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# ***Australia in the Second Anglo-Boer War***

a paper based on a presentation to the Institute on 29 April 2014 by

**Lieutenant Colonel John Howells, RFD (Ret'd)**  
Royal United Services Institute, New South Wales<sup>1</sup>



*The six Australian colonies, then the Commonwealth of Australia, each sent several contingents of mounted infantry, infantry and supporting troops to fight in the Boer War from 1899 to 1902. Over 500 Australians died in the conflict. The major engagements in which Australians participated are described. Australia emerged from the war with its own fiercely-independent military tradition.*

**Key words:** South Africa; Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902; Australia.

With ANZAC centenary commemorations upon us, it behoves us to look at our nation in the years that led up to its involvement in World War I. Australia was at war in 1901 when the continent's six colonies federated to become a sovereign nation, a Commonwealth within the British Empire. The Second Anglo-Boer War took place almost as far from our shores as Europe. Over 500 of our citizens were to die in the conflict, one created by economic envy, an overwhelming desire to influence and, to a small extent, stand up for the disenfranchised.

## **Background to the Anglo-Boer War**

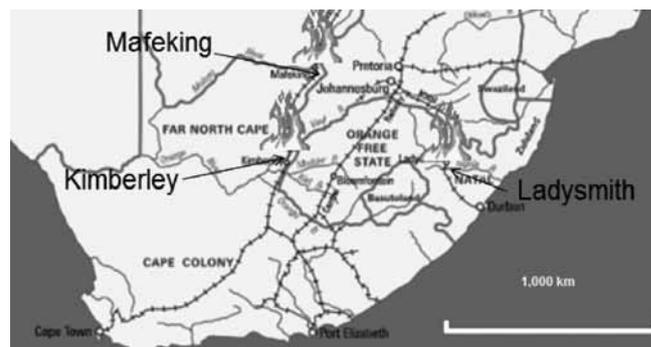
The Dutch began colonising the Cape in 1652, but lost sovereignty to the British in 1815 by the Treaty of Vienna which ended the Napoleonic Wars. In 1835, the Boers began their Great Trek inland; and in 1862 the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) – also referred to as the South African Republic or the Transvaal – and the Orange Free State (OFS) were granted independence. Diamonds were discovered in the Boer Republics in 1869 and gold in 1886, the same year that Cecil Rhodes founded Rhodesia, north of the ZAR.

This discovery and subsequent exploitation of the mineral resources was the ultimate trigger for the conflict. The Boer Republics had confirmed their right to exist in 1880 in the First Boer War where the British were soundly defeated. Boer society, however, was rural and exclusive. Farmers were free to work their properties, and it was only they who were free to take part in the democratic process of government. Indigenous black and yellow people were regarded as 'drawers of water and hewers of wood', and foreigners (uitlanders) as outsiders. It was the foreigners, though, who exploited the gold and diamonds. By 1890, there were more people in Johannesburg and more economic activity was generated there than in the rest of the Transvaal; and those involved were disenfranchised. Those outside the borders (mainly in the British colonies) looked in with envy – they wanted a piece of the action.

After the failure of the Jamison raid into the ZAR in 1895, the British reinforced garrisons in their surrounding possessions and in response the two Boer Republics entered a formal alliance. Then, on 10 October 1899, the British Government received an ultimatum from the Boers demanding that additional British forces be removed from the British colonies of the Cape and Natal. The ultimatum gave the British 48 hours to act or the Boers would declare war. The Boers struck out and lay siege to the key towns of Mafikeng, Kimberley and Ladysmith.



South Africa in 1899 [Map: Wikipedia commons].



Towns besieged by the Boers at the start of the war [Map: Wikipedia commons].

## **The Anglo-Boer War**

The British sent out an appeal to the colonies for: "Manageable numbers of dutiful military apprentices – company-sized units, preferably foot soldiers that could

<sup>1</sup>John Howells is the Institute's webmaster. These are his personal views.

embark by 31 October 1899 and be attached to regular regiments on arrival. They would be paid at the usual low regular army rates, and any wounded or invalided man would be eligible for a regular army pension” (Wilcox 2002: 20). No cavalry, artillery or medical services were requested, of course, being considered far too sophisticated for colonials to provide.

The following data on the participation in the conflict of combat forces from different nations serve to put Australia’s contribution into perspective:

| Source nation        | Total served   | Total deaths  | Non-combat deaths |
|----------------------|----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| United Kingdom       | 337,435        | 16,786        | 12,482            |
| Australian           | 16,175         | 516           | 267               |
| Other Colonial       | 94,825         | 4,640         | 3,419             |
| <b>Total British</b> | <b>448,435</b> | <b>21,942</b> | <b>16,168</b>     |
| <b>Boer</b>          | <b>87,365</b>  | <b>7,140</b>  |                   |

In addition, some 116,500 people from the Boer side were incarcerated in concentration camps of whom 26,000 whites and 20,000 blacks died. Further, some 500,000 horses served in the conflict of which 300,000 died.

