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British Soldier Shows At Spion Kop Battle His Fighting Qualities

Ambrose Bierce Says Up to That Time the Flower of England Had Not Displayed Any Remarkable Military Qualities in the South African War

Cites Cases Where Men Retreated From the Boers Instead of Holding Their Ground, and Asks if it Be True That the Nation is Decaying

Before withdrawing from Spion Kop the British troops, according to General Buller, endured a loss of 40 percent. To those who favour the British cause—and I am one of them—this is encouraging news. It breaks a long record of defeat without fighting and promotes the hope that the British soldier has begun to display soldierly qualities.

The first of soldierly qualities is the courage to fight and fight hard. Up to the day of Spion Kop there had been no hard fighting in South Africa. In all previous engagements either the attack or the defence has given way before its losses justified it in so doing. Generally speaking, it has been the attack, and, generally speaking, the British have done the attacking. The inevitable inference is that they have not fought as well as their antagonists.

It is all very well to talk about "terrific fighting" (as Lord Methuen ridiculously did), but there is one, and only one, infallible test of such civilian vaunting, namely: the percentage of killed and wounded. Fighting is not terrific where that is only 7 or 8 per cent of the troops actually engaged. Losses by capture in the open field do not count: they are presumptive evidence of feeble resistance. Great Britain can hardly point to her thousands of soldiers in Pretoria as proof of gallantry and endurance. If they had fought better when, by the blundering of her officers, they were cut off from their comrades, there would be fewer of them there.

Advantage of the Boers.

It is admitted that in the South African war (still gravely called the Transvaal war, although not a shot has been fired on Transvaal soil), the Boers and their allies have a tremendous advantage in everything but numbers. That has nothing to do with what we are considering—the fighting and staying qualities of the British soldiery. An enemy's advantage calls for greater sacrifices to overcome it, and these sacrifices are not yet in evidence. In the British defence of Spion Kop we have the sole exception, and even there the endurance seems to have been not voluntary, but compulsory—the defenders could not retire during daylight without extermination. As soon as they could safely retire they did, and they did well. In the general operation, in which that bloody affair was included, two-thirds of General Buller's army was engaged in an offensive movement against the enemy's position, and after more than a week's fighting gave it up and retreated, with a total loss of but a little more than 1,400.

As to the terrible Boer artillery, of which we hear so much in palliation of British defeat, it seems, excepting in the instance of Spion Kop, to have been about as harmless as the guns pitted against it. It is of record that it killed a dog in Mafeking and a child or two in Ladysmith, and it makes an appalling noise. And that is about all that artillery ever does in land fighting, except when working upon masses of contiguous fugitives too much preoccupied with important matters for remonstrance.

Bloody American Battles

In the American civil war it came to be expected that in a general engagement we should experience a loss of from 15 to 20 per cent. On certain parts of the field and in isolated fights a loss of 40 and 50 per cent was not so exceptional as to cause surprise. I have myself seen a small brigade of 1,500 men attack an intrenched enemy and, fighting a hopeless battle, lose 700 men in twenty minutes. Perhaps this is too exacting a standard. The battles of the American civil war were more bloody than any in modern history—possibly because Americans have a brutal and barbarous disregard of human life—as is seen in our nearly 10,000 homicides annually, mostly unpunished. But compare the English at Maagersfontein and Badajose and Colenso with the English at Balaklava and Sebastopol. I will not take into consideration such battles as that at Omdurman, between "Tommy Atkins" and the war-like, but unmilitary "Fuzzy-Wuzzy," who, if he once "broke a British square" was nevertheless an easy prey to the British machine gunner. There is nothing—can be nothing—in such work to justify the British boast, as made by a sympathetic poet:

> We are the men that were the men
> Of Malplaquet and Agincourt.

Of course it is understood that modern long-range cannon, small arms of "precision" and other "destructive weapons" have materially reduced the mortality in battle from what it was when men fought hand to hand with sword and spear—even from what it was when the cavalryman's saber and infantryman's bayonet had more than a moral purpose. When it is possible to fight at a distance measured by the thousand yards most of the fighting will be done at that distance and will be comparatively innocuous; but the least an army suffers from an enemy's fire the longer it ought to hold out. It can stand and fire till it loses as many men as it wants to. My point is that the British don't seem to want to lose very many of themselves, at either long-range "sniping" or "infighting" on a parapet. As long as an assailant is not himself dead or disabled he can go forward if he will. It is simply a question when to quit. In the South African war there has been too much early quitting. Of course it has been always explained; but what cannot be explained is the necessity of so much explanation.

What Does It All Mean?

What does it all mean? For one thing, obviously enough, incapable generalship. For another, only less obviously, defective organization. But is there another element? It is to be remembered that in most of the collisions which resulted in failure of the British attacks the men have not been recalled from the enemy's glacis; no command has been given by their generals for them to retire from a hopeless task, and none could have reached them if it had been given.

They gave it up of their own motion, scuttling back to their own lines one by one, as opportunity presented: and excepting in instances of such needless surprise or ambuscade as that in which Wauchope fell, they did this without having suffered any very great loss in killed and wounded. Is it possible that the unfriendly German critics are right—that England, like Spain and many another nation, is already taking her turn at military decadence as all must eventually do? Is her power on the wane? That power has always been not her wealth, not her vast sea armament, not her enlightened institutions, but the courage and devotion of her sons. Are these failing her? Amongst her many resources can she no longer count upon that first and last line of aggression and defence, the breasts of her soldiers?

I am not prepared to believe it. I hold and hope to continue to hold my life-long conviction that next to the incomparable Turk the Englishman is the best fighter in the world. Certainly he was two generations ago, and it is difficult to think that while his empire has been extending itself to so stupendous dimensions, his ships multiplying themselves incalculably on every sea and his capital dictating the commercial and financial policies of the world, he has himself sunk to the low estate of a military degenerate. But in candor it must be confessed that all the current explanations of the paralysis of the British arms in South Africa leave something to be desired—fall somewhere short of entire adequacy. If the British soldier has really become the base and vulgar brute that Mr. Kipling delights proudly to paint him, all is clear.