

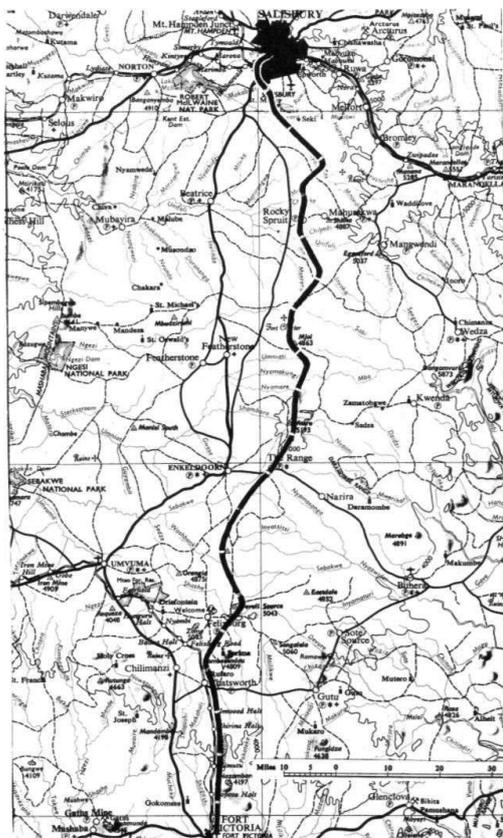


Fort Victoria to Fort Salisbury: The Latter Part of the Journey of The Pioneer Column in 1890

E. E. Burke

The Pioneer Column which occupied Mashonaland in 1890 consisted of two units, the Pioneer Corps and the British South Africa Company's Police.

The Pioneer Corps was 200 strong, especially recruited, mostly in South Africa, from a



Route of the Pioneer Column, Fort Victoria to Salisbury (superimposed on the 1:1 000 000 map of Rhodesia published by the Surveyor-General. Reproduced from State copyright mapping with the permission of the Surveyor-General. Copyright reserved.

diversity of trades and professions with the idea that on its arrival in Mashonaland the unit would be disbanded to form the structure of a complete community. However, the Imperial Government, nervous of a disaster on the scale of that at Isandhlwana in Zululand eleven years before, required an additional and permanent force to protect the lines of communication of the Pioneer Corps and the community itself after its members had dispersed.

Thus was created the British South Africa Company's Police commanded by Lieut. Col. E. G. Pennefather, a regular soldier of the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, who was also in overall command of the expedition. The Pioneer Corps was recruited, equipped and lead by Frank Johnson who had previous experience in Matabeleland and Mashonaland.

The usual route to Mashonaland was by way of Lobengula's capital at Bulawayo but in order to avoid offence F. C. Selous, guide and principal intelligence officer to the expedition, pioneered a different route around the southern and eastern edges of Matabeleland. A forward base was established at Fort Tuli and from here the advance commenced on 11th July, 1890. Selous with a party of Pioneers went ahead to mark out the line of road; he had with him a small party of picked African scouts and guides. The column was in a hurry for there was alarm that it might be forestalled by a Boer trek reported to be collecting on the south bank of the Limpopo and so all was haste. The incidents of the journey through the lowveld, of the discovery of Providential Pass and the successful emergence on the highveld — the first 180 miles — have been the subject of many descriptions in detail. On the other hand the progress of the second part of the

journey, the 170 miles from Fort Victoria to Salisbury, has generally been summarised as not containing much that deserved particular description. It is the purpose of this present paper to examine this second section of the journey and to indicate its course. The main body of the expedition debouched on to the open highveld on 14th August, 1890 and Column Orders of that day "notified for general information that the Column will probably halt for at least three days". Here was built Fort Victoria.

