

Fighting for Empire: the contribution and experience of the New South Wales  
Mounted Rifles first contingent in the South African War.

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## **Abstract**

The South African War was Australia's first war. Historians have insufficiently acknowledged the contribution of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles first contingent in this conflict. Unlike most Australian soldiers, the Mounted Rifles had a unique experience. Taking part in both the conventional and guerrilla phase of the war, they encountered both a familiar and unfamiliar war. After the war, they returned to a society that was largely indifferent towards them. This thesis improves our understanding of Australia's contribution in the South African War and reveals how the antipodes were actively involved in a wider imperial network.

## Introduction

On 9 November 1899, the *Aberdeen* sailed out of Sydney Harbour bound for Cape Town. Although many ships sailed between these two ports controlled by the British Empire, the nature of the *Aberdeen's* voyage was unique. The women, men and horses aboard the ship were sailing towards Africa to assist their Queen in the struggle against Paul Kruger and the Boers. The soldiers on board the *Aberdeen* were to be the first contingent of the New South Wales Corps to see action in the Boer republics. During their time in South Africa, they would fight alongside soldiers from New Zealand, Canada, the Cape Colony and Britain, reflecting their involvement in a united imperial network.

This was the first time the colony of New South Wales had sent a sizable military force to aid the British Empire against an enemy who fought with European weapons and tactics. From the outset of the conflict, all the Australian colonies contributed troops to the campaign. The scale of colonial involvement in the South African War was unprecedented. Over four hundred thousand soldiers from all around the Empire fought on the British side, suggesting this was no little war of Empire.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of Australian historiography has focused upon recounting an Australian experience of the war. The broad nature of these histories has inevitably homogenized

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<sup>1</sup> The scale of colonial involvement was a novelty. Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories: The Boer War 1899-1902*, (Oxford: Osprey, 2003), p. 7.

the experience and involvement of specific Australian units. This has resulted in gaps of knowledge surrounding Australia's involvement in the war. Thus, a series of narrow studies examining the contribution of individual units and colonies is needed to fully reveal Australia's contribution to the war. As New South Wales was the first of the Australian colonies to contribute troops to the war, it is fitting to start with them. Much has indeed already been written about New South Wales' involvement in the South African War, but the focus has been on the New South Wales Lancers and Australian Commonwealth Horse. Nevertheless, there is another story: that of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles. Who were they? What was their experience? What was their contribution? Moreover, why have they been largely overlooked by the general public, even in their time?

This thesis shall argue that the New South Wales Mounted Rifles played an important role in the South African War. Their experience has been insufficiently acknowledged, and not understood by the wider Australian society. This thesis shall address the problem by examining the unit's involvement in the conventional phase of the war, the guerilla phase and the soldiers' return and their memory of the war. Before the war the unit had been a militia unit. Accordingly, the soldiers at least had a theoretical experience in arms and understood how European wars were traditionally fought during the period. Similarly, the society that they came from with its British influence had the same perspective of what the war would be like. However, the Mounted Rifles encountered a unique war experience in the sense that the majority of colonial soldiers did not encounter the New South Welshmen's initial war experience. While the nature of war they found themselves fighting in late 1900 was something new, for which they were completely unprepared. With their return to Australia, the

soldiers returned to their civilian lives and to a society that did not widely understand or acknowledge their experience. This exclusive focus on the experience of a single unit represents a departure from the traditional history of Australian involvement in the war. This thesis is not only restricted to providing the combat experience of the soldiers, it also examines the home front's response and how the war was remembered. Through examining the experience of the Mounted Rifles, many insights into the Australian involvement in the war can be revealed, such as how the war was understood and remembered by the soldiers and society, their links to Empire and how it was *not* remembered in popular culture. Particular analysis of the first contingent of the Mounted Rifles improves our understanding of the war as a whole because they saw action all over both Boer republics and experienced all of the war's phases. The best way to gain insights into the experience is to take a qualitative approach, examining the regiment's documents, civilian comment in newspapers, monuments to the soldier's memory and diaries were soldiers recorded their experience.

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The field of historical inquiry concerning Australia's involvement in the South African War is relatively small. Throughout the twentieth century, Australian military history had largely forgotten Australia's involvement in the war, preferring to focus upon the First World War, which was defined as Australia's first war. However, from the middle of the twentieth century historians have shown a greater interest in this part of Australia's history.

