

ELANDS RIVER ENGAGEMENT – AUG 1900

The actions of Australian soldiers at Elands River, or Brakfontein as the Boers called it, should have earned them a battle honour a latter day military symposium concluded.

The Royal United Services Institution of NSW undertook the investigation into an action of the Boer War (1899-1902) some years ago. At the time efforts were made to have a clasp struck to commemorate this defence.

Five hundred and five Australian Bushmen and Rhodesian colonials fought courageously for 10 days in August 1900 against superior Boer forces under General Koos de la Rey on the Elands River in the Western Transvaal.

It appeared that a clasp met with General Lord Kitchener's approval. Though the rolls were reportedly drawn up, it was not awarded, the War Office claiming that this would set a precedent for other small actions for which clasps had not been awarded.

In the book, *The War with Johnny Boer*, Max Chamberlain and Robin Droogleever, point out how the attitude of the Victorian Bushmen contributed to their casualties. Major David Ham, their C.O. recounted how the soldiers believed it was an act of cowardice to dig a deep trench.

“The officers had a very trying time with the men, and my fellows, getting sick of being cooped up for days, would insist on getting out and challenging the snipers to fire at them,” he reported.

“They would not believe that it was an order not to do so, and I heard them accusing me of cowardice because I would not let them go out.

Some of them who did stay under cover were called by these fool-hardy fellows a lot of funks, and I had a job with them. It was the same with the officers.”

Another Victorian Bushmen’s account from Frederick Bates tells of losing 30 killed and wounded on the first day. “The rations, 40,000 pounds worth, in camp were blown all over the place; we lost all our horses, 500 in all, some having their legs blown off and all the bullocks and mules were killed. One of the men wounded on the first day had his leg blown off, and the man beside him had an arm blown off and his side ripped open.

“The best part of the siege was the tucker, consisting of jam, biscuit and meat in any quantity – it was a long time since we had such a treat.

“We lost on the second day four or five wounded, and when night fell we would pick away and down foot or two. Well by the 10th day they (the Boers) cleared out with their big guns, and I think they must have run short of ammunition, but the snipers were still in the creek. Well, on the

12th night three rockets were sent up and not a shot was fired afterwards by the Boers.

“Next morning we could see a big body of troops coming across the kopje, which turned out to be Kitchener with 10,000 men, and next day (General) Methuen arrived with 5000 and shortly afterwards we moved off with him to our present camp, Zeerust.”

This truncated account tells of an early act of military defiance against great odds – 2000 to 3000 Boer commandos with six guns, three pom-poms and a machine gun.

The mixed Australian force had no reply to the shelling of the Boer gunners except their accurate rifle fire, which made them keep to the safety of the hills. The Boers offered terms of surrender.

When finally relieved by Kitchener and a large British force, Lieutenant Colonel R.V. Kelly of the NSW Army Medical Corps, wrote: “It was as grand a defence as the Residency at Lucknow and in that these men would have been safe if they had given in, it was a plucky performance. We were marched to their relief and they cheered when we came in sight and received us with great excitement and affectionate greetings.”

Australian actions in the Boer War are at last to be commemorated with a memorial in Anzac Parade Canberra.

On May 31, a site is to be dedicated for a memorial to Australians who went to South Africa, fighting for the first time in the name of Australia following federation in 1901.

All other major wars that Australians have fought in have been remembered. Australia lost more soldiers fighting in the Boer War than in Vietnam. That makes it our third most devastating war after World War 1 and World War 11. It has taken too long for Australia to recognise these sacrifices.

Boer War Memorial Committees have been set up in all States and Territories.

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