The next strategic target was to put a fort at the junction between the road planned to Mount Hampden and a proposed route to the eastern highlands, a route which would give access to Umtasa's country, the Portuguese and access to the sea at Beira. It was the original intention to put this fort, called Fort Charter, at or near Mount Wedza, 70 miles north-east of Fort Victoria but as the Column travelled north the idea was abandoned. There were several reasons, but particularly the poor condition of the oxen. Instead Selous being, as he says, then "in a country with which I had a most intimate knowledge, gained during many hunting expeditions" took the expedition along the watershed to the head of the Ngezi.

FORTS VICTORIA AND CHARTER

The Column stayed at Fort Victoria longer than was first expected, and did not leave until 19th August. This gave opportunity for a supply train under Capt. Sir John Willoughby which left Tuli eighteen days behind the main body, to catch up and for its loads to be distributed and absorbed.

As it moved out of Fort Victoria the Column consisted of the Pioneer Corps and two troops of the B.S.A. Company's Police. One troop of Police was guarding the base at Macloutsie, another was at Tuli and another was left to garrison Fort Victoria. The total force on the move was now about 400 men, partly mounted, with about 90 to 100 wagons each with three Africans, a driver, a leader and a general servant to attend to the brake when on the move and fetch wood and water in camp. Each wagon had a team of 16 oxen. 'B' Troop of the Pioneers (Capt. H. F. Hoste) went ahead to make, or mark, the road, There was little bush cutting to be done and two parallel tracks 50 yards apart were made by towing two young trees. According to Hoste it went like clockwork and each day the main body arrived at dawn at the place where 'B' Troop had laagered the night before.

There was no contact with any Matabele though soon after leaving Fort Victoria they encountered a strongly fortified Shona village where, only three days earlier, some 60 Matabele had been collecting tribute in sheep and cattle. The Column did a lively trade with the Shona, bartering meat and grain for red or white beads, calico and salt. Some exchanged soup tins, cartridge cases—valuable as snuff boxes—and bits of old clothing. Vegetables were obtainable—pumpkins, beans and sweet potatoes. Monkey nuts roasted and eaten with honey was a luxury, reported to taste like almond toffee. The native beer was useful as a bread raiser.

As the Column progressed there was thought to be scant danger of surprise by the Matabele and the precaution of sending out early morning patrols before the laager was broken was discontinued, but nevertheless no move was made without advance guards, rear guards and flanking patrols, and picquets were put out each night. The general plan was for the main body to march from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. when they would arrive at the place where the advance guard, who marked the road, and did what clearing work was necessary, had spent the night. There they would rest until 5.30 p.m. and then trek again until 9 p.m. In this way, at a rate of progress of about 1½ miles an hour, they covered about 10 miles a day, and conserved the oxen.

Some detail is given in a diary kept by W. L. Armstrong, of 'C' Troop of the B.S.A. Company's Police.

"August 19. Tuesday. Reveille 5 a.m. Left Fort Victoria in charge of 'C' Troop at 2 p.m. Outspanned at 6 o'clock . . .

20. Wednesday. Reveille 4.30. Trek at 6; order countermanded. 8 000 Matabilis come to eat us up, and 2 miles away. Trekked at 2. Grand open breezy country, dotted with clumps of scrub at intervals.

21. Thursday. Reveille 5 a.m. Trekked at 4 p.m. . . . Water cart ox dropped and 2 others . . .

22. Friday. Reveille 5 a.m. Lots of natives around, bought tobacco, meal, monkey nuts and fresh milk for cartridge cases and buttons. Trekked 4 to 8.30. Moonlight.

23. Saturday. Reveille 5 a.m. . . . Just about opposite Sofala. Heat gets greater daily. Great grass fires burning all around these flats, often stop the procession. Bird life very scarce. Fine breeze up here nearly like the Yorkshire moors. Could buy enough knick-nacks here to stock a house for a few buttons, etc.³

24. Sunday. Reveille 5 a.m. Rest all day and trekked at 4.30 until 10 p.m. by moonlight. Rig our blankets up on sticks, etc., daily now, to rest in shade. Buck, etc., often seen and hunted.