The historiography on Australia's involvement in the South African War can be summarised in a discussion of three major publications. Robert Wallace's *The Australians at the Boer War*, published in 1965, it was the first attempt to comprehensively account for Australian involvement in the Second Anglo - Boer War. Wallace was not an historian, but a retired postal worker, who was inspired to write a history of the war from an Australian perspective after visiting the graves of Australian soldiers who had died during the war. This inspiration produced a book that provided a chronological account of the war, strung together from random Australian soldiers' letters and diaries. The book presents a linear view of Australian involvement, failing to recognise how different Australian units were often involved in combat and in different places at the same time. Recognising a lack of public knowledge and limited scholarship on the subject, in 1979 Laurence Field wrote, *The forgotten war: Australian involvement in the South African conflict of 1899-1902*. The book provides an analysis of the politics, public opinion and experience of the colonial contingents during the war. Although very comprehensive, Field focuses on the New South Wales Lancers of the first contingent and Imperial Bushmen units of the later contingents. Recently, in 2002, Craig Wilcox wrote, *Australia's Boer War: the war in South Africa, 1899-1902*. Commissioned by the Australian War Memorial, the book takes an Australian perspective on the war. Wilcox has provided a highly detailed account of the war's beginning and Australia's contribution. Wilcox has also examined the role of women, the development of the Australian character, disease and horses.

Other accounts of Australian involvement in the South African War besides these major publications have also been written. Joan Beaumont, an Australian historian,

who has mainly examined military history, has argued, ‘the Australian contribution of war is difficult to assess as at no time did they make a contribution in their own right, serving always as part of other forces including Canadians, New Zealanders, Cape Colonists, British Yeomen and British Reservists.’<sup>2</sup> Beaumont is accurate in suggesting that the Australian soldiers never operated as a single formation. Units such as the Mounted Rifles were separated and attached to the various Imperial armies, often as battlefield circumstances changed. As a result, they would have had different experiences to units attached to different armies. However, to suggest that these soldiers never made a contribution in their own right, and their actions were those of a larger group is inaccurate. The only reason for suggesting there may be difficulty in assessing the Australian units’ contribution would be a result of limited research on the part of the historian.

Not all histories on the South African War have focused upon the combat side of the war. In 1978, CN Connolly examined the civilian population’s perspective towards the war in, ‘Class, birthplace, loyalty: Australian attitudes to the Boer War.’<sup>3</sup> This innovative journal article marked a break with the traditional history of Australian involvement in the war arguing, a person’s background and social position influenced whether they supported or opposed the war.

All these publications address the ‘Australian’ experience of the war. Yet, Australia did not exist when the South African War began. What would become the Australian nation still consisted of an assemblage of independent British colonies. Colonial

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<sup>2</sup> Joan Beaumont, *Australian Defence: sources and statistics. Australian centenary of defence vol. 6*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> CN Connolly, ‘Class, birthplace, loyalty: Australian attitudes to the Boer War’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 18, no. 71 (1978), pp. 210-32.

military units were dispersed among various British armies during the war and would often be fighting different battles at the same time. Historians who have sought to capture an 'Australian' experience of the war had to choose which unit's history best represented this viewpoint. Inevitably, their accounts have created gaps and silences about the diversity of Australian involvement in the war.

Specific histories of each colony's contribution to the war are still thin on the ground. In the case of New South Wales, little has been written about the Boer War. What scholars have written focuses upon the New South Wales Lancers and the Bushmen contingents from the former colony. There are many reasons for the memory of these units. The Lancers, often referred to as the 'fighting twenty nine', were the first Australian unit to fight in the South African War. The 1/15 Royal New South Wales Lancers Regiment of the Australian Army remembers the Lancers' involvement in the war because they can trace their unit's lineage to them.<sup>4</sup> The Bushmen unit's contribution has been remembered as they made up a large proportion of the soldiers in the later contingents, and when writing about an 'Australian' experience the ideal of 'The Bush' can and does fit nicely into a nationalist paradigm. Yet there is another story to be told, that of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles. The soldiers from this regiment, who were part of the first contingent, played a crucial role in the war. Arguably, they saw more fighting than any other Australian unit. However, this unit does not have ties to current Army regiments, or a link to popular Australian culture. As a result, it has been largely forgotten by the Australian scholarship of the South African War. Through analysing the documents that remain the contribution of the

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<sup>4</sup> *The Regiment*, updated August 2011, Website of the Royal New South Wales Lancers, Lancer Barracks and Museum, <<http://www.lancers.org.au/>>, viewed 12 September 2011.

