

## Australia's first

### Sir Neville Howse, VC and the Boer War

This memorial is intended to commemorate people who should not be forgotten but who have been. It does not commemorate political issues in any way. Rather, it celebrates the gallantry of men who served selflessly, often in atrocious conditions, and who laid the foundations of a great and noble tradition that has underpinned Australian nationhood ever since. Some achieved honours and distinctions; others did not. This memorial will commemorate them all.

Neville Howse was one of those who won fame. Six Victoria Crosses were awarded to Australians in South Africa. Neville Howse's was the first. It is well to remember that this was the last war before the motor age. Howse rode out on horseback to rescue a bugler boy who in the midst of heavy fighting had stood to sound the retreat and was shot in the abdomen. Howse rode unarmed into hostile fire so heavy that the British force to which he was attached was forced to retreat. He saved his man but lost his horse. In those old wars horses suffered even more than men. One horrifying statistic of the Boer War is that the British Army, according to official parlance, "expended" 347,000 horses. Think of the outcry if that happened now.

Howse lost his horse but he won the Victoria Cross. He went on to distinction. He was the first commander of a unit in the Australian Army to include men from every Australian state. It was the Bearer Company of 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Commonwealth Contingent to South Africa in 1902. Later, for his great services in the care of the wounded at the Landing at Gallipoli, he was the first Australian in World War I to be appointed Companion of the Order of the Bath. A little later, he was the first Australian in World War I to receive in person the accolade of knighthood from His Majesty the King. We are seated today a few hundred metres from another scene of his achievements. As Minister for Territories in 1927, he was in charge of arrangements for the opening of the Provisional Parliament House just across the water. As Minister for Defence in 1925, the man who rode a horse into battle in 1900 conceived a plan for the future defence of Australia based on aircraft. It did not involve hugely expensive and ultimately pointless battleships and hugely expensive

naval bases like Singapore, soon to be proved utterly useless, but Howse proposed to introduce amphibious aircraft to the Royal Australian Air Force. It made good sense for a country with a vast coastline to defend and very few airstrips in the remote North, but the money was not there to put it into effect. As Minister for Health, he did all in his power to promote the health of the nation, convinced that there would be another war within 20 years. The farsightedness of this remarkable man is amazing.

Sir Neville Howse would not want me to be saying all this today. As an eminent man in later years, he seldom wore his decorations. What he did always wear was the A.I.F. badge issued to all the Diggers of the Great War. Neville Howse would want the tributes today to be paid to the common man. The Boer War was not only the last of the old colonial wars. It was also the first modern war both in military and human terms. Militarily, it was the first total war, sweeping up a whole civilian population in its devastation. In human terms, from now on, private soldiers would matter, not only generals. I shall conclude with the story of one of them. His name was David Willis, and he grew up in the little village of Beecroft on the outskirts of Sydney. At the outbreak of war in October 1899, he enlisted in the New South Wales Infantry Unit, which sailed for South Africa on 3 November. He was killed in a skirmish at Elands Kop on 1 October 1900, a day before his 20th birthday. He was still a teenager, too young to vote, but old enough to die for his Queen and Empire. What is remarkable about this obscure boy is that his local community clubbed together to raise a memorial in his memory. More than 500 people came from near and far to attend the unveiling. This says much about the emerging Australian national consciousness. It is one of very few memorials to commemorate an individual soldier in the war, though civic memorials are scattered throughout Australia, everywhere except the national capital.

And soon we shall have a National Memorial to all the Australian soldiers of the Boer War, the famous and the unknown. As a nation we stand upon their shoulders.

Stuart Braga

Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2008