25. Monday. Reveille 5 a.m. Trekked at 5.30 to 9 p.m., then again 2 a.m. to 5.30—50 miles of burnt plain to cross.

26. Tuesday. Reveille 7 a.m. Trekked 2 to 5. Mr. Colquhoun and escort went to Portuguese settlement and Colonel and escort to Mt. Wetsa; trekked at 5 p.m. to 8.30. Still in middle of plain, horizon bounds it on all sides. No wood."

This last entry needs some enlargement. A. R. Colquhoun was travelling with the Column as the Chief Magistrate designate of Mashonaland but he also had instructions that as soon as practicable he would visit the chief of the Manica country to negotiate a treaty and would also endeavour to secure rights of communications through Portuguese territory, to the coast. Umtasa, the chief in question, was outside Lobengula's sphere of influence and hence

an independent treaty with him was deemed to be necessary. Colquhoun left the Column together with L. S. Jameson who was travelling as Rhodes's representative, C. Harrison who was Colquhoun's secretary, Selous as guide, and an escort of Police. There is a brief note in the Regimental Orders of the Pioneer Corps dated 26th August, 1890 that "Capt. F. C. Selous having resigned his commission this day is struck off strength of the Regiment accordingly." So Selous handed over the duties of chief guide to the Column to his assistant, Lieut. R. G. Nicholson, to whom he gave a sketch map and notes to help him to the Column's destination. Selous had compiled a compass sketch of the route from Macloutsie and the continuation of this was taken over by Lieut. W. E. Fry, formerly a member of the staff of the Royal Observatory at Cape Town, who joined the Pioneer Corps as Selous's assistant and the official photographer. But only the next day the Column was reported to be in difficulties and Selous's services were needed to resolve them. Colquhoun was not able to make a second start until 3rd September.

Armstrong's diary continues:—

27. Wednesday. Reveille 5 a.m. 2 miles to go for a particle of wood. Bully beef and biscuits. Veldt burning far ahead of us. No food for oxen or horses. Trekked at 5 p.m. to 9. Slept until 2, then on again until 6 a.m.
28. Thursday. Reveille 2 a.m. Marched at 3 until 6 a.m. All burnt and black far as we can see. 5 oxen dropped pulling . . . Trekked 5.30 to 8 p.m.
29. Friday. Reveille 5 a.m. Natives look with awe upon our horsemen. One ran up a tree and the other knelt down and clasped hands, etc. . . . Left Mt. Wetsa on right. Swampy ground . . . Trekked at 5.30 until 9.30.
30. Saturday. Reveille 2 a.m. Started at 3 until 6.30 a.m. Trekked at 5.30 to 10 p.m. Seem to have crossed burnt patch, taken us 7 treks or about 50 miles. Dew heavy some nights, and cold quite stiffens our hands in early morning, on this highveldt, though we had it warm in bush before pass . . .³ Left another lot of men yesterday as post riders.⁴ Pitiabie to see oxen, heads down, tongues out and pulling until they drop in shafts.
31. Sunday. Reveille 2 a.m. Trekked at 3 by moonlight until 7 a.m. Fine camp on hilltop . . . 68 natives, men women and children, Indian file, came in. Trekked 5.30 to 8.30.
- September 1. Monday. Reveille 5 a.m. . . . trek by moon at 8.15 p.m. Ant hills all over great plateau . . . Trekked to 11.45 . . .
2. Tuesday. Reveille 1.30 to 7 a.m. Bitterly cold. Same great flat. ½ mile to go for little wood . . .
3. Wednesday. Reveille 2 a.m. Off at 3 a.m. Cold intense. Made my teeth chatter. Outspanned at 8 a.m. Fine sand, cleaning rod goes right up to head.¹
4. Thursday. Reveille 5 a.m. Stand to waggons, general clean up. 'A' Troop left us and are to remain here . . . Fort Charter."

And so they came to Fort Charter on the top of the watershed, but not to remain there for long. The route from Fort Victoria had been very nearly due north

and close to the line of the present railway as far as Felixburg, thence curving slightly around the various headwaters of the Nyazwidzi and then close to north again to Fort Charter.

