

THE BIG GUNS OF THE BOER WAR

By WJ Havenga

The Second Anglo Boer War centenary celebrations took place in 2001, and since then we saw a flow of new historical writings on the subject. These writings just illustrate how the great battle between the South African Boers (Burghers) and the British of more than a hundred years ago continue to exercise a fascination. The Anglo Boer war was not just another war. It was a war that happened in a very exciting time in our history, the beginning of the technological age. The most fascinating question of this war was probably how the **60,291** Boer Burghers (untrained, unskilled and undisciplined) could hold the **458,610** well trained soldiers of the British at bay for so long. The answer might lie in the fact that the British seriously underestimated the fire power of the **BIG GUNS** of the Boers.

The secret weapon of the Boers that made a big difference was the legendary **LONG TOM**. The 155mm Creosot gun, earned this nickname (given by the British) due to due to the long barrel and its long firing range. President Paul Kruger was not very pleased with this name, but it soon became a popular word on everybody's lips and there was nothing he could do about it. Kruger imported these guns from Schneider & Co in Creosot (France) in 1886, mainly to serve as fortress guns to protect the city of Pretoria from enemy attacks. Each of the four Long Toms ordered was supplied complete with 8000 shells. This was an excellent fortress gun, because when elevated, the 94 lb (42,6 kg) shells could **fired at a distance of about 11 000 yards** (10 154 m), which was the longest range of any gun in use during that time. Each of the four guns received a name based on the name of the hill on which the fortresses were positioned, intended to defend the main approaches to Pretoria, namely [Wonderboompoort](#), [Klapperkop](#), [Schanzkop](#), and [Daspoort](#). Recoil goes hand in hand with a heavy firing power. To keep the big gun in position after a shot it had to be mounted on a special base plate with the brakes bolted down. Later during one of the wars the Boers used these pieces in action without a base plate, which send the gun running backwards for 40 meters. The Boers then realized that this was a good strategy to use when they need to retreat quickly.

When war broke out between Britain and the Boer Republics in September 1899, the Boer War Council worked out their careful plans to attack the British forces. They decided to attack the two main forces in Ladysmith and Dundee. It was only

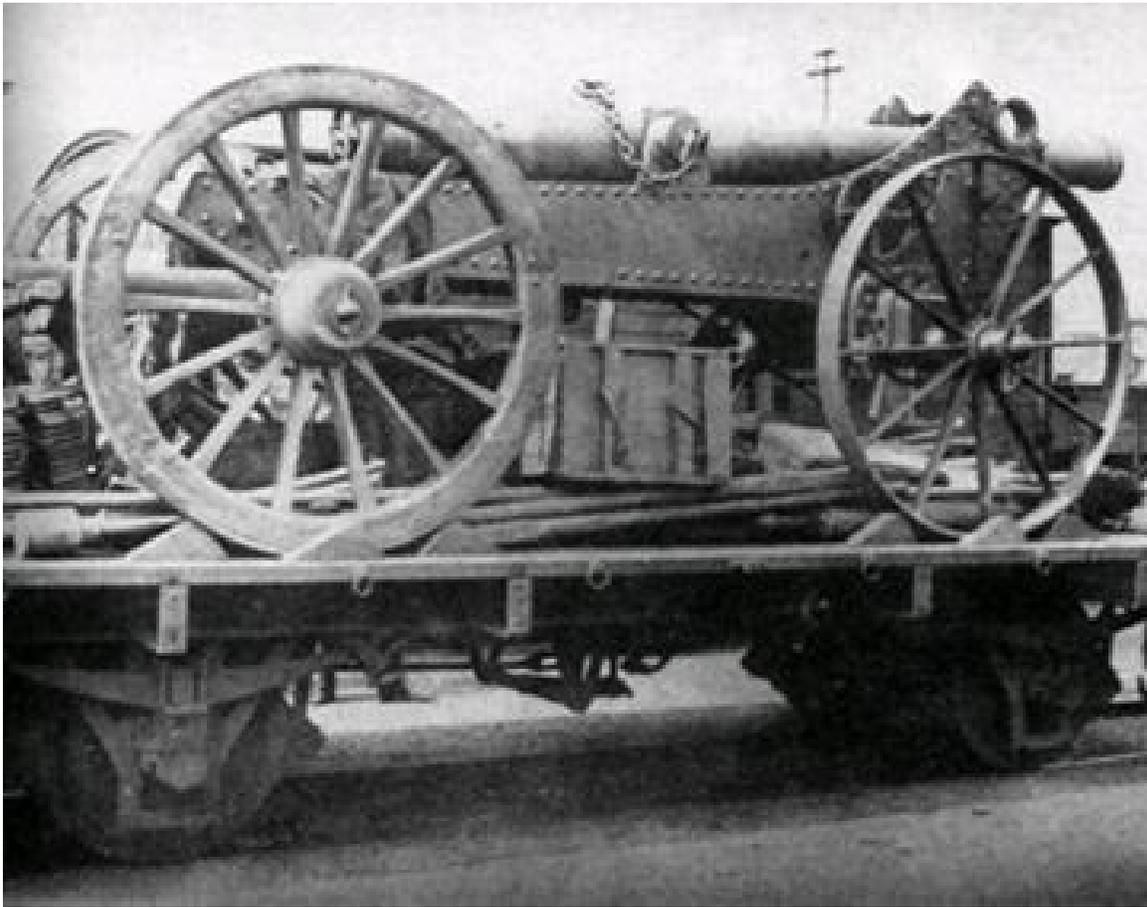
then that the council decided to send two Long Toms to the battlefield. These guns were certainly not designed as a field gun and the British nowhere nearly imagined to find themselves end up in a duel with these guns.