There were some 150 engagements involving Australians. I will discuss a few illustrative examples starting with Lieutenant-General Lord Methuen’s advance along the line of the western railway to relieve Kimberley. A squadron of New South Wales Lancers had been training with British cavalry in England since April 1899 mostly at their own expense. As the prospect of war in South Africa loomed, their commander Captain Cox had lobbied the British and New South Wales governments for permission to take part. The squadron left England as war was declared and arrived in Cape Town to the news that they could stay and fight. With no horses and little equipment, the squadron quickly assembled a troop of 29 (one officer Lieutenant F. S. Osborne and 28 other ranks), mounted them on cape ponies and sent them north. They de-trained at the rail centre of de Aar and were sent to join Lord Methuen’s force.



*The hills near Belmont Railway Station, with inset showing the hill and rocks where the first Australian shots were fired [Photo: the author].*

### Conventional Warfare Phase

As the Lancers arrived, the general’s army had struck the first covering position deployed by the Boers on hills near Belmont railway station, some 80 km south of Kimberley. Attached to the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers, the troop was given the task of covering the lancers’ withdrawal, should it be necessary, as

they skirmished forward. It was necessary; the shots fired by the troop were the first by soldiers in Australian uniform in this war.

The troop then took part in the subsequent covering force battles of Grasspan and Modder River before lining up to take the main position at Magersfontein; a line of kopjes covering the rail line to Kimberley. It was the Boer general, de la Rey, who came up with the innovative layout. Commandos were entrenched at the base of the kopjes taking advantage of the flat trajectory of their Mauser rounds, their smokeless powder making it difficult for the British to target, and the deep trenches difficult for the Free Staters to slip away from as they had tended to do in the covering force engagements.

The Boer battle plan was a success. The troopers were the only Australians at this Black Week battle. Their task was to guard the guns of the Royal Horse Artillery who, even with a balloon spotting for them, found it difficult to target the Boer trenches.

The other lancers, joined by Australian infantry companies now mounted, were soon in action 500 km east at Colesberg. Tom Morris, a farm labourer from Singleton, became the first Australian nominated for the Victoria Cross when he rescued his mate, Harrison, after his horse was shot from under him. With General French in command, the Stormberg (another Black Week battle) defeat was avenged and the Boers were pushed from Colesberg. Casualties rose, the first Australian in an Australian uniform to die was Victor Jones, a trooper of the Queensland Mounted Infantry, at Sunnyside 20 km west of Belmont on 1 January 1900. The next casualties were at Colesberg where a single patrol on 17 January saw the deaths of the first New South Welshman, Troop Sergeant Major Griffin, and first Lancer, Corporal Kilpatrick. The Australians started to make their name here as the casualties mounted. The first Victorian, South Australian and Western Australian also died here.

The successful French was soon rushed off to seize a more iconic prize. Taking many of his mounted colonials with him, he joined Methuen south of the Magersfontein feature. Kimberley was to be relieved by a wide flanking move to the east. Five hundred horses later, the diamond city was relieved.



*Kimberley c. 1900, recreated [Photo: the author].*

Boer forces drew back from the city, General Cronje deciding to make a stand at Paardeberg on the Modder River. Here the tactics used by the Boers were brilliant. The riverbank was used as the major entrenchment. The low trajectory of the Mauser rounds was again used to decimate the British attacks over the wide open ground. Australian forces were building; they took part, but did not make a great showing here. It was the Scottish infantry who bore the brunt of the fighting and took most of the casualties. One Australian special service officer, who died commanding a company of

<sup>2</sup>Taken from British War Office and AWM records – some figures are projections.

the Black Watch, Lieutenant Gideon Grieve, was an exception.

Good tactics, however, could not counter the numbers the British could now field or the gallantry of the Canadians who delivered the *coup de grâce*. General Cronje found his forces and supply train surrounded; surrender was the only alternative. On 27 February 1900 surrender he did, and so ended the last conventional battle.

What followed was a fighting withdrawal, first to Bloemfontein, capital of the OFS, thence to Pretoria capital of the ZAR. The Boer forces were eventually seen off in the battle of Diamond Hill 11-12 June 1900. The war should have been over, Ladysmith had been relieved on 1 March, and Mafikeng 11 May. Even in May, Queensland Bushmen, fresh for the fray having spent weeks on the narrow gauge railway and dusty roads from Beira in what is now Mozambique, were so eager to take part in the war before it ended they rushed forward without orders to attempt to fight for Mafikeng.

