

# The Boer War

## Introduction

Towards the end of the nineteenth century elements within the South African colonies had become disgruntled with increasing interference in local affairs by the British, who had established a presence in the region from 1806. In 1899 the Boer farmers of the Transvaal and Orange Free State, descendants of Dutch settlers, declared war on the British by invading the colonies of Natal and Cape Colony. The war continued for three years, but by 1902 the British had defeated Boer resistance. The 1902 Peace of Vereeniging installed a pro-British civil administration.

**Australian involvement:** When war broke out the British government called for support across the Empire. The Australian colonies – with initial hesitation – offered support. Contingents were raised from all colonies and after Federation in 1901 a joint Commonwealth contingent was raised.

There is no agreed figure for the number of Australians who served. Craig Wilcox, in *Australia's Boer War: The War in South Africa, 1899–1902* (Oxford University Press, 2002, p. xiii) suggests figures of 'around 20,000 men and 80 women', but adds 'we will probably never know the precise number as many enlisted more than once and those with irregular regiments have never been counted and may not be countable'.

The Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour lists 598 casualties. Six Australians were awarded the Victoria Cross for their Boer War service.

## Australia and the Boer War, 1899–1902



From soon after its acquisition by Britain during the Napoleonic wars, the southern tip of Africa had been shared between British colonies and independent republics of Dutch–Afrikaner settlers, known as Boers. In order to escape British rule many Boers had moved north and east from the Cape to settle on new lands which eventually became the Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. The relationship between the British and the Boers was an uneasy one, with Britain extending its control by annexing Natal in 1845, though London did recognise the two republics in two treaties in the 1850s. Throughout the nineteenth century tensions were often high, and in 1880–81 the two sides fought a war in which the Boers inflicted several costly defeats on the British army. Coupled with the advent of a new government in London reluctant to fight the war, this ensured that the Transvaal was able effectively to maintain its independence.

The discovery of gold and diamonds in the Boer republics in the 1880s further intensified the rivalry, particularly as British subjects flooded into the Boer territories in search of wealth. The rights of British subjects in Boer territory, British imperial ambition, and the Boer desire for to stay outside the British Empire all caused more friction, which in 1899 provoked the Boers to attack in order to forestall what they saw as an impending British conquest.

As part of the British Empire, the Australian colonies offered troops for the war in South Africa. Australians served in contingents raised by the six colonies or, from 1901, by the new Australian Commonwealth. For a variety of reasons many Australians also joined British or South African colonial units in South Africa: some were already in South Africa when the war broke out; others either made their own way to the Cape or joined local units after their enlistment in an Australian contingent ended. Recruiting was also done in Australia for units which already existed in South Africa, such as the Scottish Horse.

Australians served mostly in mounted units formed in each colony before despatch, or in South Africa itself. The Australian contribution took the form of five “waves”. The first were the contingents raised by the Australian colonies in response to the outbreak of war in 1899, which often drew heavily on the men in the militia of the colonial forces. The second were the “bushmen” contingents, which were recruited from more diverse sources and paid for by public subscription or the military philanthropy of wealthy individuals. The third were the “imperial bushmen” contingents, which were raised in ways similar to the preceding contingents, but paid for by the imperial government in London. Then were then the “draft contingents”, which were raised by the state governments after Federation on behalf of the new Commonwealth government, which was as yet unable to do so. Finally, after Federation, and close to the end of the war, the Australian Commonwealth Horse contingents were raised by the new Federal government. These contingents fought in both the British counter-offensive of 1900, which resulted in the capture of the Boer capitals, and in the long, weary guerrilla phases of the war which lasted until 1902. Colonial troops were valued for their ability to “shoot and ride”, and in many ways performed well in the open war on the veldt. There were significant problems, however, with the relatively poor training of Australian officers, with contingents generally arriving without having undergone much training and being sent on campaign immediately. These and other problems faced many of the hastily raised contingents sent from around the empire, however, and were by no means restricted to those from Australia.