The site for the fort was chosen 3½ miles away from the place where the Column laagered on 4th September and a start was made on the earth banks at once. 'A' Troop of the Police were detailed to complete it and occupy it.

FORT CHARTER TO THE HUNYANI

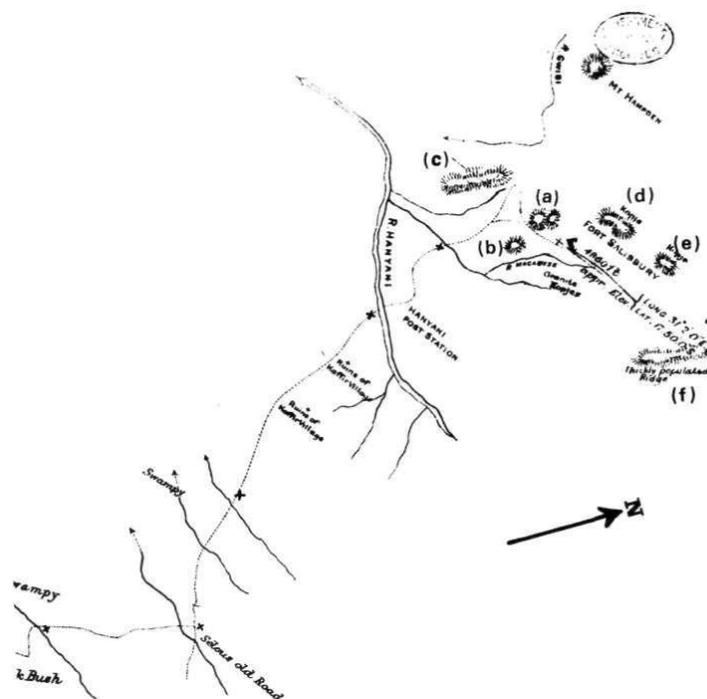
There was little time to be lost and on the next day, Friday, 5th September, at 3.30 p.m. the main body moved on again, travelling until 8 p.m. After the detaching of 'A' Troop it now mustered about 300 men. The mileage was coming down—Charter to Salisbury was 64 miles but it took seven-and-a-half days, another indication of the poverished condition of the oxen.

Saturday was good travelling across open country though with a marked range of temperature. Armstrong mentions night frost and his surprise at a piece of ice thicker than a 2-shilling piece, while the mid-day heat was extreme. That day the Column did ten miles, from 3.30 a.m. until about 7.30 a.m. and from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., one of its longest marches in this, the latter part of the journey and it brought them to within four miles of the Umfuli, the last but one of the major streams to be crossed. On Sunday, 7th September, early in the morning they came to the south bank where they joined up with 'A' Troop of the Pioneers who were advance guard and working on the crossing. Here too they were joined by Burnett, Nicholson and Langerman who walked in carrying their saddles.³ These had been out ahead on a long reconnaissance. Two days before, near the Hunyani, they were camped for the night when a lion killed two of their horses and stampeded another two, so as they had a rendezvous with the Column at the Umfuli on the morning of the 7th to show it the road to travel they had to walk back, taking their saddles with them. The oxen were now so weak that they had to be helped across the river bed by hand, the men putting the yokes over their shoulders; the site of the crossing place is obscure, in the Chiota Tribal Trust Land about 20 miles upstream from Beatrice. After crossing they waited until 4 p.m. before moving on; being Sunday the usual morning services were held and there was also opportunity for a boating excursion. Johnson had brought with him a 'Berthon'¹ boat which he proposed to use on the Pungwe in an expedition to open a route to Beira after the Column had reached its destination. It was now tried out successfully on some long pools in the Umfuli. There was an incident here too which apparently lingered long in Pioneer memories. Mail arrived from down country but proved to be their own bag, sent off the week before, which had become reversed at Fort Victoria and returned to them, while what should have been theirs was travelling south again from Fort Victoria. Another small detachment of Police was left here to man a post station. That night, the 7th, the Column,

laagered well into what is now the Chiota Tribal Trust Land; at that time it was almost totally denuded of any population.

