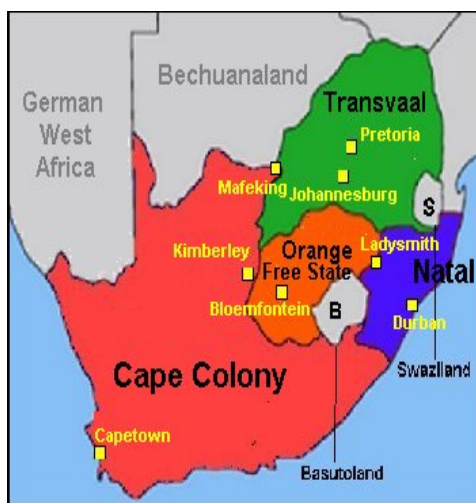


## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

---

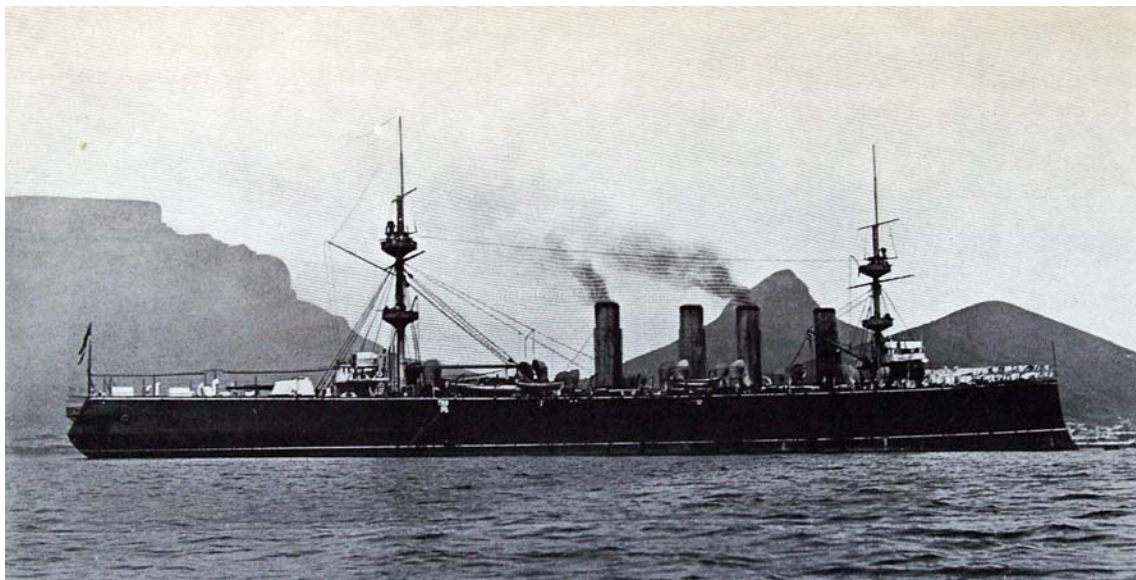
As a researcher of the Colenso family, my interest in the Boer War battle, just outside of the village of Colenso, named for the first Bishop of Natal, is easy to understand. Many British children were named after this battle – a loss. Recent research into why there are so many called *Colenso Jones*, led me to *Edward Pitcairn Jones* – a Tasmanian-born Royal Naval captain who commanded naval guns at Colenso. This led to the question of why, despite the description of ‘*the British army as a projectile that should be fired by the Royal Navy*’, at the beginning of the second Anglo-Boer War the Royal Navy was firing projectiles for the British Army?<sup>1</sup>

This war began on October 11, 1899, when the Boers of the Transvaal and Orange Free State declared war on the British colonial forces of South Africa. Ladysmith, on the border of Natal and Orange Free State, was one of the towns under immediate attack. The garrison commander, General Sir George White, after observing the Boer artillery advancing on Ladysmith, urgently requested naval guns with sufficient range.



The Boers had acquired four 155mm Creusots (Long Toms), six 75mm Creusots and eight 75mm Krupp QF guns. All of these were more modern than the British 15-pounders and their performance was much better. The Long Toms were sent to the battle-front - the Boers moved these 5-ton guns over difficult terrain. They fired a 94 lb shell about 11,000 yards.

A first class cruiser, *HMS Powerful*, returning from China, was in the dockyard at Simonstown (near Cape Town). She was joined by *HMS Terrible*, on her way to China, 3 days later. Their guns were available, but had no suitable mounting for their use on land.



**HMS TERRIBLE**, a first class cruiser of 14,200 tons. Commissioned at Portsmouth 24 March 1898 for the China Station.

---

<sup>1</sup> Attributed to Sir Edward Grey (1862-1933), British Foreign Secretary 1905 to 1916. Unable to establish the context.

---

## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

---

Fortunately *Terrible's* captain, Percy Scott RN, was a gunnery specialist with more than twenty years experience. Overnight, using only what was available at the dockyard, Scott drew up plans for the mountings and within 48 hours had overseen the fabrication of mobile carriages for the 4.7-inch guns. Within another 24 hour period the mountings for the long naval 12-pounder guns were also fabricated.

During trials the 4.7-inch and 12-pounder guns were proven to fire projectiles to 12,000 and 9,000 yards respectively. Further guns were converted and in the interim a naval brigade of sailors and marines from the British fleet in Simonstown began practising with the guns on the 17, 18 and 19 October.