### Guerrilla Warfare Phase

Now began the guerrilla campaign; Boer Forces seeking to disrupt and demoralise the occupiers. On 22 July 1900, De Wet had derailed and looted a train, before moving towards the OFS village of Vredefort. Part of a nearby British force, accompanied by members of the New South Wales Medical team, was sent to investigate. Among the first to fall in the forward line was a young trumpeter, who lay shot through the bladder and bleeding severely as his comrades were forced to retreat.

Lieutenant Howse did not hesitate. Digging his spurs into his horse, he charged through literally a hail of bullets to the wounded man. The brave doctor's horse dropped dead under him. Undaunted, Howse grabbed his medical bag and ran forward on foot. Reaching the trumpeter, he dressed his wound and while bullets flew round him, lifted the man onto his shoulders and carried him to safety. For his courage, Lieutenant Howse was awarded the Victoria Cross – the first ever awarded to someone in an Australian unit, and the only one ever awarded to an Australian medical officer.

With Pretoria and Mafikeng secure, a supply depot was established mid-way between them, where the road crossed the Elands River. It was garrisoned by Australian Bushmen from all colonies, Queensland Mounted Infantry, 200 Rhodesian volunteers and some other horsemen; 500 defenders in all. It was a prize the Boers could not resist. From 4 – 16 August 1900, Boer General de la Rey lay siege. Attempts were made by forces led by Carrington and Baden-Powell to relieve the post. With communications cut, Kitchener was advised the post was lost. Not so; the garrison held out. Eventually, whilst on another task, Kitchener himself, with an overwhelming relief force, stumbled on the position. The story of the siege is the stuff of legend. They had been outnumbered by four or five to one and they had been massively out-gunned, but had not shown the slightest sign of surrendering. They had lost heavily in horses – over 1400 of the 1550 in the post were killed. Among the men, the casualties had been amazingly light; of the 77 casualties, only eight Australians had died.



*The horseshoe hills that form the Rhenosterkop feature  
[Photo: the author].*

Rhenosterkop (100 km north-east of Pretoria) could perhaps be rated the first occasion where troops from all the Australian colonies and New Zealand were involved. Fought against Boer General Viljoen on 29 November 1900, it was mainly the Australian Bushmen contingents that took part. The Australians had 12 casualties (mainly Queenslanders) and the New Zealanders had 28. The horseshoe-shaped position, with the horns facing the British advance and Boer laager at the rear, was classic. General Paget, in command of the force embodying the Australian and New Zealand troops, attacked the position's front door; the fighting was fierce. However, as Viljoen recognised the British were massing their forces to a point where the 5000 he could field would be substantially outnumbered, he withdrew from the position. General Paget achieved one of the many pyrrhic victories that were to plague the developing guerrilla phase of the war.

The saddest incident I will review is that of Grobelaar Recht on 16 May 1901. It took place south-east of Pretoria where the road crossed a non-perennial creek. The 5<sup>th</sup> Western Australian Mounted Infantry was the second last contingent sent by Western Australia. Anthony Forrest, the son of the Premier's brother, was an experienced cadet and desperate to prove himself on the battlefield. Dad organised a commission for him at age 16. He lasted three months in the combat zone. Giving him charge of a squad picquetting a supply wagon, his commander possibly considered he was protecting his young charge. The Boers, however, were short of supplies. As the wagon approached the boggy spruit, Boers laying in ambush rose from a mealie (maize) field and fired, killing Forrest. The raiding party were driven off, unable to claim their prize, and in this action, two more Western Australians were killed.



*Grobelaar Recht, showing the mealie field  
and the line of the old road  
[Photo: the author].*

The war continued. One particular tragedy, with consequences that possibly saved many Australian lives in subsequent wars, stands out. In June 1901, a newly arrived contingent from Victoria, the 5<sup>th</sup> Victorian Mounted Rifles, under the command of a British officer (Major Morris RA) with no South African experience, was tracking a party of Boers. On 12 June, they camped for the night near Wilmansrust farm. Unbeknown to the Victorians, they too were being tracked by another party of Boers. Major Morris personally placed the piquets, some up to 1 km away from the encampment where, in accord with King's Regulations and consistent with his experience in India, he ordered the soldiers to erect their bell tents, stack their weapons outside their accommodation and bed down for a good night's rest.

In the dimming light of sunset, the tracking Boers, dressed in salvaged British khaki, easily passed the sparsely placed guard parties, crawling to within 30 metres of the main camp. The result was a massacre – “they ran along the line of saddles and shot men in their beds” – 18 were killed and 42 wounded, the largest casualty list of any Australian contingent in the war. The action ended when an order given by a well-spoken Boer to the detachment's bugler resulted in ‘cease fire’ being sounded. This saved lives but resulted in unfounded accusations of cowardice being levelled at the Victorians.