The Australians at home initially supported the war, but became disenchanted as the conflict dragged on, especially as the effects on Boer civilians became known.



Men from the 2nd South Australian (Mounted Rifles) Contingent, who fought in the Boer War. Third from left is Trooper Harry "The Breaker" Morant. South Africa, c. 1900.

AWM [P00220.001](#)

The conflict in South Africa is generally divided into three phases:

1. The early phase, from October to December 1899, when the British armies, mainly infantry, were defeated or besieged by highly mobile Boer mounted troops.
2. The second phase, from December 1899 until September 1900, which involved a British counter-offensive, resulting in the capture of most of the major towns and cities of South Africa.
3. The third and longest phase, from September 1900 to May 1902, when the war was mainly a guerrilla conflict between British mounted troops and Boer irregulars.

The outbreak of war had long been expected in both Britain and Australia. Believing that conflict was imminent, Queensland had offered troops in July, and the same month Britain had requested the participation of New South Wales and Victoria. Each of the colonies ultimately sent between four and six contingents. The first groups arrived in South Africa between November 1899 and March 1900; the second between December 1899 and February 1900; the third between April and May 1900; and the fourth between May and June 1900. The 4th Tasmanian, 6th Queensland, South Australian, and Western Australian contingents did not reach South Africa until March–April 1901. A further three contingents were raised by the new Commonwealth in 1901, but as they did not embark until 1902, most arrived too late for any action; indeed, some were still at sea when the war ended on 31 May 1902.

The first Australian troops arrived in South Africa in December 1899, too late to become involved in the serious British defeats of “black week” (10–17 December), when 2,300 men were killed or wounded by the Boers in three separate engagements. Five hundred

members of the Queensland Mounted Infantry and the NSW Lancers took part in the relief of Kimberley in February 1900, and men of the NSW Mounted Rifles played a minor part in the last major battle of the war, at Paardeberg, in the same month. After a series of defeats in 1900 the Boer armies became fragmented, forming groups of highly mobile commandos which harassed British troop movements and lines of supply. Faced with this type of warfare, the British commanders became increasingly reliant on mounted troops from Britain and the colonies.

Conditions for both soldiers and horses were harsh. Without time to acclimatise to the severe environment and in an army with a greatly over-strained logistic system, the horses fared badly. Many died, not just in battle but of disease, while others succumbed to exhaustion and starvation on the long treks across the veld. Quarantine regulations in Australia ensured that even those which did survive could not return home. In the early stages of the war Australian soldier losses were so high through illness that components of the first and second contingents ceased to exist as viable units after a few months of service.



In the NSW Imperial Bushmen camp, South Africa, 1900.

AWM [A04298](#)

In the second phase of the war, when the British forces captured the major South African towns, over-extended supply lines and inadequate food caused problems. Looting was widespread, and did not stop at the acquisition of bare essentials for men and their horses. Disease and epidemics also took a heavy toll. In early 1900 water contaminated by corpses and human waste infected the army during a period of rest in the captured town of Bloemfontein; 1,000 deaths resulted, mostly from typhoid.

After September 1900, by which time the war had become mainly a guerrilla conflict, Australian troops were deployed in sweeping the countryside and enforcing the British policy of cutting the Boer guerrillas off from the support of their farms and families. This meant the destruction of Boer farms, the confiscation of horses, cattle and wagons, and the rounding up of the inhabitants, usually women and children. These civilian captives were

taken to concentration camps where, weakened by malnutrition, thousands died of contagious diseases. By mid-1901 the war for the Australians was characterised by long rides, often at night, followed by an attack on a Boer farmhouse or encampment (*laager*) at dawn. The skirmishes were often minor, involving small Boer forces quickly overwhelmed by superior numbers. There were occasional fights between the Australians and larger Boer forces, but encounters with Boer commandos were rare.

The experience of the NSW Mounted Rifles in the last five months of 1901 was said to be typical: they trekked almost 3,000 kilometres and were involved in 13 skirmishes for the loss of five dead and 19 wounded. They reported killing 27 Boers, wounding 15 and capturing 196. The men spent long periods in the saddle with few opportunities to bathe or change their clothes; lice were a constant problem. Temperatures on the veld ranged from relentless heat during the day to freezing cold at night.



