

**THE 31<sup>ST</sup> MAY**  
**An Address by Nigel Webster**  
**At the National Boer War Memorial Dedication Ceremony**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> May 2008 it will be exactly 106 years since the signing of the Peace treaty at Vereeniging in South Africa, thereby ending the Anglo-Boer War. Peace had come after 32 weary months to conclude the first of the modern wars.

It was a conditional peace too. That much had been won by the Boers, for to make it unconditional would have prolonged a war which was no longer a popular one. The defeated states of the Transvaal and Orange Free State were annexed to the British Empire and together with the British Colonies of Natal and the Cape Colony, were prepared for a Union of South African states which came into existence with the Act of Union in 1910.

Australia's colonies had been formed into a Federation in 1901, while the war was still being fought.

The Peace of Vereeniging of 31<sup>st</sup> May 1902 was, like the Versailles Treaty of 1919, an imperfect document that was to throw up more problems in the future than was ever intended.

It is ironic that the first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa was the Boer General Louis Botha. And it was Louis Botha and Jan Smuts, another Boer General, who took South Africa into the 1<sup>st</sup> World War on Britain's side.

Unfortunately, it polarised the Dutch population, and led to the growth of Afrikaner nationalism, and a laager mentality, which finally obtained power through the ballot box in 1949, and resulted in the implementation of apartheid in the country, which ensured the non-franchisement of the black South Africans for the next 50 years.

Although the Boer War has had a negative impact on South Africa, it actually had a positive effect on Australia's development. In general terms it played an important role in shaping what can be defined as "the Australian Character".

In October 1899 the Australian colonies had responded to the Empire's call and sent three waves of volunteers, and in 1901 when more volunteers were called for, the new Australian federation responded by

preparing to send out 8 battalions of Commonwealth Horse. The war by this time was drawing to a close so only the first four battalions arrived before the war was over.

Over half a million men served in South Africa, and of those there were 16,000 Australians who did their year's stint in Australian units. Add to that another 8,000 or so that served in South African colonial units and the figure is still only about 24,000 which equates to about 5%.

However, of these 500,000 men huge numbers were to be used as garrison troops in towns and blockhouses to protect lines of communication. Most of these were infantrymen, who could not keep pace with the mounted Boer horsemen. Many thousands more men were tied up in transport and supplies.

The Australians were not used in any of these tasks. They were used as front-line troops. The reason for this was that they were selected as mounted infantrymen. The Light Horse Brigades of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War were born out of these Boer war beginnings.

Australian units were in action against the Boers for almost the entire duration of the war, and during the guerilla campaign they were among the most effective of the mounted soldiers. Not one of the Australian units went without some serious action against the Boers.

Why were the Australians used as front-line troops? Because it became clear to the various column commanders (who were almost without exception from Britain) that if the Boer was to be defeated then he had to be fought on his terms.

The colonials, such as the Australians, best fitted this definition and soon virtually all Australians were serving as mounted infantry. This was essentially a mounted infantryman's war, and one of the proposed designs for a monument is that of a mounted infantryman.

Surely a most appropriate reflection of Australia's contribution? As over 90% of the Australians who served in South Africa, served in this capacity.

The close association between Australian and New Zealand troops that was manifest in the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, finds their beginnings in the Boer War.

Where New Zealanders were to be found more often than not there would be Australians in the same column side by side with their antipodean comrades. Local papers in Australia reported New Zealand casualties as well as their own.

As far as the characteristics of the Digger of WW1 are concerned, they were to be found in the Australian volunteers [the Bushmen] of the Boer War: self-sufficiency; loyalty to your mates; speedy adaptability to difficult living and fighting conditions; an irrepressible humour; courage in the face of overwhelming odds; dislike of the 'parade ground' officer; disdain for army formalities such as saluting, and maintaining a neat uniform; respect for leaders who showed they could be trusted to make a wise decision, and, of course, a penchant for larrikinism.

By February 1900 all Australian units were mounted. In March 1900, Banjo Paterson, employed as a war correspondent by *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Argus*, recorded the British Army Command's evaluation of Australian troops when he reported that three separate generals of divisions had heard that more Australian mounted troops (the Australian Bushmen) were on their way to South Africa, and each tried his best to secure the Bushmen under his command.

