

Coleskop

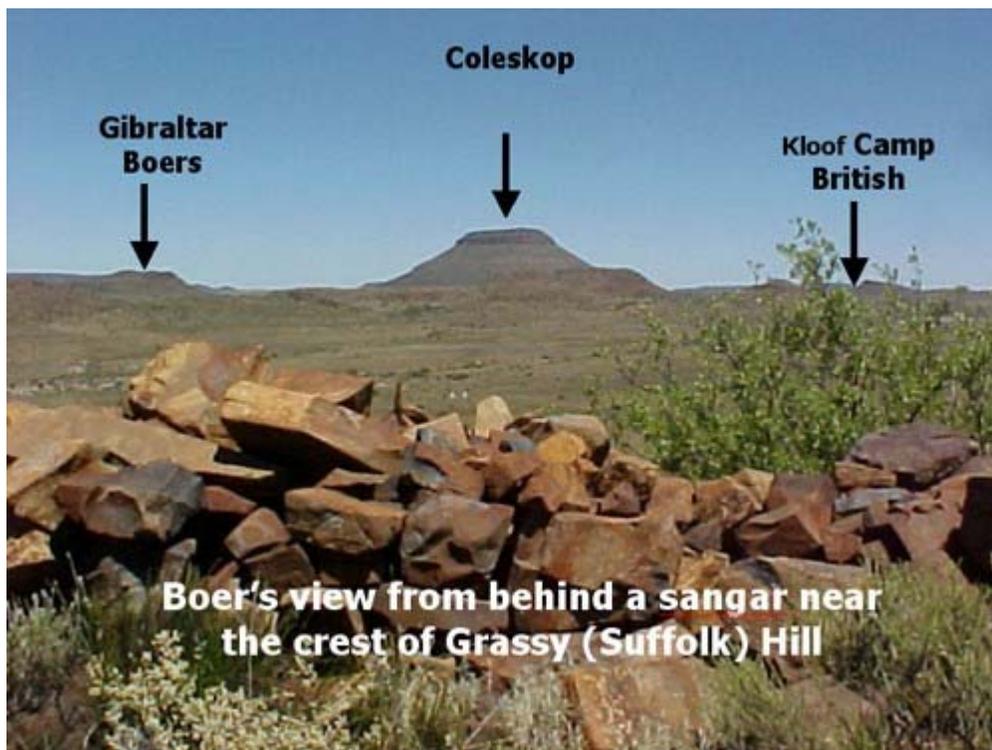
Colesberg Actions

during the Anglo-Boer War (1899 – 1902)

Boer forces under Generals Schoeman and Grobler marched into Colesberg unopposed on Tuesday 14th November 1899. To stop this advance into the Cape as quickly as possible, Sir Redvers Buller sent Lieutenant-General J.D.P. French Commanding Cavalry Division, to Noupoot with orders to remove the Boers in and around Colesberg and push them back over the Orange River.