Mounted Rifles can be remembered and can provide a greater insight into Australian involvement in the war.

While there may be a lack of scholarship on the Mounted Rifles, there is no lack of evidence declaring their memory. The regimental orders provide an official account of what the regiment did during the war, including the unit's manning, pay and casualties. This will be useful to understand the big picture of the unit's involvement. The diary of Private Steel provides a soldier's insight into the daily experience of the Mounted Rifles campaign.<sup>5</sup> The diary of William Barham provides an insight into the campaign from the perspective of a non-commissioned officer.<sup>6</sup> These diaries both provide insight to the realities of how the war was fought. Unlike the official histories, these diaries reveal the everyday experience and reality of the war in a way the official history cannot. They are useful as they present an unedited and unbiased version of the war. Any colouring they give to events will, through examination, reveal the raw experience. This enables a better understanding of the New South Wales experience of the war. However, the diaries that were written on the veldt do present difficulties. The writing is difficult to read and in Steel's diary, dates and page numbers are often out of chronological order.

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To understand the experience of the soldiers in the Mounted Rifles it is important to understand their background. A person's background provides an insight to how they

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<sup>5</sup> Watson Augustus Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles: a diary of the campaign from day to day 1899-1901*, MLMSS 2105, Manuscripts, oral history and pictures catalogue, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

<sup>6</sup> William Henry Barham, *Diary of the Boer War 1899-1901*, B 1680, Manuscripts, oral history and pictures catalogue, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

interpret events and the world. Nevertheless, to talk of a common soldier and a common experience can be difficult. Of all the soldiers who served in the New South Wales Mounted Rifles, two left diaries that historians know of. So who were these soldiers?

Service number 109, Watson Augustus Steel, was a private in A squadron, New South Wales Mounted Rifles. Although part of the first contingent, Steel travelled to South Africa on the *Southern Cross*. As a private, Steel's diary might be expected to provide a typical experience of a soldier in the Mounted Rifles. However, Steel was far from being a typical private.

Like most Australians who served in the Boer War, he came from a rural background. Most of the soldiers, including the infamous Lieutenant Morant, had jobs on the land. In civilian life, Steel was a New South Wales bank officer. The employees in the colonial public service were of a middle or lower middle class background.<sup>7</sup> We can assume that this was also true of Steel. With an occupation in the public service, Steel would have been different to the majority of soldiers in his regiment<sup>8</sup>. Steel's otherness provides insights common soldiers cannot, while the contrast between him and the other soldiers can reveal the common experience.

The Mounted Rifles was not Steel's first experience with the military. Before the war he had been an officer with the New South Wales Lancers. A lack of social status

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<sup>7</sup> Desley Deacon, *Managing gender: the state, the middle class and women workers, 1830-1930*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 24-32.

<sup>8</sup> Most of the soldiers in the first contingent of the Mounted Rifles did not work for the public service. *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles, 1899-1901*, 1251, 4/7648, New South Wales State Records, p. 9.

may have been one of the reasons for his inability to go to South Africa as an officer.<sup>9</sup> Unable to fight as an officer, he had enlisted as a private to get to South Africa. In his diary on 8 April 1900 he wrote, ‘Whitaker died at Heidelberg and Harriott also in June at the battle of Diamond Hill. Harriott was the nephew of Joseph Abbot the speaker of the New South Wales Assembly’.<sup>10</sup> Whitaker and Harriott were both officers. Harriott being a relation of a New South Wales politician came from a more privileged background. Similarly, Major Anthill was related to the renowned Macarthur family. Thus, the Australian officers only came from some of the most well to do families within the colony.