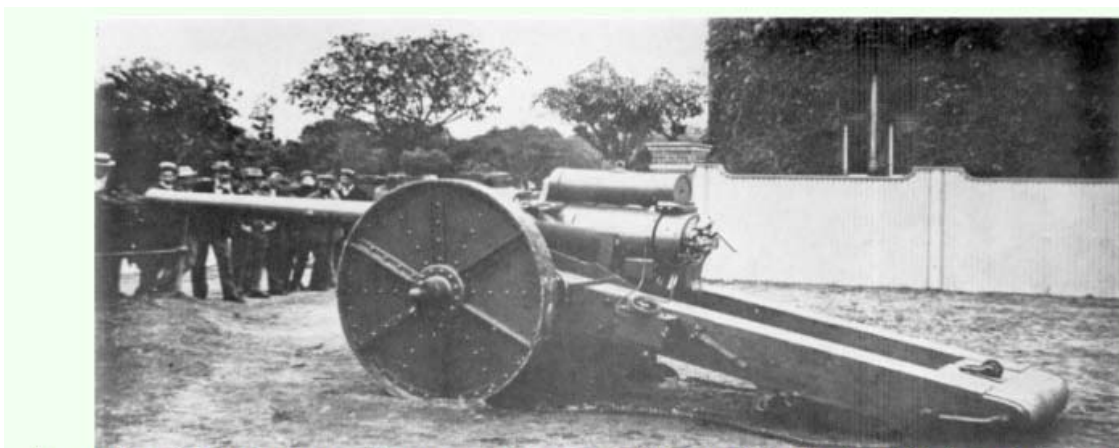
The available ships were:

- HMS Doris Light Cruiser Flagship - Cape of Good Hope Station
- HMS *Terrible* 1st Class Cruiser
- HMS *Powerful* 1st Class Cruiser
- HMS *Philomel* Light Cruiser
- HMS *Forte* Light Cruiser
- HMS *Barossa* 3rd Class Cruiser
- HMS *Tartar* Torpedo Cruiser (later HMS *Monarch*)



### First Naval Brigade

*Powerful* with guns and brigade embarked, arrived in Durban on October 28. The following day the brigade, navy whites substituted by khaki, left Durban by rail for Ladysmith. Under the command of *Powerful's* Captain Hedworth Lambton, they took two 4.7-inch guns, four long-range 12-pounders, 4 maxim guns and ammunition. Their train was the last to reach Ladysmith, on October 30, before the Boer siege began. By November 3 the town was encircled.



*4,7 in QF on platform mounting. Two guns on mountings of this type helped to defend Ladysmith during the Siege*

---

# Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

---

## Second Naval Brigade

A second naval brigade, under Commander Alfred Ethelston, proceeded by rail from Simonstown, via Capetown, to Stormberg Junction and then to Queenstown before returning to Simonstown on November 19, without firing a shot. This brigade was reinforced and joined British forces, by rail, at Witteputs and was involved in a number of major battles in the Cape Colony and Orange Free State on its way to breaking the siege at Kimberley. This brigade was commanded originally by Captain Reginald Prothero (wounded at Graspan) and then by Captain John Bearcroft.

At the battle of Modder River one of the brigade's 12-pounders gun crews was commanded by Lieutenant Commander William Jarvie Colquhoun (1859-1908), a member of the Victorian naval forces who had been given leave to accompany the 1st Victorian army contingent to South Africa.

A Victorian, Major G J Johnston, described his resourcefulness in a newspaper article:

*He never bothered a bit about red tape and consequently he staggered some of the Imperial officers a good deal. At Bloemfontein for example his battery had lost a gun somewhere they sent Colquhoun to find it. After scouring the whole country for a week he found the missing gun on a truck in a siding at a small roadside station away south of Bloemfontein. How to get it back was the trouble because all the traffic was stopped except the hospital trains. But it happened that a special train consisting of just an engine and one carriage came up the line, bound for Bloemfontein and containing no less a personage than Sir Alfred Milner who was travelling in state to visit the captured capital. Colquhoun was entirely regardless of appearances he only knew he wanted to get his gun back to Bloemfontein. Sir Alfred Milner's special carriage stopped for minute or two at the roadside station, the enterprising Colquhoun managed to hook his little truck behind it and the High Commissioner made his State entry into Bloemfontein dragging missing gun and the audacious Victorian behind him.<sup>2</sup>*

Some British officers complained that only an Australian could get away with this sort of behaviour.



Lieutenant Colquhoun

---

<sup>2</sup> "The Fortunes of War", *The Argus*, June 12, 1900



# Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

---

## Defence of Durban

Captain Scott was appointed military Commandant of Durban. *Terrible* immediately sailed for Durban arriving on the 7<sup>th</sup> November. In his words:

*On the morning of the 8th the defence force, consisting of 30 guns and 450 officers and men, under the supreme command of Commander Limpus, ranked up in the main street of Durban. By ten o'clock the 100 bullocks and 60 horses were spanned-in to the guns and waggons. Commander Limpus reported that he was ready. I sounded the advance from the Town Hall, the band played "A Life on the Ocean Wave," and the little army started. Prince Christian Victor, with the Mayor of Durban and other civic dignitaries, watched the procession with me from the Town Hall, and the loyal Natalians cheered to the echo. The sailors, in khaki and khaki-coloured straw hats, looked very well. The officers were similarly dressed, but carried a telescope instead of a sword. I thought it would be more useful, and it turned out to be so.<sup>3</sup>*



DEFENCE OF DURBAN.  
"TERRIBLE'S" CYCLIST SECTION OF DURBAN DEFENCE FORCE.

---

<sup>3</sup> Scott, *Fifty Years in the Royal Navy*, 106.

## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

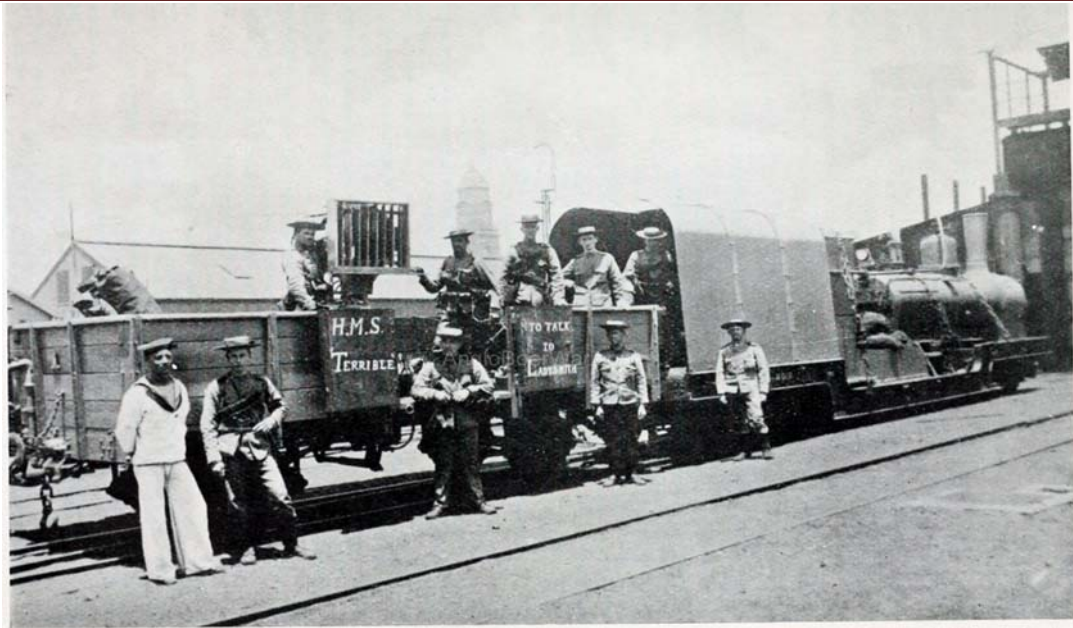
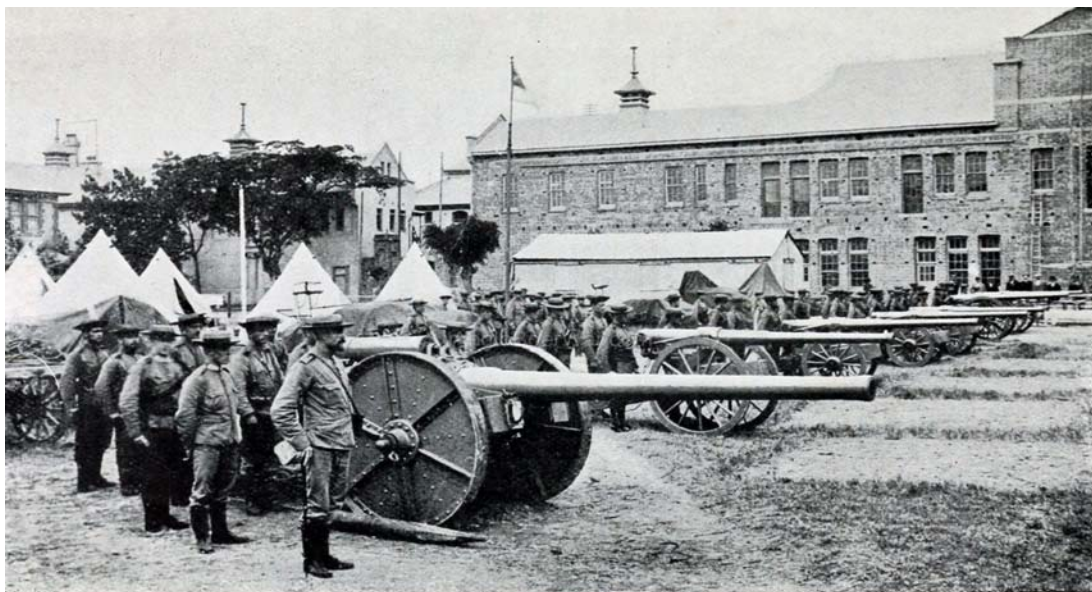


Photo by permission of *J. E. Middlebrook, Durban.*  
"TERRIBLE'S" SEARCH-LIGHT TRAIN WHICH FLASHED THE NIGHT SIGNALS  
INTO BELEAGUERED LADYSMITH.

While defending Durban, Captain Scott's sailors also manned a search-light train that was used to communicate with Ladysmith, after all their messenger pigeons had been used.

### Third Naval Brigade

General Sir Redvers Buller had just arrived in Durban. Upon being informed of the naval guns capability and the preparedness of the men, he ordered two 4.7-in and four 12-pounders to be sent to the front. This third brigade, under the command of Captain Edward Pitcairn Jones RN, from *Forte*, joined a force of 21,000 men as far north as the rail lines now allowed; just outside Colenso, then under the control of the Boers. Colenso is some 20 kilometers south of Ladysmith.



THE "TERRIBLE'S" GUNS CONCENTRATED AT THE TOWN CAMP, DURBAN,  
JUST PREVIOUS TO PROCEEDING TO THE FRONT.



## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

Edward Pitcairn Jones was born in Australia in 1850 and educated in Tasmania. After leaving Hutchins school (in Hobart) he joined the Royal Navy, where he was promoted to Lieutenant in 1874 and Captain in 1895, following active service in the Sudan and Egypt for which he was awarded both the Khedive Star and Egyptian Medal.



*Dobsonham,  
1895.*

*E. Pitcairn-Jones*

CAPTAIN EDWARD PITCAIRN-JONES, C.B.,  
WHO COMMANDED THE NAVAL BRIGADE IN NATAL.

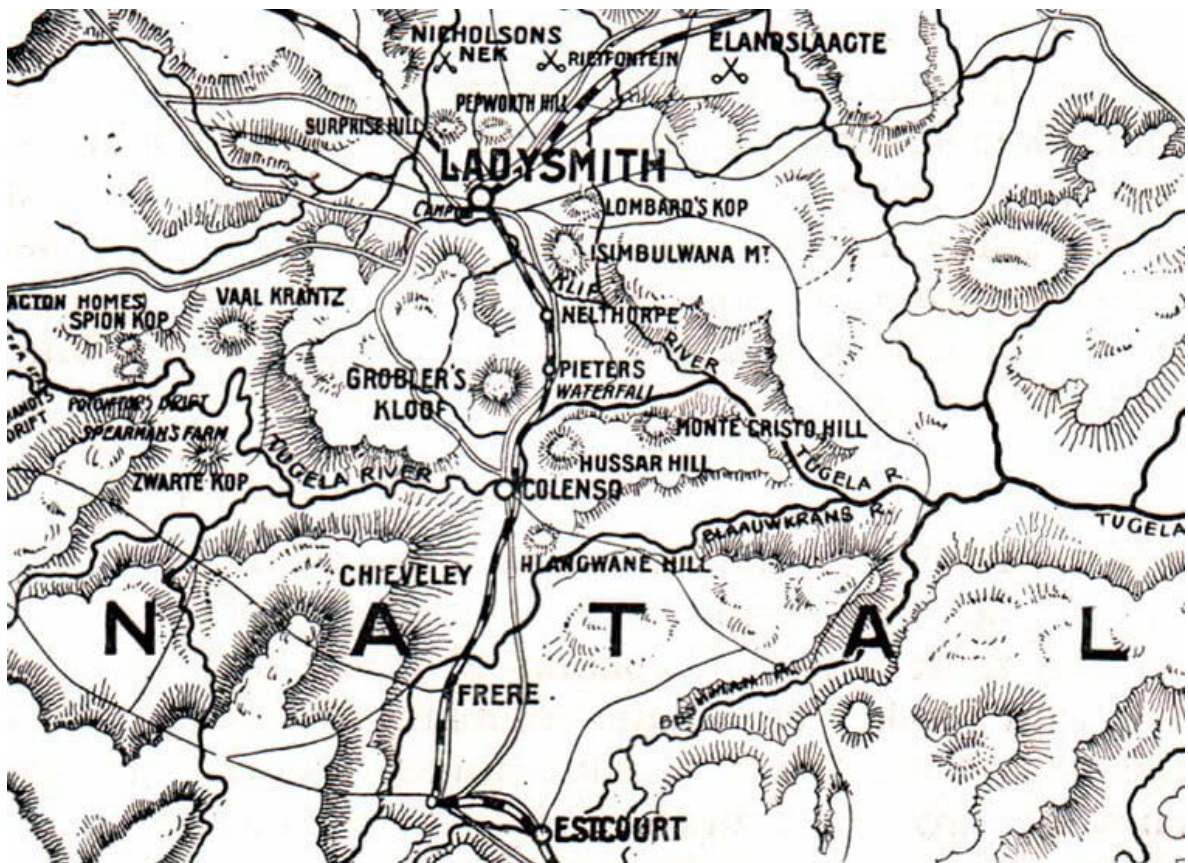


*Photo Copyright.*

CAPTAIN E. P. JONES AND THE "FORBES" NAVAL BRIGADE.