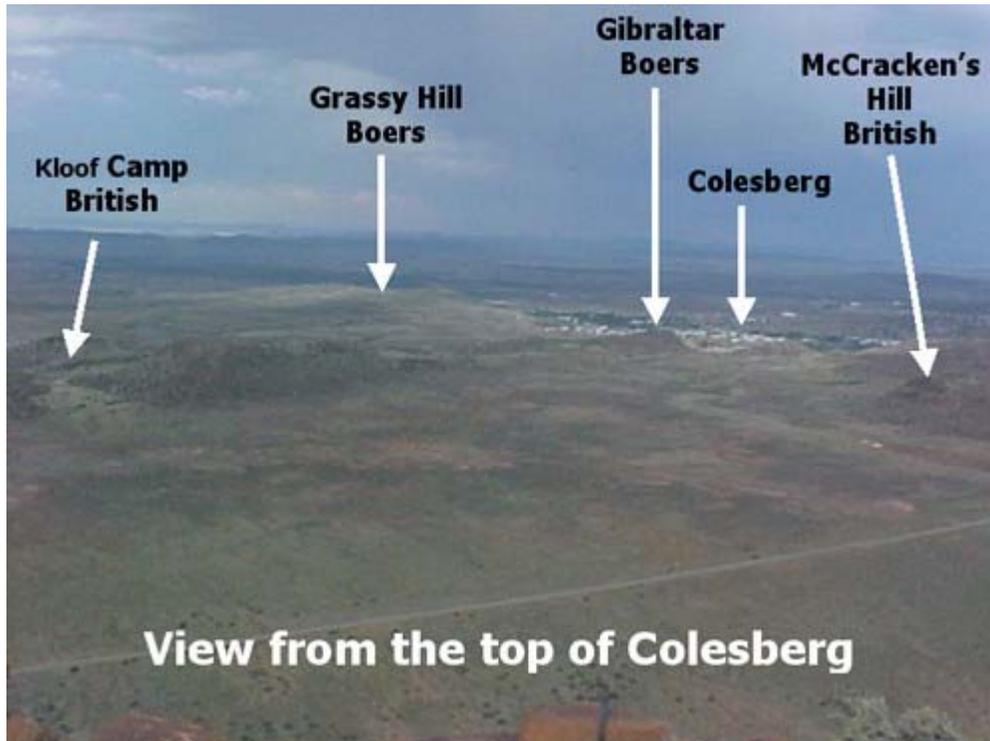
General French pushed forward and by the 30th of December he had advanced to Rensberg. On Monday 1st January he reached Coleskop, which stood 364m high, in the centre of an open plain, affording French a wide view of Colesberg and the Boer positions around it. By 4th January, the British had gained more ground – Colesberg was almost surrounded.

From his position at the top of Coleskop it had become apparent to General French that the capture of a koppie (Grassy Hill, now known as Suffolk Hill) north-west of Colesberg, would have cut of the Boer supply lines over the Orange River, along the roads to the Wagon Bridge, Botha's Drift and Norval's Pont.



In response to General Schoemans appeal for reinforcements, General De La Rey arrived in

Colesberg on the 10th January 1900 with a force of about 1,000 men. He set up camp north east of **Colesberg**, where he soon proved himself to be a formidable opponent. General French realised that he was up against a strong adversary and moved troops east of **Colesberg** to Slingsfontein Camp and sent for reinforcements. In response to this request, Roberts sent over three thousand infantry to strengthen the British forces around **Colesberg**. This was said to bring the total number of men to almost eight thousand. Boer forces were estimated at just over five thousand.



Every year at **Colesberg**, on the nearest weekend to the 11th January, the 6 LAA (Light Anti-Aircraft) Regiment commemorate their affiliation to 14 (Coles Kop) Air Defence Battery. In England, on the same date, the 14 (Coles Kop) Air Defence Battery celebrates "Coles Kop Day".

The 14 Battery bears the honour title for hauling two 15-pounder guns to the top of **Coleskop** (1706 m. above sea level) on 11th January 1900, during General French's unsuccessful attempts to remove the Boers from **Colesberg**.

General French reached the top of **Coleskop** on 1st January 1900. In his report to Lord Roberts he wrote:

"About 2000 yards west of the centre of the western face is a hill called 'Kols Kop', of great height, commanding the whole country for many miles round. It stands quite isolated in the centre of a large plain."

From the top of **Coleskop** General French was now able to communicate with his forces by heliograph and telegraph.

Extract from a letter from Ernest Murray written from the top of **Coleskop** - published in a Wick paper - John O'Groat Journal (Feb. 1900):

(On 2nd Jan.) - "We ran a telegraph wire (insulated cable) right up (**Coleskop**) and were

finished 12 midday. I slept in one blanket with another fellow who was to work an office at the bottom. Next day we had a look round. The sight was worth the trouble. We could see the town of **Colesberg** (President Kruger's birthplace), and all the Boer laagers around it."

French's plans went well and by 4th January the British had gained more ground - **Colesberg** was almost surrounded. Alarmed by the British advance, Schoeman had asked Commandant Naude to telegraph for reinforcements, reporting that the big hill, (**Coleskop**), very near the town had been captured by the enemy. He stated that the British had up to 35 guns and that his positions were being shelled from all sides. He gave his casualties up until January as 5 killed and 9 wounded. Gen Grobler, who was positioned at the **Colesberg** Bridge, also telegraphed for reinforcements.