On Monday the 8th they crossed the Nyatsime and turned north-west to parallel it up to the Hunyani, travelling through the length of the present Seki TTL. They found the country between the two rivers to be beautiful and, as one comparison had it, rather like English park scenery, but there was doubt as to its suitability for farming owing to the number of marshes. This was of particular interest because there had been some talk of this being a possible area from which the agricultural needs of the new community could be met and there was a general feeling amongst the Pioneers that they would rather choose their own sites than have areas allocated.

On the night of the 9th, the Column laagered eight miles from the Hunyani, from 7.30



The final part of the journey, enlarged from "Map of the route . . . copied from a compass sketch by F. C. Selous as far as Fort Charter, the remainder from a sketch by W. E. Fry". War Office, December, 1870.

- Tentative identification of features are:—
- a) The Salisbury Kopje.
 - b) Harari Hospital Kopje.
 - c) Warren Hills.
 - d) Hartmann Hill.
 - e) Highlands.
 - f) Epworth.

p.m. to 5.30 a.m., for it was too dark for the usual night travel. Again the absence of population between the Umfuli and the Hunyani draws comment in the diaries: Biscoe mentions the old cultivations and Hoste that the Matabele "had swept the country clean, and with the exception of an isolated village here and there perched on the top of an almost inaccessible kopje there were no signs of any inhabitants".

The main body came riding down to the Hunyani on the afternoon of Wednesday, 10th September, and laagered on the south bank, in what is now St. Mary's Mission Township. The river

was low and the crossing sandy, and 'A' Troop was at work on a passage through the sand. That night the sky was lit with some large ship's rockets, sent up to guide some stragglers.

THE HUNYANI TO SALISBURY

Reveille on Thursday, 11th September, was at 5 a.m. and the wagons were on the move by 5.45, Pioneer Corps first, and Police second. As they crossed they went into laager on the north bank, and rested there until 3 p.m. when they

started again; 'A' Troop of the Pioneers was away earlier, still acting as the advance guard and, although the expectation of Matabele hostility was now minimal, there were the usual flanking patrols and rear guard.

It is not clear how many wagons there were at this stage as no doubt some had been left



The posting station, on the Salisbury bank of the Hunyani, 1890.

(Photo: Ellerton Fry)

at Fort Victoria and Charter, perhaps 90 in all, with the enormous special wagons for the donkey engine, generator and searchlight, together with the pieces and limbers of the artillery troop. The whole advancing across the veld in a double

column 50 yards apart must have been a notable sight, a column about 1½ miles long.

The crossing place was described as sandy, the river was low and it was necessary to reinforce it with reeds and grass and cut some access slopes. Ellerton Fry, the photographer, had not been overly active since leaving Victoria but he did take two plates of the crossing—one shows a wagon in difficulty with two full spans of oxen.

I am indebted to Miss B. Tredgold, of Chizororo, for guidance to the site of the crossing. There is an old drift which is the remains of the later main road, and a little upstream from it a stretch of bank very similar to that shown in Fry's photographs. The nature of the river here however has changed since the 1890's as deep pools have been created by the digging of sand for use in Salisbury.

Another postal relay station was established on the Salisbury side of the crossing, working back to the one on the Umfuli which in turn worked to Fort Charter.