*Which landed with Buller to Ladysmith and Laing's Nek.*

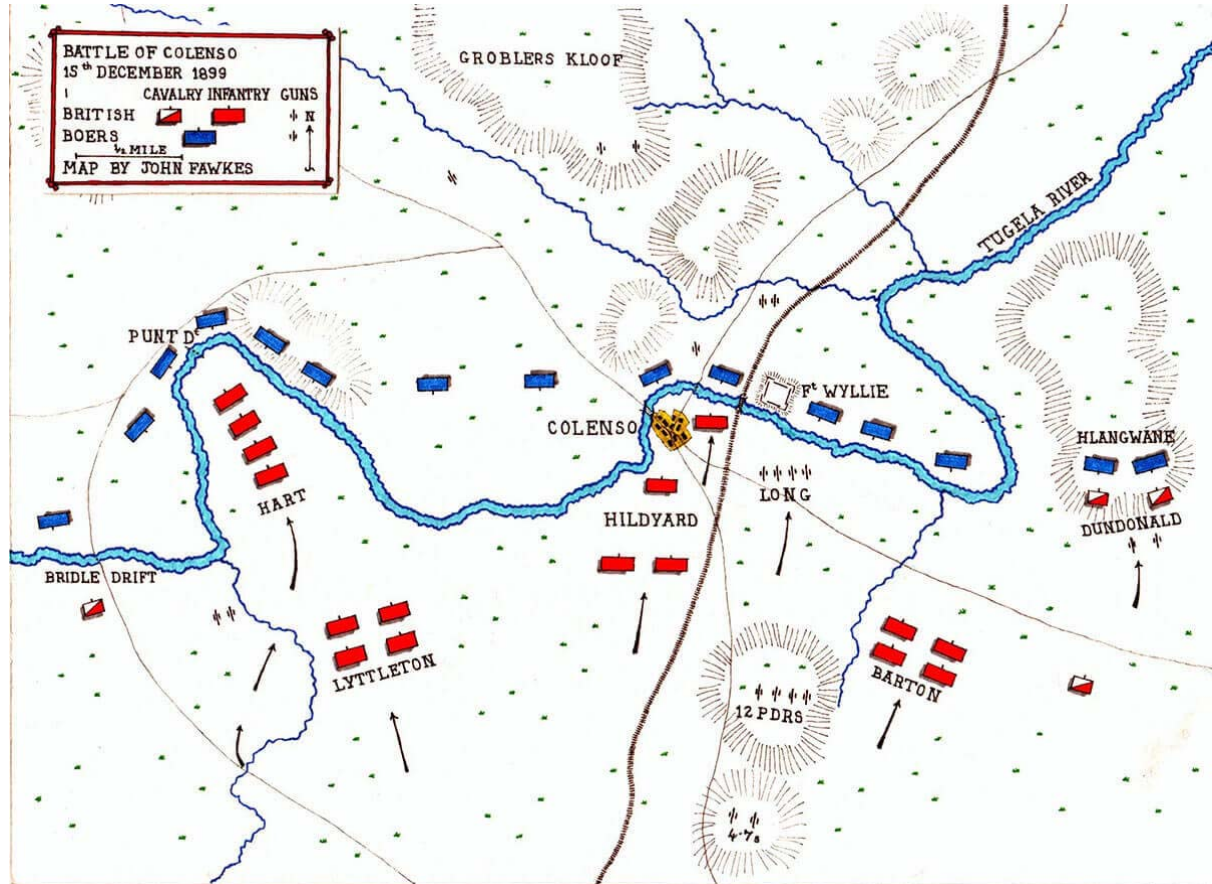
*"Navy & Army."*



# Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

## Battle of Colenso

Buller began his campaign to relieve Ladysmith with the battle of Colenso on December 15. His artillery, under the command of Colonel Long was twelve 12-pounders from the Royal Artillery and the six naval guns.



In the centre of the British line the two naval 4.7 inch guns opened fire on Fort Wylie in the eastern river loop at 4.45am at a range of 4,000 yards. On the right of the 4.7s the naval 12 pounders and the 14th and 66th Field Batteries, commanded by Colonel Long, joined in the bombardment. There was no responding fire from the Boers.



Royal Navy 4.7 inch gun in action at the Battle of Colenso



## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

---

Long's orders were to remain behind Barton's Brigade and to use the naval 12 pounders, for the long range work in support of Hildyard's attack on Colenso.

A German work on the use of artillery stated that the Prussian artillery had been particularly effective in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 because the guns had been pushed as far forward as possible, often in front of the infantry. The same work pointed to the relative ineffectiveness of the Prussian artillery in the war against Austria when the guns had been kept to the rear. Long was a keen advocate of advancing the guns.



A Naval 12 Pounder in action

Long resolved to move his two field batteries forward towards the river to enable them to fire more effectively on the Boer positions in the hills. Two of his subordinate officers objected to this risky move, so he sent forward two scouts who returned to report there was no sign of the Boers. So Long ordered the 14th and 66th Field Batteries with the naval 12 pounders to move to a position nearer the river.

The two field batteries moved forward, overtaking Hildyard's Brigade, and took up positions opposite Fort Wylie. The guns were unlimbered and about to come into action when the Boers opened fire from the far side of the river. Along with the devastating rifle fire a Boer one pounder pom pom and other field guns fired on the British gunners. The nearest Boer riflemen in Colenso were only 300 yards to the left of the British gun line which was 500 yards from the river bank to its front.

Within minutes most of the horses of the two batteries and two thirds of the gunners were dead or wounded, including the battery commanders. Long, shot through the arm and liver, was urged to order the survivors to abandon the guns and escape. Long is reputed to have retorted "Abandon be damned. We never abandon guns."



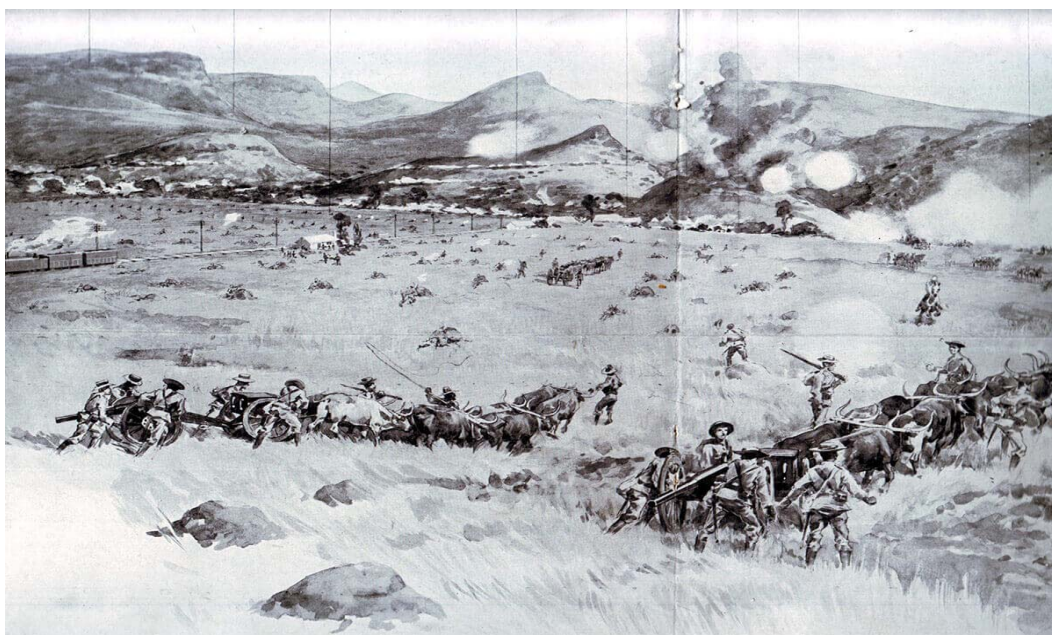
## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