On the 11th January 1900, Major A.E.A. Butcher Commanding the 4th battery field-artillery (now 14 (**Coles Kop**) Air Defence Battery), assisted by The Royal Engineers and 50 men from the Essex Regiment dragged a 15-pounder to the summit of **Coleskop**, a sheer and almost inaccessible height rising 800 feet from the plain. Ropes were attached to each side of the gun with 50 men to each rope and by pulling on the ropes to order, the guns were successfully hauled into place in three hours. Shelling commenced at a range of 5,100 yards, increased by the extreme elevation to 7,000 yards. This was followed by a second field gun on the 16th January 1900.



Because the loose stones and rocks made the hauling of food, water and ammunition an arduous task, an ammunition lift 1,400 feet long, made of 7 strand railway fencing wire was rigged up from the bottom to the top of **Coleskop**. 24ft rails were erected at the top and bottom as uprights. A second lift was made later by fixing a large drum between the two uprights on the top so that both lifts could be worked with the same hauling wire.



The two field guns did considerable damage to the Boer laagers around the town. The following extract comes from a letter, written by E J Murray writing to his father in England. It gives his account of the advantage gained when the two guns opened fire on the Boer laagers around the town:

"About a week or ten days ago we got two guns up here; it took over a hundred men to drag them up. When we opened fire on Boer laagers from this height there was great commotion amongst them and they could not understand it (we were firing with smokeless powder), because days they did not know where it was coming from. We must have got up two lyddite guns, but they don't work such wonders as we were inclined to believe. Of course when they do get amongst them they do some damage".

(Lyddite was a highly explosive shell, but the blast was too concentrated and failed to make much impression against the Boers, who spread their troops out, making use of natural cover). As a result of this several Boer camps had to be moved out of range of the **Coleskop** guns. The town was not directly shelled, because of the British residents and prisoners housed there, yet people living in the town reported that during January and February the streets in the town were not safe because of the bullets "flying about."

The remains of one of the 15-pounders can be seen in the **Colesberg** Museum. This field-gun was kept in action until the last moments of a Boer attack and finally pushed over the edge to save it from capture.

On January 29th Lord Roberts summoned General French to Cape Town, and entrusted to him the responsible task of relieving Kimberley. When General French left for Cape Town on

January 29th, the Boers, strongly entrenched, held **Colesberg** with about 8,000 men, five field guns, two long-range guns, and five smaller quick-firers; there was also a big gun at **Colesberg** and one at Achtertang. Any effort to dislodge them would have required the whole attention of a much larger force than was then available.

On 3rd February General French returned to Rensberg, and on the 6th was on his way to Modder River with his cavalry. His departure left a considerably smaller, less mobile force under General Clements, who had replaced General French.

Well aware of this Gen de la Rey renewed his attacks and by the 14th February 1900 he succeeded in driving the 6,000 remaining British troops back to Arundel – the position General French had started from just under three months before.

But this victory was short lived - three days later Lord Roberts' army attacked the Boers at Paardeberg. In **Colesberg**, alarmed by Roberts' advance into the Free State, Pres Stein ordered De la Rey to withdraw with 1500 men to take part in the rescue of Cronje and the main force of Boers.

The loss of De la Rey and a weakened Boer force under the passive General Schoeman, enabled General Clements to move out of his defensive position at Arundel.

By the 28th February 1900 the Boers retreated, making it possible for Clements' troops to march into the town and raise the British flag over the Magistrates Court. For the remaining years of the war British troops under Lieutenant Colonel R Holden, remained in **Colesberg** to safe guard the position.

Camps were placed at strategic positions in the district stretching from the Orange River to Noupoot – e.g. Plateau Camp. Defensive fortifications, blockhouses and walls were erected around the town and along the railway lines. These fortifications were often under attack as encounters with the **Colesberg** rebels in the area continued to cause the British endless problems. In 1901 five of these rebels were executed at **Colesberg**.

In and around **Colesberg**, cairns, graves, walls, blockhouses, names scratched on rocks and other war debris are all that remains of the actions that took place here during the Anglo-Boer War.

Major C S G Smith R A, visited **Colesberg** in 1989 and climbed to the top of **Coleskop**. After this visit he wrote an article in the Gunner, Issue Number 222, May 1989, in which he claimed to have found a circle of rocks that he thought could be the exact gun position.