accounts for the twice wounded. The subsidised reporters and the pet-puppy Ogilvie, who is of the same kidney, account for the newspaper glorifications of this "gallant and brave officer". I am waiting to see the account of Domkop [sic] where both O and his pet-puppy were too scared to come forward with the Battn at all and only found us that night, long after dark, by accident. Thank goodness all in the Battn noticed their conduct on that occasion and can vouch for it if necessary. I don't mind who hears this true account of "Otters gallant conduct" but it is not for publication in the papers. The newspaper accounts are so palpably absurd I write this in self defence and for circulation amongst any of my friends who care to hear the facts and who may wonder what I have been doing all the time. The diary of my command from 26 April to 26 May will I suppose be published in due course, like O's, if he has not suppressed it: which I hardly think he would dare to do.

Good bye dear little girl with much love
from your aged
father

While the worsening antipathy between the two men might explain some of Buchan's invective, this heretofore hidden 'debate' between them will undoubtedly cause students of Canada's participation in the South African War to reinterpret Otter's oft-repeated version of these events.

Notes

1. Canadian War Museum [CWM] Archives, Otter Papers, Classification 58 A1, Volumes 101 and 102.
2. CWM Archives, 58 A1 6-6 through 6-9
3. Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal and Kingston: Canadian War Museum Publication No. 28 and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p.68.
4. Desmond Morton, *The Canadian General: Sir William Otter*, (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974), pp.182, 272-273.
5. Brian A. Reld, *Our Little Army in the Field: The Canadians in South Africa 1899-1902*, (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell, 1996), pp.72-73.
6. Miller, p. 124.
7. Canada, Department of Militia and Defence, *Supplementary Report, Organization, Equipment, Despatch and Service of the Canadian Contingents during the War in South Africa*, (Sessional Papers 35A, 1901), pp.48-49.
8. CWM Archives, Otter Papers, 58 A1 101-9
9. CWM Archives, Otter Papers, 58 A1 102-1
10. *Supplementary Report*, pp.54-55.
11. CWM Archives, Otter Papers, 58 A1 101-9
12. CWM Archives, Otter Papers, 58 A1 101-9
13. CWM Archives 58 A1 6-8.

Serge Durlfänger is an historian at the Canadian War Museum.