---

Finally only one gun was being fired and that by two gunners. One of the two was hit and the other turned to walk back to cover. He was struck and the two batteries ceased firing. The few survivors, mainly wounded, lay in a donga behind the gun line with the injured Long, who was reported as saying in delirium "Ah my gunners. My gunners are splendid. Look at them."



The naval 12 pounders, hauled by slow moving oxen, were far in the rear of the horse-drawn Royal Field Artillery batteries. Two of the naval guns had just crossed a donga when the Boers opened fire. All the oxen in those two teams were killed, leaving the sailors to manhandle their guns to safety with the remaining 12 pounders.





---

## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

---

400 yards behind the two field batteries the naval 12 pounders fired in support, losing only three men wounded, but their fire had little impact on the entrenched Boers.

Meanwhile, on the left flank, Hart's Irish Brigade advanced into the northern loop of the river and was soon pinned down by the Boers. On the right flank detachments of the Mounted Brigade made an unsuccessful attack on Hlangwane.

Buller watched these abortive assaults from a hill near the 4.7-in naval guns. After losing so many of his guns, he ordered a desperate rescue attempt which succeeded in dragging two of the field pieces clear – at the cost of several lives. One of these was the only son of Field Marshall Lord Roberts of Khandahar.



The naval guns were equipped with telescopes, were long-range and with powerful shells. They suffered no further losses and continued to fire until the close of the action. The central Naval battery had during the day fired 160 rounds of 4.7-in. and 600 rounds of 12-pounder ammunition.

British casualties were 1,125: 132 killed, 765 wounded and 228 captured. 1st Royal Dublin Fusiliers, the leading battalion of Hart's Brigade, suffered 216 casualties out of 900 men. 10 field guns were taken by the Boers, some damaged. Boer losses were slight.

*There were few casualties amongst the naval personnel. Seamen Newstead, Webster and White were wounded, and another bluejacket received what was termed a 'scratch'. In White's case, while he was lying dangerously wounded by a shell splinter in the back, his 'oppo', Able Seaman Campling, had stayed behind to guard him, after the guns had retired, until the ambulance picked him up,*



## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

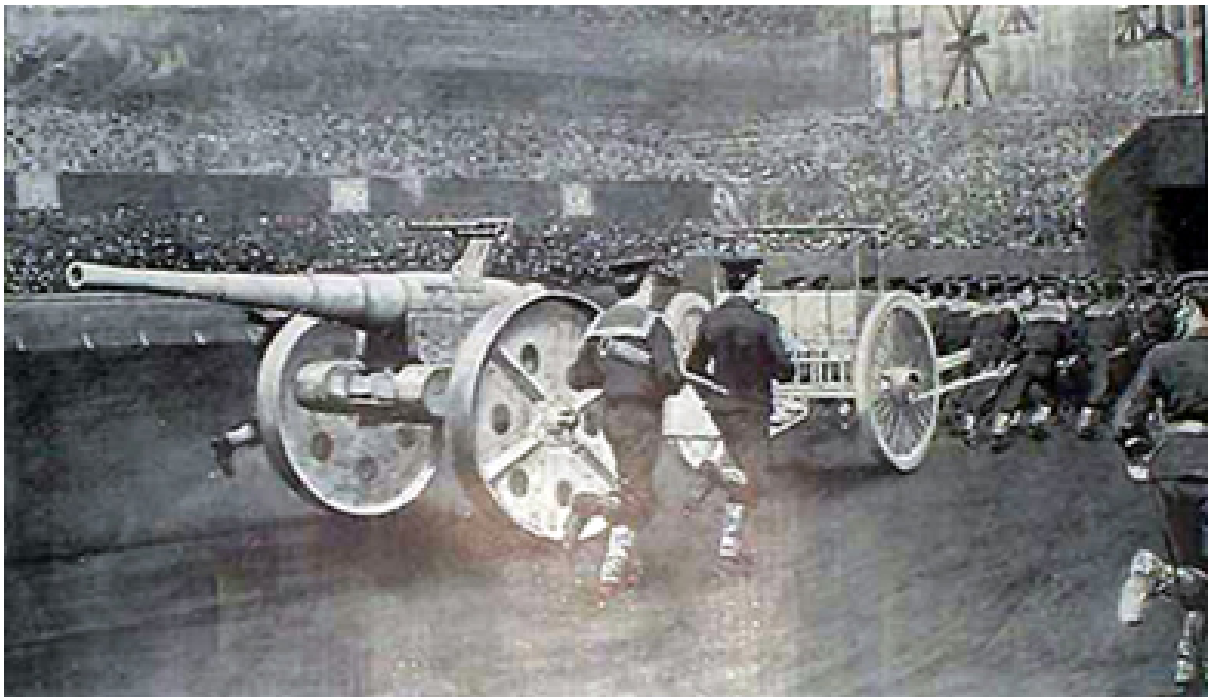
---

*Campling had then advanced, on his own, to join the infantry in the firing line and was officially recorded as 'missing' until he later returned to receive an appropriate rebuke.<sup>4</sup>*

The Battle of Colenso was the third and final battle fought during the Black Week, 10-17 December 1899, of the Second Boer War. In this disastrous week, the British Army suffered three devastating defeats at the battles of Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso. The losses were 2,776 men killed, wounded and captured. The events were an eye opener for the government and troops, who had thought that the war could be won very easily.