Two years later this high regard had not diminished. When the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of New South Wales Imperial Bushmen left at the conclusion of their service in June 1902, Lieutenant-General Sir Ian Hamilton, Chief of Staff, congratulated the men "in having played so distinguished a part in the closing scenes of the South African War, ***whereby I am convinced you have contributed in a very special degree to the termination of hostilities.***"

Australian units were to be found in most of the mobile columns that were used to hunt the most troublesome Boer commanders particularly the big three: de la Rey, De Wet, and Louis Botha. Australians took part in all three drives against the redoubtable De Wet, rated the best of the Boer Generals. In February 1901 when De Wet invaded the Cape, they pressed him so hard he was forced to return to the Orange Free State within two weeks, losing his artillery to the Australian Bushmen.

They harried Louis Botha in the eastern Transvaal throughout 1900-1901. They frequently were the 'advance guard' in Lord Methuen's campaign against the Boer commandos in the Western Transvaal.

In the final drive against de la Rey in May 1902 Lord Kitchener, the Commander-in-Chief, was prepared to throw the newly arrived and untested 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Commonwealth Horse into action against him.

This is not the occasion to chronicle the list of successful actions involving Australians. Australians won five VC's, 65 D.S.O.'s and 66 D.C.M's.

There were more casualties in the Boer War than in Vietnam.

The origin of the famous Rising Sun badge is to be found in the badge worn by the Australian Commonwealth Horse in 1902.

Many veterans of the South African war were to fight again in the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, large numbers providing the officer corps with a leavening of invaluable experience. The links between the two wars are closer than most historians have given credit.

Because this war provided the genesis of the Digger tradition it should not be forgotten. Because Australians played an active and vital role disproportionate to their numbers, they should not be marginalised.

I suggest that those who dismiss this war as inconsequential, even in Australia, should look through the local newspapers of 1900 and 1901, and see for themselves what a large event it was in the community's life, and read the letters home by the soldiers to get a better idea of what the men did there.

These men, like those who fought in Vietnam, deserve great credit for their commitment to a cause; their honour in service, and their courage in the face of a dogged enemy. Like the Digger in World War I the 'Bushmen' left a legacy of which all Australians might be proud.

At Home the war had considerable impact. The Home Front was galvanised into providing 'comforts' for the men on a large scale and Women's Associations and Patriotic Societies were at the forefront of these activities. The Churches also played a major role in supporting these organisations. A similar structure developed to help the troops in WW1 and WW2.

Local communities were proud of their contribution to the war, whether it was in the form of young men or women serving, or in the form of

material support. Local newspapers followed their local heroes with avid interest, and sadly recalled their sacrifice on memorials in the town. The same attitude was prevalent in WW1 and WW2.

When the average Australian is asked what they know about the Boer War most will say “Breaker Morant”, if they say anything at all.

The trial of Morant occurred in February 1902. The war had been on for nearly 2½ years, and had only months to go before it was over. The issue of the guilt of Morant and Handcock continues to be an academic exercise but surprisingly the legacy of that unhappy moment in the war was to be felt in many positive ways for Australia.

The trial of two Australians run by British officers under British court martial rules alienated Australians from British Military Justice once the truth was known about how the system operated. The men were presumed guilty until proven innocent.

The execution of the two men by a British firing squad was the last time that Australians were to be shot for acts committed during war. The fact that these men were volunteers made the decision even less palatable.

The same philosophy applied in WW1. The men were volunteers. No Australian was shot for cowardice, falling asleep at his post, or taking ‘French leave’ even if many AIF commanders were in favour of the death penalty.

So when you think back 106 years on this little war in the Southern hemisphere, who would have expected that anything positive for Australia could possibly have come from it? Did we learn anything to help us get through WW1 – the war to end all wars? Was the legacy of the Boer War to be of value to us in WW2?

Have we today taken for granted the benefits accrued from the Boer war? The answer is yes to all these questions, and that is why we need a physical presence in the form of a monument to remind us of this legacy.

Nigel Webster  
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