Members of E Company, 5th Contingent, Victorian Mounted Rifles, in action against the Boers in front of the Pongola Bosch, October 1901.

AWM [P01866.006](#)

It is generally thought that about 16,000 Australians fought in the Boer War. This figure includes those who enlisted in an Australian unit, as well as the many raised locally, but it does not allow for double-counting of those who served in two contingents. A small number of Australians are known to have fought on the Boer side. The nature of the conditions under which the war was fought can be deduced from the fact that in the Australian contingents, 282 died in action or from wounds sustained in battle, while 286 died from disease and another 38 died of accident or other unknown causes. Six Australians received the Victoria Cross in South Africa, and many others received other decorations.





William Dargie, *The incident for which Captain Howse was awarded the VC in Vredefort, July 1900*

(1968, oil on paper on board, 25.5 x 35.5 cm)

AWM [ART29246](#)

## SA Contingents to the Boer War

### South Australian Departures and Arrivals

CONTINGENT	DEPARTED	RETURNED
1st (South Australian Mounted Rifles)	November 2, 1899	November 30, 1900
2nd (South Australian Mounted Rifles)	January 26, 1900	May 12, 1901
3rd South Australian Bushmen's	February 27, 1900	June 25, 1901
4th (South Australian Imperial Bushmen)	May 1, 1900	July 27, 1901
5th (South Australian Imperial Bushmen)	February 9, 1901	April 27, 1902
6th (South Australian Imperial Bushmen)	April 6, 1901	April 27, 1902
Australian Army Medical Corps (SA)	February 11, 1902	
2nd Battalion Australian Commonwealth Horse (SA)	February 20, 1902	July 31, 1902
4th Battalion Australian Commonwealth Horse (SA)	April 1, 1902	July 24 & 31, 1902
8th Battalion Australian Commonwealth Horse (SA)	May 26, 1902	July 24, 1902

## **FIRST SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONTINGENT**

### **SOUTH AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY COMPANY/1ST SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MOUNTED RIFLES**

- Original Strength 127
- Subunits: one infantry company/later one mounted rifle squadron
- Commanding officer: Major F. H. Howland <
- Left for South Africa: 2 November 1899 on Medic
- Service: November 1899 - October 1900 in northern Cape Colony, Free State and in east Transvaal; part of Australian Regiment November 1899-April 1900, converted to mounted rifles December 1899, joined to 2nd SA Mounted Rifles April – October 1900
- Fatal casualties: two killed or died of wounds, three died of disease
- Decorations: one DSO ( J. H. Stapleton)
- Returned: 30 November 1900 on Harlech Castle
- Useful sources: Howland diary and A. D. Botha diary (Mortlock Library,

## **SECOND SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONTINGENT**

### **2ND SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MOUNTED RIFLES**

- Original strength: 119
- Subunits: one mounted rifle squadron only, consisting of:
- Contingent command - 1 Offr 1 OR
- Mounted Squadron - 5 Offr 95 Ors
- Machine Gun Detachment - 5 Ors (one Colt MG) Transport Section - 11 Ors (wagons) Total - 119  
Commanding officer: Major C. J. Reade, Left for South Africa: 21 January 1900 on Surrey
- Service: March 1900 - October 1900 or March 1901 in northwest Cape Colony,

Free State, and east Transvaal; joined to first SA contingent April-October 1900, most of contingent then becoming part of Australian Mounted Infantry Brigade c. November 1900-March 1901; H. H. Morant was a non-commissioned officer in the contingent.