### Aftermath

The naval brigade continued to participate in the battles that finally resulted in the relief of Ladysmith in February 1900. After this the sailors slowly returned to their ships. HMS *Powerful* returned to England and the sailors from the naval brigade paraded their guns at the Royal Tournament and through the streets of London.



HMS *Terrible* sailed for China in March 1900. Sailors from the other ships, members of the Cape of Good Hope fleet, continued to assist the army with their guns.

---

<sup>4</sup> Bridgeland, *Field Gun Jack versus the Boers*.

# Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

## Memorials

In Portsmouth there is a memorial erected by the officers and ships company of HMS *Powerful*, that list the names of those that died from that ship.

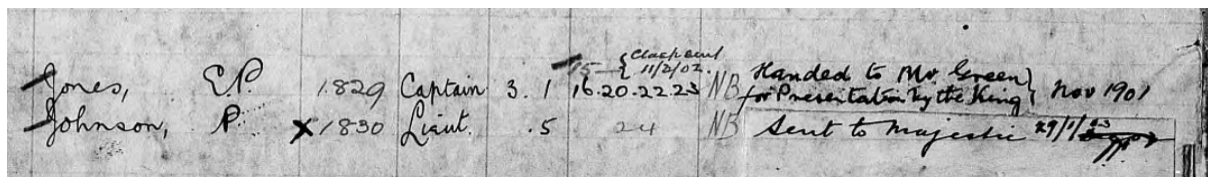
Of the 129 casualties listed for all the Royal Naval Brigades, seventeen were killed, nineteen died (of disease) and two were taken prisoner.<sup>5</sup>

## Queen's South Africa Medal Clasps

Like other participants in the Anglo-Boer War, the sailors were given the Queen's South Africa Medal - with various clasps. The medal roll lists the clasps earned by each individual – *Relief of Ladysmith* clasp was given to those who served at Estcourt and northern Natal between the Battle of Colenso and the Relief of Ladysmith.<sup>6</sup> There was only an unofficial clasp for *Colenso*.



The following is an extract from the *Forté's* roll, listing Captain Edward Pitcairn Jones, whose medal was presented by King Edward VII. His clasps indicate that he and his guns served in the Transvaal and Orange Free State after the Relief of Ladysmith.



The Lieutenant Johnson, who was awarded the Natal clasp (24) was likely to have been part of the Defence of Durban, and by 1903 was aboard HMS *Majestic*.

<b>Tugela Heights (20)</b>	A clasp inscribed "Tugela Heights" will be granted to all troops of the Natal Field Force, exclusive of the Ladysmith garrison, employed in the operations north of an east and west line through Chieveley Station between February 14 <sup>th</sup> and 27 <sup>th</sup> , 1900, both dates inclusive.
<b>Relief of Ladysmith (22)</b>	A clasp inscribed "Relief of Ladysmith" will be granted to all troops in Natal north of and including Estcourt between December 15 <sup>th</sup> , 1899, and February 28 <sup>th</sup> , 1900, both dates inclusive.
<b>Laing's Nek (23)</b>	A clasp inscribed "Laing's Nek" will be granted to all troops of the Natal Field Force employed in operations, and north of an east and west line through Newcastle between June 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 9 <sup>th</sup> , 1900, both dates inclusive.

<sup>5</sup> Ancestry, UK, *Casualties of the Boer War, 1899-1902*.

<sup>6</sup> Ancestry, All UK, *Naval Medal and Award Rolls, 1793-1972*.



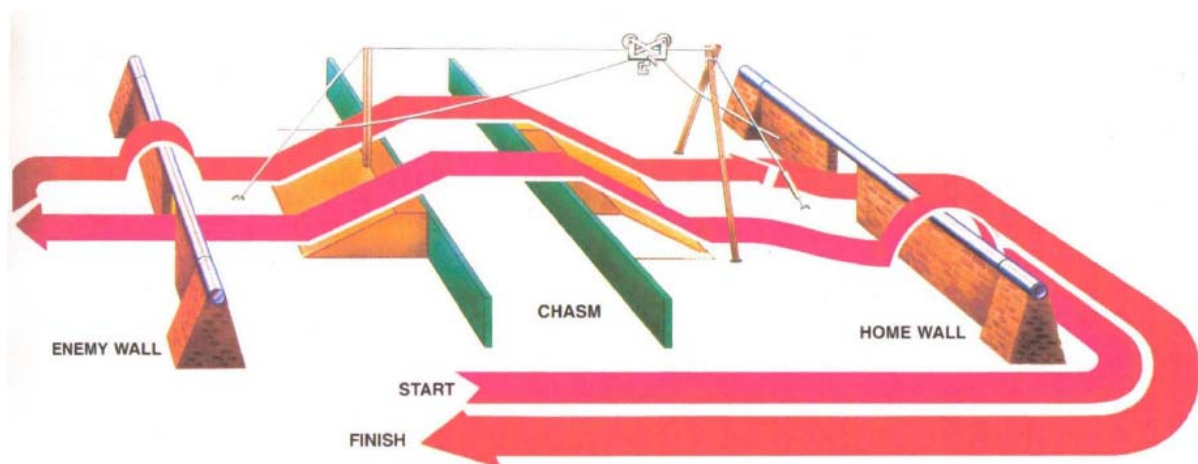
## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