Steel’s world view can also be understood through examination of the diary. Steel stated, ‘two of our fellows got drunk last night and asked for grog at a private residence at 1am.’<sup>11</sup> The tone of this diary entry suggests he is shocked, perhaps embarrassed, by his comrades’ actions. He seems driven by a Victorian era respectability, which was not shared by the common soldiers with whom he served. This middle class sensibility is further evidenced by his role in civilian and military life. During the end of the nineteenth century, people seeking jobs in the public service often had middle class sensibilities and sought to better their position within society.<sup>12</sup> The very existence of the diary is a testament to Steel’s difference and middle class world view. No other private soldier within the regiment kept a diary that has survived. This enables him to provide a unique and valuable account of his experiences.

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<sup>9</sup> The limited amount of officers who commanded Australian’s in the South African War all seem to come from the most well to do families in the colony. Lieutenant Harriott was related to the political elite, while Major Anthill was a descendant from the renowned MacArthur family.

<sup>10</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 8 August, 1900, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> This incident seems to have taken place away from the front lines towards the end of their deployment. Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 30 November, 1900, p. 197.

<sup>12</sup> Deacon, *Managing gender*, p. 129.

William Henry Barham was the only other soldier within the New South Wales Mounted Rifles to leave an account of the South African War. Service number 5, Barham was a sergeant in A Squadron, New South Wales Mounted Rifles. Although a sergeant, Barham's diary can provide useful insights to the soldier's experience. As a non-commissioned officer, Barham was still among the men and experienced the same events. His position also gave him a wider understanding of the events. In addition, as the Sergeant and Steel were in many of the same battles and skirmishes, their interpretation of events can be compared to provide an accurate account of their experience.

A Bathurst local, Barham too came from a rural background. Letters to his family suggest he was familiar with rural issues. Yet Barham was a butcher. The Bathurst post office was where his parents had worked. Thus, like Steel, Barham had a middle class upbringing. Similarly, Barham had also been a soldier before the war. Unlike Steel, he had been an enlisted man during his time in the militia. He was believed to have good soldier skills.<sup>13</sup> This would have led to others perceiving him to be a capable soldier. Thus, he would have been well known and highly regarded within the regiment.

Though his social background seems similar to Steel's and he held a superior rank in the unit, Barham's diary seems more in keeping with the tone and experience of the common soldier. His style is clear and simple, each daily entry is short and straight to

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<sup>13</sup> 'The Bathurst Mounted Rifles', *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 31 October, 1899, p. 3.

the point. 'Moved out to commandeer cattle and sheep,'<sup>14</sup> he writes, without elaboration or further comment. The entries can be seen as a chronicle of the main events for each day of the campaign. This straightforward approach is not lacking in information. Much can be revealed about the experience and Barham's understanding of the war from this approach. Within the diary and letters to his wife, Barham constantly mentioned the realities of what was happening. He also mentioned individual soldiers and what they were doing. Furthermore, within the diary he mentioned days when the Mounted Rifles were granted local leave. In comparison, Steel did not mention taking or even being offered leave once. Thus, Barham's background presents another perspective of the war, which may be more representative and revealing of the common soldier's experience.

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This thesis draws on the diaries of Barham and Steel, as well as press and official accounts of the war, to follow the experience of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles throughout the South African War and its aftermath. Chapter One assesses their role in the early, more conventional phase of the war. Chapter Two shows the effect of guerilla warfare when the Boers changed tactics after their initial defeat. Chapter Three follows the soldiers home to New South Wales seeking to understand the low key response to their return and the limited memorialisation of their experience in the years that followed. Australia's involvement in the South African War would soon be overshadowed by the carnage of World War I. This thesis seeks to recover the experience of the New South Wales Mounted Riflemen at a time when this was still Australia's most significant overseas war.

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<sup>14</sup> At this point commandeering seems to have been done to feed the soldiers, rather than cause destruction. Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, 31 March, 1900, p. 26.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The War Begins**

Soldiers of the Transvaal and Orange Free State swarmed into the British possessions of Natal and the Cape Colony on 11 October 1899, sparking a war between the Boer republics and the British Empire. War fever quickly spread throughout the British Empire and soldiers from the antipodes flocked to South Africa.