It must be remembered that the route taken by the Column became automatically the main route to the south until gradually corners came to be cut as more negotiable variations were adopted. But certainly for the first few years in the 1890's the main road from Salisbury to Charter and thence eventually to Kimberley, to Cape Town and to the Company's Head Office in London, was the road the Column was now marking out. From the Hunyani it had some curious curves, to the north-east and then back to west and then north again avoiding rocky country and seeking easy crossings over the streams

and vleis. The little stream Nyrongo comes from the higher ground of Retreat and wanders past the Derbyshire quarries; it lay across the Column's path and had to be followed upstream for a while before there was a suitable transit in open country clear of rocky outcrops. The target was still Mount Hampden, 20 miles away, and the next minor obstacle was the Makabusi. The chosen crossing place was at what was later known as the Six Mile Spruit, where there is a firm shelf across the stream close to the present Seven Mile Hotel on the Salisbury-Beatrice road.¹ The Column went into laager on the south of the Makabusi close to the crossing point. There was some excitement that evening (the 11th). Hoste relates that just after the laager had been formed a veld fire came roaring down on it, fanned by a fresh breeze—"all hands turned out and put in an hour fighting it, it nearly reached the laager; we managed to stop it, but only just".

It was in this area that the Column came into contact again with the African population for several of the diarists mention villages perched on the kopjes in the neighbourhood. Fry took some photographs of one amongst some rocks which are easily recognisable today, near the old Glen Norah farmhouse. Nearby too was the men's first sight of a bushman painting.¹ Meanwhile Pennefather was engaged on a particular duty. He was in command of the Column and in the absence of Colquhoun it was he who had to be satisfied that Johnson completed his contract. Early on that morning of the 11th, while the Column was getting itself across the Hunyani, Pennefather with his staff officer, Sir John Willoughby, and Captain Burnett, of the Pioneers, had left it to choose a suitable site for a fort near Mount Hampden, and not only for a fort but for the settlement and eventual capital city that would grow up around it.

At the Makabusi they got a guide from Matephi's kraal amongst the rocks and rode on



Kraal (Matephi's) on the Makabusi, September, 1890.

(Photo: Canon F. R. T. Balfour)

following the stream, then they crossed to the head of the Gwebi which they reached at 10 that morning. They rode down the Gwebi towards Mount Hampden for about five miles before turning north-east to follow the edge of the escarpment overlooking the Mazoe Valley. "Finding that the water supply in the Gwibi valley and at the edge of the plateau was

not sufficient for what might eventually be the seat of government, with a considerable population, I returned to the valley of the Makobisi and selected the site where the camp now is", said Pennefather in a later report.

So that day, the 11th September, the site of Salisbury was selected and Pennefather and his two companions camped for the night somewhere nearby, while the column was in laager at the Six Mile Spruit.

Frank Johnson has a supplementary account in his *Great Days* (1940).



The site of the Kraal on the Makabusi, at Glen Norah, June, 1972.

(Photo: E. E. Burke)

According to this he rode forward from Six Mile Spruit on the 11th to a "good-sized kopje" about five miles ahead and from the top of this he saw Mount Hampden in the distance and also a splendid "open plain with rich red soil . . . which

stretched away from the kopje I was on to the east to more broken country and was bounded to the south by a stream which would be ideal for a good-sized town".

He hurried back to the Column and collected Jameson whom he induced to return to the kopje when Jameson, acting for Rhodes, decided to accept the spot instead of Mount Hampden. Finally Johnson sent off messengers to the advance guard to turn back to the kopje. This account and also the account of the following day, the last day of the trek, differ in some regards from the accounts of Pennefather and others. As Pennefather's was written within a few days of the events and Johnson's many years later one must prefer the former.

Reveille was at 5 a.m. on the 12th and at 5.45 the wagons began to splash across the rocky underwater ledge at the Six Mile Spruit and then its route lay through the present Highfield and Lochinvar. Somewhere near here the main body was met by Burnett sent by Pennefather to re-direct it to the chosen site and so it turned towards the kopje, parallel to the present railway line.¹

Meanwhile the advance guard, 'B' Troop of the Pioneers, was apparently well up in the Belvedere area before it too was turned to join up with the main body at or near the kopje.