<b>Transvaal (16)</b>	A clasp inscribed "Transvaal" will be granted to all troops in the Transvaal at any time between May 24 <sup>th</sup> , 1900 and a date to be hereafter fixed, who received no clasp for an action in the Transvaal which has already been specified.
<b>Orange Free State (15)</b>	A clasp inscribed "Orange Free State" will be granted to all troops in the Orange Free State at any time between 28 February 1900 and 31 May 1902 inclusive, who had not received a clasp for a specific action in the Orange Free State.
<b>Natal (24)</b>	A clasp inscribed "Natal" will be granted to all troops in Natal at any time between October 11 <sup>th</sup> , 1899, and June 11 <sup>th</sup> , 1900 both dates inclusive, who receive no clasp for an action in Natal nor the "Cape Colony" clasp as already specified.

### Royal Naval Field Gun Races

Following on from the public's reaction to the sailors from *Powerful* running their gun through the Royal Tournament and then the streets of London a unique annual tradition was created.

In 1907 the first Field Gun competition was held to commemorate the courage and determination of the naval brigades in Ladysmith and in the battles to relieve Ladysmith. The course was constructed to depict the obstacles and hazards which confronted the "Blue Jackets". The race is a brutal military test of strength, physical fitness, technique, discipline and teamwork. It is designed to recreate the build-up to a Boer War battle when naval guns were pulled over rough terrain to deliver gunfire – projectiles for the British Army.



The races continued until 1999. The following link is to the 1997 final, where Portsmouth defeated the Fleet Air Arm, "after ten years in the wilderness." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VslIuK-bAHg>. The following article is a view through the eyes of an American journalist.<sup>7</sup>

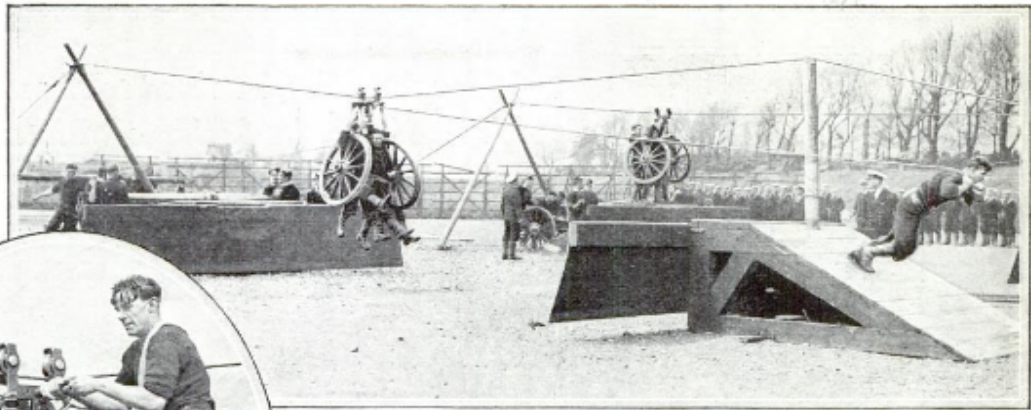
<sup>7</sup> "British Tars Move Big Guns Across Fake Chasm", *Popular Science Monthly*, 25

## Royal Naval Guns at the battle of Colenso

---

### British Tars Move Big Guns Across Fake Chasm

At right, the fake chasm across which British tars swung big guns. Below, the barrel goes over as two sailors ride it.



At the naval gunnery station near Portsmouth, England, the other day British tars staged an odd race to show what sailors could do ashore. Cables were rigged between platforms that represented opposite sides of a chasm in mountainous country. The sailors then transported two field guns and their crews across the chasm on trolleys that ran on the cables. Each gun was “knocked

down” into three sections for its odd trip, wheels, mountings, and barrels being taken over separately. As each section crossed the chasm, members of the crew went with it, the load being drawn across by a tow-rope manned by husky sailors. It was a matter of but a few minutes to take the guns apart on one side of the chasm, get them across, and put them together again on the far side. The photograph above shows the wheels being carried across.

### References

“British Tars Move Big Guns Across Fake Chasm”. *Popular Science Monthly*. August 1931.

“Lieutenant (later Commander) William Colquhoun.” *Boer War Memorial*.

[http://www.bwm.org.au/site/William\\_Colquhoun.php](http://www.bwm.org.au/site/William_Colquhoun.php)

“The Fortunes of War.” *The Argus*, June 12, 1900.

Brigland, Tony. *Field Gun Jacks versus the Boers*. Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1998.

Clowes, Sir William Laird. *The Royal Navy: A History*. London: Sampson Low & Marston, 1903, Vol VII.

Crowe, George, MAA. *The Commission of HMS Terrible 1898-1902*. London: George Newnes, 1903.

<https://archive.org/stream/commissionhmste00crowgoog/>

Hall, Major D D. “The Naval Guns in Natal 1899-1902.” *Military History Journal*: Vol. 4 No.3, June 1978, South Africa.

Mackenzie, John. “Battle of Colenso.” *BritishBattles.com*. 2002-2011.

<http://www.britishbattles.com/battle-of-colenso/>

Scott, Admiral Sir Percy. *Fifty Years in the Royal Navy*. London: John Murray, 1919.