- Fatal casualties: none killed or died of wounds, four died of disease
- Decorations: one CB (Reade), one DSO (J. F. Humphris), four DCMs (H. W. Brown, L. Knapman, V. M. Newland, H. L. S. B. Oglivy)
- Returned: 30 November 1900 on Harlech Castle, 12 May 1900 on Tongario
- Useful sources: Bail Diaries of Cpl Herbert Bail (1999)

### **SOUTH AUSTRALIAN NURSES**

- Original strength: nine
- Commanding officer: Sister M. S. Bidmead, Left for South Africa: mid February 1900 on Australasian.
- Service: March 1900 - 1902 in Cape Colony, Free State, and Transvaal
- Fatal casualties: none
- Decorations: RRC (Bidmead)
- Returned to Australia: unknown </LI>
- Useful sources: files of nurses (State Records of SA, GRG24/6, 40/1900, and 52/1900), nurses' letters in Adelaide Observer. 2 June 1900 p. 8, 9 June 1900 p. 7, and 21 July 1900 p. 43

### **THIRD SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONTINGENT**

#### **SOUTH AUSTRALIAN [CITIZEN] BUSHMEN**

- Original strength: 99
- Subunits: one mounted rifle squadron only
- Commanding officer: Captain S. G. Hubbe then Captain A. E. Collins
- Left for South Africa: 7 March 1900 on Maplemore



- Service: April 1900 - April 1901 in Rhodesia under Carrington and west Transvaal under Methuen; part of Composite Bushmen Regt August 1900-April 1901  
Fatal casualties: three killed or died of wounds including Hubbe, non died of disease
- Decorations: two DSOs ( Collins, C. M. Ives)
- Returned to Australia: June 1901 on Morayshire
- Useful sources: Hubbe letters (Barr Smith Library, MSS0046/1), R. Hayward memoir (Australian War Memorial, PR00996)

#### **FOURTH SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONTINGENT**

##### **SOUTH AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL BUSHMEN**

- Original strength: 234 Subunits: two mounted rifle squadrons
- Commanding officer: Lieutenant-Colonel J. Rowell
- Left for South Africa: 1 May 1900 on Manhattan
- Service: June 1900 - June 1901 as part of 4th Imperial Bushmen Regt in Cape Colony including charge at Bakenkop (3 July 1900) and skirmish at Stinkhoutboom where three killed (24 July 1900), and under Plumer in northern Transvaal including battle of Rhenoster Kop (29 November 1900), great De Wet hunt, and advance on Pietersburg and into east Transvaal.
- Fatal casualties: six killed or died of wounds, three died of disease.
- Decorations: one CB (Rowell), two DSOs (A. E. M. Norton, H. A. Reid), three DCMs (G. S. Allnut, W. F. Spencer, F. O. Thorne)
- Returned to Australia: 27 July 1901 on Britannic
- Useful sources: J. H. Wadham diaries (Mortlock Library, D5369L and D5425L)

#### **FIFTH SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONTINGENT**

- SAIB Administrative party consisting of: 1 Major (Major G H Heaney) 1 NCO, 6 Men, 50 Horses. Departed on the SS Teviotdale 10 February 1901

- References: South Australian Government [GO 2/01 10 January 1901] and Adelaide Advertiser 16 February 1901 p53

#### **5TH SOUTH AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL BUSHMEN**

- Original strength: 316
- Subunits: three mounted rifle squadrons
- Commanding officer: Major W. Scriven then Major H. L. D. Wilson
- Left for South Africa: 9 February 1901 on Ormazon
- Service: March 1901 - March 1902 under de Lisle in Free State including defence of Graspan where five dead (6 June 1901) and charge at Grootvlei (2 August 1901); amalgamated with 6th SA Imperial Bushmen May 1901-March 1902 under Major J. S. M. Shea
- Fatal casualties: nine killed or died of wounds, 10 died of disease
- Decorations: two DSOs (E. J. F. Langley, J. A. Watt), two DCMs (J. Berry, T. Kermode)
- Returned to Australia: 27 April 1902 on Manchester Merchant  
Useful sources: A. G. Wellington letters and Hipwell scrapbook (Mortlock Library, D733L and PRG183)

#### **SIXTH SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONTINGENT**

Raised but did not sail or serve.