A member of the State Artillery with a Long Tom (Taken from Media Makers, a Photo Album of the Anglo Boer War)

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome was the weight of these heavy guns, as each gun weighed nearly 7 tons. The ammunition of a Long Tom was just as heavy as the gun itself, weighing about 40kg each. It was beyond everybody's imagination that these guns could be transported over rough terrain to the battlefield, and definitely not up a mountain. Twelve to fourteen oxen were required to pull these guns on level ground, and up to another twenty to forty oxen were required for steep angles or difficult terrain. But the Boers made a plan. They were initially transported by rail as far as possible and only later pulled by a

carriage and oxen. These guns then arrived in Natal by rail during October 1899, and they were eventually dragged to the battle fields with great success and with the admiration of the British gunners.



A Long Tom Ready for transportation by rail (Taken from Media Makers, a Photo Album of the Anglo Boer War)

Already during the first battles in Natal, the British forces realized that their own artillery were much inferior to the long range Boer guns. After the successes at Elandslaagte and Rietfontein, Joubert and the State Artillery were moving to Ladysmith across from Dundee, and the Free Staters were to the north and west. The two forces eventually united to attack General White in Ladysmith. The main difficulty that both armies experienced in this area was of course the geography. There are plenty of **hills, up's and down's**, with the **Tugela river twisting through the area**. To move the LONG TOMS was not easy, but they did it. To

make things worse, they also had to reckon with an occasional thick blanket of mist that caused **bad visibility, and** then the **regular rain, hail** and **thunderstorms**. They even had to cross a river! This of course did not discourage the State Artillery and they reached the area of Ladysmith. The next challenge was to haul the heavy guns up the steep and slippery hills. Astonishingly the also succeeded with this operation, and the Boers soon occupied a few strategical positions on the hills around Ladysmith.



The State Artillery moving a Long Tom to Ladysmith. (Taken from Media Makers, a Photo Album of the Anglo Boer War)

The siege of Ladysmith was slowly falling into place. The commandos soon occupied Umbulwana, Pepworth, and Nicholsnek. From this high ground they had a good view on the town of Ladysmith during fine and clear days. The initial position of the State Artillery was upon one of the spurs of Signal Hill, where they had two 75mm Krupp guns and three other lighter guns Commandant S.P.E Trichard was in charge of the 1st Battery of the State Artillery and Mayor Wolmarans in charge of the 2nd Battery. As the day went on, the artillery strength on the hills around Ladysmith increased steadily. Some guns were positioned on Pepworth Hill, including a **Long Tom**. The activities on Pepworth (3 miles away)

were clearly visible from Ladysmith, and the British observed the operations with astonishment. The British did not have guns that were a match for the BIG GUNS of the Boers. White did order some long range Navel guns from Captain Percy Scott, but they were still underway. The Republican forces of Joubert were positioned in a half circle from the north to the south east of Ladysmith. During the day General Joubert joined up with Christiaan de Wet. On his arrival it was settled that the Transvalers should proceed to the north of Ladysmith and occupy positions on the east of Nicholson's Nek, whilst the Free Staters were to go to the west and north-west of that town.



Boer artillery firing into Ladysmith

Surrounded by Boer commandos and artillery, the town of Ladysmith was captured in a siege, a typical Boer strategy. The LONG TOMS unfortunately had a big drawback, it still used **black powder**. A cloud of white smoke could be seen from a long distance after each shot. This, unfortunately, revealed its position. It has been said that the Long Tom that was used to pound the besieged town of Ladysmith, took 30 seconds from the time that its white puff was sighted by a lookout, to when the heavy projectile slammed into the town. It was not long

before the smoke from the LONG TOM revealed its position to the British. The State Artillery guns on Pepworth hill showed extraordinary courage during this battle. They kept their positions at a stage when the British artillery managed to launch a very fierce and intensive attack on them. The crest of the hill was literally transformed into a continuous **blaze of exploding bombs, bursting shells and flying shrapnel**. The gunners kept on serving the guns until very badly or mortally wounded. Some of them even continued fighting even though they lost an arm or hand.

