

The 1st Battalion Devonshire Regiment at Wagon Hill
6th January 1900

(With acknowledgement of this extract to <http://www.angloboerwar.com/unit-information/imperial-units/547-devonshire-regiment>)

The 1st Battalion was one of the four infantry battalions which, along with three cavalry regiments and three batteries of Field Artillery, were dispatched from India to Natal immediately before war was declared, and when it was obvious that the Boers were massing their forces near the frontiers.

The 1st Devons were in Ladysmith when Sir George White landed at Durban to take command of the forces in Natal. They were not present at the battle of Glencoe or Talana Hill, but they were soon to have a chance of showing what sterling stuff they contained. They were brigaded with the 1st Manchesters and 2nd Gordons under Colonel Ian Hamilton, and it was this brigade which did so well at Elandsplaagte and subsequently at Waggon Hill on 6th January.

The story of Elandsplaagte was one of the few bright days when bright days were sadly wanting. On 18th October General French arrived at Ladysmith. Early on the morning of Saturday, the 21st, he went out northwards towards Elandsplaagte, where it was known that a Boer force, which had cut the line to Dundee, was stationed. The general took with him part of the 5th Dragoon Guards, the 5th Lancers, five squadrons of the newly raised Imperial Light Horse, some Natal Volunteers, half the 1st Manchester Regiment, and the Natal Field Battery. After some skirmishing he found the Boers too strong for his small body, so about 9 am he wired for reinforcements. About two o'clock these came on the scene, the Devons, five companies 2nd Gordons, another squadron of the 5th Dragoon Guards, one of the 5th Lancers, and the 21st and 42nd Batteries RFA. The Boers were seen to be strongly posted on a ridge, but General French at once decided to attack. The infantry were put under Colonel Ian Hamilton. Roughly the formation was—the 5th Dragoon Guards, some Volunteers, and one battery on our extreme left; the Devons and a battery on the left centre, these to make for the left of the ridge. The Manchesters in the centre and the Gordons on their right rear to attack the extremity of the ridge, move along it, and crumple up the enemy. The 5th Lancers and Imperial Light Horse on our extreme right to work round the Boer left. In face of a terrible fire the Manchesters and Gordons pulled off their part of the task. The Boers were driven along the ridge, and the Devons pressed in, having assaulted two detached hills. When the enemy's guns were reached and the end of the ridge gained from which the whole of the enemy's camp, full of tents, horses, and men, was fully exposed to view at fixed-sight range, a white flag was raised by the enemy, and Colonel Hamilton ordered the cease fire. Men rose up, thinking all was over, not yet having learned what an excess of individual initiative may lead to. At any rate the white flag was disowned by many Boers, who seized the grand target and poured in a fierce fire. Our men were staggered a bit, but soon gathered their wits, and, splendidly led, they charged and routed the remaining Boers, the cavalry charging through and through the enemy while they fled. Two guns and about 200 prisoners were taken, and Sir George estimated that 100 were killed and 108 wounded. The losses of the Devons were 4 officers and 29 men wounded.

In the battle outside Ladysmith on 30th October the 1st Devons were in the centre, under Colonel Ian Hamilton, and had little to do but cover the rather ragged retreat of Colonel Grimwood's brigade. During the siege the battalion did splendid work. In the great attack on 6th January, after the fight had lasted from 3 am till 5 pm, and notwithstanding every effort by half-battalions of the 1st King's Royal Rifles, 2nd King's Royal Rifles, and companies of various other regiments, the south-east portion of Waggon Hill was still held by the enemy. A quotation from Sir George White's despatch of 23rd March will best show how it was cleared. This magnificent charge has been described by many writers, and to the three companies of the Devons everything in the way of praise and admiration has been given.

"At 5 pm Lieutenant Colonel C W Park arrived at Waggon Hill with three companies 1st Battalion Devonshire Regiment, which I had ordered up as a reinforcement, and was at once directed by Colonel Hamilton to turn the enemy off the ridge with the bayonet. The Devons dashed forward and gained a position under cover within 50 yards of the enemy. Here a fire-fight ensued; but the Devons were not to be denied, and eventually, cheering as they pushed from point to point, they drove the enemy not only off the plateau, but cleared every Boer out of the lower slopes and the dongas surrounding the position. Lieutenant Colonel Park went into action with four officers, but he alone remained untouched at the close. The total loss of the Devons was nearly 28 per cent of those engaged, and the men fired only 12 rounds per rifle."

On the same day the post known as Observation Hill West, held by the remainder of the Devons, was attacked, but there the enemy was driven off without much difficulty.

The silver medal as awarded to Henry Palmer, but with clasps as described in the text.