The colony of New South Wales sent many combat units to assist the British Empire in the South African War, one of which was the New South Wales Mounted Rifles. Consequently, both Sergeant Barham having been in this regiment before the war and Private Steel who had transferred to it, found themselves, in the state's first South Africa contingent. As part of the first contingent, they had a unique combat experience, which had a limited resonance with the wider colonial society. The people of New South Wales were aware the war was imminent and at its outbreak, displayed an outpouring of patriotic jingoism, which was not to be confused with support. Citizens and soldiers alike thought they were taking part in a war that would be fought in the conventional style of the nineteenth century. This was indeed what the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles initially experienced. However, the nature of warfare encountered by the Mounted Rifles differed from that of other units, especially after the middle of 1900.

For the citizens and militia soldiers of New South Wales, the outbreak of war in South Africa did not come as a surprise. The conditions in the Boer republics of Transvaal and Orange Free State were widely published in the media. With the

discovery of gold, a large influx of utilanders had swarmed into the Boer republics.<sup>15</sup> Worried about maintaining their status and identity, these nations sought to restrict political rights to the themselves. Behaviour exhibited by both Briton and Boer increasingly contributed to creating an atmosphere that would lead to war in South Africa.<sup>16</sup> An anonymous letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* stated,

In the event of hostilities breaking out in the Transvaal the bulk of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles would be available should the government decide to make an offer to the Imperial authorities, located at Camden.<sup>17</sup>

While the New South Wales Mounted Rifles headquarters was located in Camden, it also had sub units located all across regional New South Wales. These sub units were located at, Liverpool, Picton, Bega, Tenterfield, Inverell, and Bathurst.<sup>18</sup> The letter reveals an accurate knowledge of the location of the Mounted Rifles. Accordingly, the individual who wrote this would have had to have some kind of military background to have access to such information, and to be able to speak on the behalf of the soldiers. As later editions of the newspaper contained no outraged letter, from members of the military contradicting the claims made, the author was accurately reflecting the soldiers' position. In this way, the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles, such as Sergeant Barham, understood there would soon be a war in South Africa. Moreover, the article reveals that three months before the South African War began, an expectation that there would be a war between the Boer republics and the British

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<sup>15</sup> The word utilander is a Boer word that refers to white foreign nationals who were living within the Boer republics.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Pakenham has rightly argued the outbreak of war in South Africa was also influenced by a longer antagonism between Boer and Briton. Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*, (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1979), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Mounted Rifles', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 July, 1899, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> *The New South Wales Military Force 1899*, NSW Government Printer Sydney, 1899.

Empire had spread throughout the colony of New South Wales.<sup>19</sup> As the article was published in a popular paper of the time, the people of New South Wales would be aware of the increasing tension between Briton and Boer in South Africa before the war. The tone of the source suggests that loyalty to Empire demanded the colony should provide assistance to the motherland. If the Empire was at war, they believed they had a duty to provide assistance in that war.

With the outbreak of war in South Africa, war fever spread across the British Empire, including the colony of New South Wales. The people of New South Wales were sent into a frenzy of imperial jingoism and were eager to display their loyalty to Empire. A concerned citizen writing to the editor stated,

Must New South Wales forfeit her position as the leading colony in Australia, so far she has done nothing in respect to this Transvaal business. Queensland was the first colony to offer troops, Victoria has received a virtual acceptance of their offer. The cost to New South Wales would be absolutely nothing and she would have maintained her place as a leading colony by sending to England's aid a fighting unit such as no other colony could dream of sending.<sup>20</sup>

The tone of this letter reveals, at the outbreak of war there was an intense desire in New South Wales to be involved in the war. Imperialism and colonial rivalry were important factors which influenced the people of New South Wales to provide soldiers to assist their Empire in the war. Jeffery Grey has argued that at the initial outbreak of the South African War the people of New South Wales were supportive of the war.<sup>21</sup> Initially there was support for the war. However, support does not necessarily result in enthusiasm or intervention in a war. To simply suggest there was

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<sup>19</sup>Robert Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War*, (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1976), p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> 'What is New South Wales going to do?', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 October, 1899, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Grey, *A military history of Australia*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 57.

support for the British in the South African War is to overlook the complex nature of the colony's response. The population of colonial New South Wales was largely of British descent.<sup>22</sup> The institutions and way of life in the colony were reminiscent of the metropole.<sup>23</sup> Although there was a rising Australian identity in the 1890s, as reflected in Australian native movements, most people still overwhelmingly identified themselves as colonial Britons, as evidenced by their failure to make a complete break with the Empire when they formed a nation in 1901. Thus, in 1899, for the citizens of New South Wales their status as a subject of the British Empire was something with which they strongly identified. The jingoism displayed by the colonials, reflected in the letter to the editor, was a product of their patriotism towards Britannia, not solely support for a war. Thus, the initial war fever at the war's outbreak was a display of their solidarity for the Empire and not only support for the war.