On hearing of the debacle, General Beatson in charge of the column was heard to remark: "I tell you what I think. The Australians are a damned fat, round shouldered, useless crowd of wasters ... In my opinion they are a lot of white-livered curs ... you can add dogs too" (Chamberlain 1985). News of these remarks filtered down through the ranks.

On 7 July, when the Victorians were ordered out on another operation, Trooper James Steele was overheard by nearby British officers to say: "It will be better for the men to be shot than to go out with a man who called them white-livered curs". Steele and troopers Arthur Richards and Herbert Parry were arrested, given a summary court-martial and sentenced to death. Lord Kitchener intervened. He commuted the sentences – Steele to do 10 years' jail, the others to do one year each. Controversy continued when a speech in the new Federal Parliament lingered on how the aftermath of Wilmansrust was a disgraceful way to treat men who had volunteered to go to war. The men were ultimately released, the court-martial deemed not to have followed proper process. The Boer War was the last time a death sentence given an Australian soldier was not commuted.

As the conflict dragged on into 1902 the Boer tactics were well established. Where possible, draw a manageable British force into an ambush, attack with overwhelming force, take their uniforms, weapons and supplies, then leave. Do not kill the prisoners, just humiliate them by stripping them almost naked and leave them on the veld. The Boer wagon trains were becoming smaller. The once self-sufficient travelling communities, full families complete with driven stock and mobile flour mills, had faded. Kitchener's scorched earth policy was working. As supplies ran low, children suffered. Boer commanders saw no alternative but to hand their families over to the British. Even as peace approached, however, the bitter enders, their skills honed by two years in the field, were capable of delivering humiliation. The action at Onverwacht, a few kilometres south east of Ermelo, on 4 January 1902 stands testament.

This time it was the 5<sup>th</sup> Queensland Imperial Bushmen who were to suffer. They were the advance guard of a major force tracking Boers under General Opperman. They were banded together with British troops under a British Major Vallentin. Shortly after they had come to a halt in undulating terrain, they noticed about 50 Boers on the flank of a small ravine. Without waiting to familiarise himself with the unknown terrain, Major Vallentin decided to chase the small party of Boers. As they charged down the hollow, they were surprised by 300 Boers who had been concealed by the ground to their flanks.

The superior power of the Boers forced Vallentin's force back. The Boers could then concentrate on trying to seize a British Pom-Pom. Lightning-fast action by the Queenslanders under their own Major Toll allowed the Pom-Pom to withdraw. However, with all their horses shot, a final stand was made on a bare knoll against a force now of 500 Boers. Thirteen young Queenslanders died, the rest taken prisoner to be stripped and released.

General Louis Botha tried to operate on the Eastern Transvaal Highveld between the blockhouse lines for about another month. After the Battle of Onverwacht, resisting became more and more senseless. Negotiations between the warring parties had been sporadic in nature for some time. In early 1901, Kitchener had reached an agreement on terms to end the conflict only to have these rejected by the British government. A meeting was called at a tented encampment at Vereeniging, on the border of the ZAR and OFS 50 km south of Johannesburg. There, terms were agreed and although

remarkably similar to those agreed twelve months' previously, acceded to by London. Rather than signing them off in a tent, they were formally signed in Melrose House, the splendid gentleman's residence in Pretoria that Kitchener had commandeered as his headquarters.



Melrose House [Photo: the author].

## Conclusion

So what came out of this war? The Transvaal and Orange Free State became part of British South Africa. Within nine years, South Africa became a self-governing Dominion led by Boer generals. This resulted in no granting of any 'legal equality' or 'the vote' to either black or coloured South Africans as was promised in the treaty of Vereeniging. We know, of course, the terrors that followed with the introduction of 'Apartheid' in the decades after. It took until 27 April 1994 for the democratic elections, with people of all races being able to vote, to take place as agreed in the treaty.

Australia came out of the war with its own military tradition, a fiercely independent one that distrusted commanders who had been bred to lead regardless of their competence. It ensured that ground rules on command were laid down before our troops were committed to World War 1. No longer would our soldiers be willing military apprentices to be sacrificed on the altar of 'well-bred' incompetence. No longer would they be subject to the death penalty for crimes as slight as a bit of back-chat.

**The Author:** John Howells served in the Australian Armed Forces for 32 years mostly in the Army Reserve, with 20 years in the Armoured Corps. His Regimental service was with the Royal New South Wales Lancers at Parramatta. He retired from the Army in 1995 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and was awarded the Reserve Force Decoration. Subsequently, he became a volunteer guide at the Lancers' Museum, and is now its secretary and public officer. A parallel civil career included time as a manager with the National Archives of Australia and a computer systems manager with the Commonwealth Bank. After retirement in 2010, he established a web design business; and separately joined a group of old Army colleagues in a business taking tour groups to Australian battle sites, including the Boer War sites in South Africa. [Photo of Colonel Howells: Sean Littler]

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