Pennefather had chosen the site for the final laager on the rising ground to the east of the kopje as it had some defensive virtues, a stream on one side and a marsh on another. To get there the Column had to edge round the marsh that the Kingsway area then was, So it went, along the line of Pioneer Street, up to the Park and then down the line of First Street. According to Armstrong the final laager was reached at 10 a.m., Friday 12th September, 1890. It had been five months since the first parties set out from the railhead at Kimberley. The laager was stated in one source to be half a mile from "the hill" to its west.³ Hoste in later recollection said it was near the intersection of Gordon Avenue and First Street. A close examination of Fry's photographs would indicate from the lie of the land that it was possibly a little further South, in the area where First Street meets Manica Road, but the point is not important.

The laager was dispersed on 30th October, 1890.

It seems there was no large African population in the neighbourhood, there is no mention of any after leaving the Makabusi, there were signs of previous settlement on the kopje but no present settlement. Pennefather comments in his first report that there were several small tribes under chiefs independent of each other strung along the north bank of the Hunyani—Inyamwenda, Umsweske, Nichesa and others—all of whom welcomed the expedition, and with whom a considerable trade in grain and other produce quickly developed. Fry's map indicates a "Thickly populated ridge" to the east; identification is not certain but it would seem to be the ridge running from Epworth Mission to Mabvuku.

Column Orders for the day of arrival are worth quoting in full:—

"Morning Col. Orders by Col. Pennyfather:

1. It is notified for general information that the Column having arrived at its destination will halt.
2. The name of the place will be Fort Salisbury.¹
3. Reveille in future will be 5 a.m. Sunset Retreat.
4. A Cossack post will mount daily at daybreak on the hill about half a mile west of laager and will be withdrawn at Retreat.²
5. A mounted Water Patrol in three reliefs will be detailed daily from 6 a.m. until Retreat.
6. The Pioneer Force will furnish two Scouts daily until further orders. They will report themselves to Staff Officer at daybreak.
7. All latrines to be dug at West side of laager. No trenches of any sort for kitchens or otherwise to be dug on the South and East.
8. All cattle to be kraaled on the South side of the river.
9. No shooting will be allowed within a radius of three miles from camp.
10. Boundaries. Cossack post on the West. Skyline on the North, the

wooded ridge nearest the laager on the East and the granite kopjes on the South side of the laager."

B/O Sd. J. Willoughby S.O.

Evening Co. Orders:

Detail

1. Countersign "Kisber"⁴

Capt. of day Capt. Heaney

Inlying Picquet Pioneers

2. The Column will parade in full dress, dismounted, at 10 a.m. The 7-pounders will fire a Royal Salute, with blank amm., to celebrate the hoisting of the British Flag.

3. The O.C. 'B' Trp. B.S.A.P. will be good enough to detail a working party to cut poles for the huts at an hour to be fixed upon by the O.C. 'B' Troop.¹

4. The O.C. Pioneers will be good enough to detail a working party for the Fort at 2.30 p.m.²

5. Lt. Col. Pennefather congratulates the Officers, N.C.O.s and Men of the Column on the successful attainment of the object of the Expedition, viz. the occupation of Mashonaland. He wishes to express his thanks to all ranks of the Pioneers and the Police for the hearty goodwill which they have brought to bear in overcoming the obstacles of a difficult march. Col. Pennefather desires especially to thank Mr. Selous and the Officers, N.C.O.s and Troopers employed on the intelligence service for the excellent work performed by them, and would especially mention the admirable manner in which the scouting has been carried out by Lt. Nicholson, Col. Montague, Troopers Cowie, Griffiths, Newmayer and others. The hard work of road cutting and drift making has been excellently done by 'A' and 'B' Troops under Capt. Heaney and Hoste. Col. Pennefather trusts that the good fortune and services which has attended the Expedition collectively may follow the individual Members of it when the Column breaks up.

B.O. Sd. J. Willoughby S.O."



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Reference

[Burke, E.E., 1890. Fort Victoria to Fort Salisbury: The latter part of the journey of the Pioneer Column in 1890. Rhodesiana Society, Publication 28, July 1973](#)

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