Dr Holts, from the medical personnel of the State Artillery was desperately helping the wounded gunners until he was also killed by a shell. With only a few guns, the State Artillery managed to hold their ground along the fighting front of almost eleven kilometers long. They became both feared and famous during the conflict, and many stories about these guns still remain to this day. It later became evident that the heavy firing power and long range of the Long Toms made life very difficult for the British Army.

story often told is how, on Christmas day, the Boers had shot a Long Tom shell off to Kimberley. Upon digging up the shell from the place where it had struck, the souvenir-hunters discovered, to their utter astonishment, a small token of the Boers' unique sense of humor. The shell contained a Christmas pudding, neatly wrapped in a Union Jack, with the words: "Compliments of the Season," written on it!⁹

The Boers also had a mournful day on the 9th of December. During the nights, groups of British soldiers would sneak out of the besieged town to try and harm the Boers. During the night of 9 December, such a party of daring soldiers had snuck out and managed to sneak up Lombards Hill. The State Artillery gunners were taking a break from the long day of serving the Long Tom near Gun Hill and the Bronkhorstspuit Commando were to take over the watch. They fell asleep themselves, leaving the Long Tom unguarded and allowing the British soldiers to sneak past them and capture the gun. Luckily (due to its size) the British soldiers could not move it, but only removed the breech screw and then damaged the breech and muzzle by shoving a bundle of gun cotton down its throat and firing it off. To add insult to injury they then absconded with its sponges, the immensely heavy and all-important breech-block, and the gun sight, still sighted at 8,000 metres! The Boers had to send their heavy weight champion off to Pretoria, where the damaged part was cut off, and the barrel shortened.

These repairs were done by the workshop of the Dutch South African Railway Company. After that, this Long Tom became widely known as "The Jew!"

Since then the night of 9 December was remembered as the “night of disgrace”. As punishment the State Artillery members had to abstain from sleeping on the night of 9th December. This “punishment” is still one of the voluntary traditions of the Transvaal State Artillery today.



THE JEW - The Long Tom with the shortened barrel that was send for repairs to Pretoria during the war. (Taken from Media Makers, a Photo Album of the Anglo Boer War)

During the early stages of the Anglo Boer War, the British were outraged by the guns of the State Artillery. It took the commanding officers (e.g. Buller) some time to realize that they were hampered with this out-of-date military strategy, and that this strategy did not work against the Boer strategies. It often resulted in many

casualties and deaths as the Boers were equipped with quick firing rifles and were excellent marksmen. The British also had the disadvantage that some of their weapons were fast becoming obsolete. At this stage they called for the navy's assistance. The re-enforcement of the forces with naval guns was later described as 'the guns which saved Ladysmith.' Later, the heavy guns were used, but in penny packets 'because they were there', and not in their proper roles.



The first of the heavy 4,7" naval guns taken from the ship HMS Terrible . ¹¹

Captain Percy Scott was the navy's foremost gunnery expert at that time, and he had to decide which gun to provide. It had to be a gun with a greater range than that available to the army at that stage and which could deal with the Boer guns. One of his options was to use guns held in the various depots ashore and guns mounted in the ships of the Cape Squadron, although these guns were not normally considered for use ashore. His first choice was the 12-pounder 12-cwt Quick Firing gun. This gun was specially designed for use against torpedo boats. With a range of 8000 yards (7385 m) for common shell and 4500 yards (4154 m) for shrapnel, it would be able to hold its own against the modern guns of the *State Artillery*. Scott bought a pair of Cape wagon wheels, and an axletree. The carpenter, shipwrights and blacksmiths worked around the clock and in 24 hours the first gun was ready. Although the result looked amateurish, it worked, and

some trial rounds were fired to ensure that all was well. In the face of some official obstruction, Scott produced four guns by 25 October. Longer in the barrel (and in range) than the army's 12-prs, these guns were soon to be known as '**Long 12s**'.

But it was the **LONG TOMS** that became legendary and served the Boer forces well. Unfortunately the British were smart enough to prevent new ammunition from reaching the Republics. It was only a matter of time before the 8000 rounds per gun became depleted. The Boers then had no choice other than to destroy the guns themselves in fear that they will fall in the hands of the British forces. They were destroyed at the following places:

1. Komatipoort on the Mozambican border – 22 September 1900
2. Letabadrift near Haenertsburg - 18 October 1900
3. Rietfontein near Lydenburg – 16 April 1901
4. Feeskop outside Haenertsburg – 30 April 1901

To read the full story of the "**Secrets of the Boer War Gunners**",

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