Lieutenant Alfred Hutton Radice,
1st Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment:
British Prisoner of War and the Disaster at Nicholson’s Nek

by Paul Benson

Nicholson’s Nek, 6 miles north of Ladysmith, Natal.
Sunday, October 29, 1899 about 11:30 PM

On the night of October 29, 1899 more than 1100 men under
the command of Lieutenant Colonel Frank Carleton left Lady-
smith, Natal under the cover of darkness towards Nicholson’s
Nek. The units consisted of six companies of the Royal Irish
Fusiliers (520 men), five and a half companies of the 1st Battal-
ion Gloucestershire Regiment (450 men) and the No. 10 Moun-
tain Battery (140 men with artillery). In addition to the troops
there were 250 mules carrying ammunition and supplies for the
attack. Their objective was to intercept Boer columns of Or-
ange Freestaters under the command of Boer General Christiaan
De Wet that were converging from the north and east toward the
town of Ladysmith (Figure 1).¹

Carleton’s departure from Ladysmith was delayed due to
fractious animals and inexperienced mule handlers. By 2 AM
on Sunday October 30th it was clear that the unit would not
reach Nicholson’s Nek before dawn. Carleton made the deci-
sion to stop his advance rather than risk being caught out in the
open. He chose to position his forces on Tchrengula Hill. In the
dark and in unfamiliar territory he deployed his troops on the
steep slope of the lower summit of the Nek.² An excerpt from

Figure 1. Map showing the positions of the British (red) and Boer forces (blue). Ladysmith is to the south, Nicholson’s Nek to the northwest
and Farquhar’s Farm to the northeast. From britishbattles.com/ladysmith-ma
Louis Creswicke’s book series South Africa and the Transvaal War, volume 2 vividly describes the resulting confusion:

“The circumstances which attended the movement of Colonel Carleton’s movement are even now fraught with some mystery. He carried out the night march unmolested until within two miles of Nicholson’s Nek. Then some boulders, loosened evidently for the purpose, rolled down the hill and a sudden crackling roll of musketry stampeded the infantry ammunition mules. The alarm became infectious, with the result that the battery mules also broke loose from their leaders practically carrying with them the whole of the gun equipment. The greater part of the regimental small-arm ammunition was similarly lost. In consequence of this misfortune, Colonel Carleton’s small force, after a plucky fight and heavy loss, had to capitulate.”

Another account of the chaos is an excerpt from The Encyclopedia of the Boer War—Nicholson’s Nek:

“It was rough, hard climbing. A Boer piquet (a small group of soldiers acting as sentinels) was disturbed and fled, passing clean through the British. Mules slipped, then panicked, then stampeded. Men and animals tumbled down the slopes. The guns went with them as well as the infantry’s ammunition reserve. Most of the men hurried to the top and hurried to build stone shelters.”

Hopelessly outnumbered, exposed, taking heavy losses, and unable to engage the elusive enemy in traditional British military fighting style, Carleton surrendered. A second front to the west at Lombard’s Kop and Farquhar’s Farm suffered the same fate. More than 400 British soldiers were killed or wounded and more than 800 were taken prisoner. This was the largest surrender of British troops since the Napoleonic Wars and became known as “Mournful Monday”.

The subject of this article is Lieutenant Alfred Hutton Radice an infantry officer with the Gloucestershire Regiment, and the cover addressed to his parents in Naples, Italy. (Figure 2) He was born in 1873, the son of Alberto Hampden Radice, to whom this cover is addressed, and Adele Visetti. (Figure 2) The Natal Field Force Official Casualty Roll lists him as captured at Farquhar’s Farm which is to the west of Nicholson’s Nek (Figure 1). However, the official account of the battle indicates that units from the Gloucestershire Regiment were with Carleton at Tchrengula which is south of Nicholson’s Nek and many miles to the east of the Farquhar Farm. Lieutenant Radice would certainly have been with his unit and not with the brigade at Farquhar’s Farm. Battlefield accounts are often hastily written and frequently inaccurate. Also, given the large number of casualties and prisoners taken at multiple sites that day it seems likely that the location of his capture is incorrect in the official casualty rolls.

Following his capture Lieutenant Radice was transferred to the State Model School in Pretoria, Transvaal. The cover is dated 2 Jan 1900 from Pretoria and arrived February 10, 1900 in Naples. (Figure 2) On the front is a large double circle COMMANDANT GENERAAL Boer censor handstamp in violet with censor’s initials. Interestingly the prisoner’s letter was not taxed when mailed without postage from Transvaal. Upon arrival in Italy it was charged 50 centimes postage due. In March 1900 Radice and others were transferred to the Daspoort prison camp. He was released on June 5, 1900 after the surrender of Pretoria to the British.
The Gloucestershire Regiment nicknamed the “Glosters” had a long and distinguished history. Originally formed in 1694 as Colonel Gibson’s Regiment of Foot, the expanded and renamed 28th Regiment won a decisive British victory against the French in 1801 during the Battle of Alexandria, Egypt. The unit was again reorganized and renamed the Gloucestershire Regiment in 1881 (Figure 3). The unit’s involvement in the Second Boer War in October 1899 was its first military action with the disastrous results at Nicholson’s Nek. Following the Boer War the Regiment distinguished itself during World Wars 1 and 2 and the Korean War. When it was disbanded on March 26, 1994 its flag carried more battle colors than any other regiment of the line. 

Lieutenant Radice survived the war and was awarded the Queen’s South Africa and King’s South Africa medals for his service during the Boer War. He served in the British Army in World War 1, was wounded and subsequently awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and the Order of the Crown of Italy for his service in World War 1. He retired as a Lieutenant Colonel in 1923. He died on April 6, 1968 at the age of 94. 

References
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Post Office Stone. The earliest surviving engraved stone inscribed in Dutch was left behind when the sailing ships Nassau, Fredick Hendrik, Nimmegen, Wesel and Galyas, homeward bound from Batavia, anchored in Table Bay. It bore the following inscription: “HIER ONDER LEGGEN BRIEVEN VAND COMAND DV LEE EN VICE COMD P. CROOCK MET DE SCHEPEN NASSAU FRE HENDRIK NIMMEGEN WESEL EN DE GALIAS. ALHIER DEN 9 APRIL1632 VAN BATTAVIA GEARIVEERT VIR OCKEN DEN 15 DITTO”. They set sail from there on 20 April, and not on 15 April as they had originally planned. Thanks to Franco Frescura for the information.
This set of stamps was issued in 1973 on the occasion of the First International Kimberlite Conference held in Cape Town. The 20c stamp misspells Kimberlite.

**Highlights**

- Homelands Postal Orders
- Disaster at Nicholson’s Nek
- Geological Superlatives
- Royal Empire Society Specimens
- Bechuanaland Government Envelopes
- Stellaland Early Usage
- Prize Letters

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