The military establishment of New South Wales also had a positive response to Britain's involvement in the South African War but this was not just out of loyalty for Empire. During the 1890s, the New South Wales Corp fluctuated between 9 000 and 29 000 men.<sup>24</sup> The individuals who were part of the army were mostly volunteers and militia soldiers. The numbers in the army fluctuated, increasing during times of perceived threat as reflected in the invasion scares of the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>25</sup> Dean Boyce has argued, that situated on the other side of the world, Australian colonists perceived themselves as an outpost of the British Empire, surrounded by enemies of

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<sup>22</sup> William Charles Wentworth, *Statistical, historical, and political description of the colony of New South Wales*, (London: G & W.B Whittaker, 1819), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Kirsten McKenzie, *Scandal in the colonies: Sydney and Cape Town, 1820-1850*, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2004), pp. 46-7.

<sup>24</sup> *The New South Wales Military Force*, p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> Craig Wilcox, *For Hearths and Homes: Citizen soldiering in Australia 1854-1945*, (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998), pp. 8-16.

the Empire and at risk of invasion.<sup>26</sup> As soldiers it was their role to defend the colony from attack. As New South Wales was part of the British Empire and had inherited its culture and system of governance, a soldier's decision to serve in the military was a decision to defend the colony and the Empire. Consequently, the military was always going to respond positively to Britain's involvement in the Boer War. As a result, when they were ordered to war by the parliament of New South Wales, there was no shortage of volunteers. Nevertheless, as reflected by the Mounted Rifles, loyalty to Empire was not the only factor affecting a soldier's decision to enlist for service in South Africa.

For the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles, duty seems to have been a key factor in participating in the war. The Bathurst newspaper claimed, 'Barham was the thirteenth member of the Bathurst half squadron to leave to fight in South Africa and he was an excellent shot and horseman.'<sup>27</sup> As a sergeant, Barham would have been among the most highly ranked enlisted men in the Bathurst half squadron. He had been a soldier in the Mounted Rifles for many years and as a result was highly experienced. For soldiers of the colony, their ability in marksmanship, drill and horsemanship in mounted units, was used to assess how good a soldier they were.<sup>28</sup> As Barham had excelled in these areas, he was perceived to be an excellent soldier. At the time a mounted rifle squadron was comprised of approximately 125 soldiers.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, the Bathurst half troop would have consisted of approximately fifty

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<sup>26</sup> Dean Boyce, *The Wolves at the Door*, (Waverley: the author, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> 'The Bathurst Mounted Rifles', *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 31 October, 1899, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Craig Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War: the war in South Africa 1899-1902*, (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 57.

<sup>29</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, p. 9.

soldiers, in two troops.<sup>30</sup> As a senior and highly trained soldier, Barham would have been expected to be amongst the first to sign up for the war. However, as the newspaper article revealed, he was not. A cutting in Sergeant Barham's diary describes how his wife, 'trying to conceal her pride in the fine well set up young sergeant, stated, "I know it is right for him to go. I told him on Sunday he could volunteer."'”<sup>31</sup> The role of Mrs. Barham in telling him where his duty lay was reminiscent of the Spartan saying, 'either this [shield] or upon this [shield]', where the women would remind the men of their duty to fight.<sup>32</sup> The description of a heroic sergeant and his wife telling him he had to fight was reminiscent with the heroes of antiquity. It is also revealing about the role of duty. Before the war, Barham had been a butcher in Bathurst and had a young family to support.<sup>33</sup> Unlike younger men, as a twenty seven year old father, he may have initially been able to avoid service perceiving that he had a duty to stay at home and look after his family. However, with an increasing percentage of the half troop volunteering for service in the war, Barham recognized that, as a soldier he had a competing duty to fight in the war. The role of duty in influencing the soldier's decision to go to war cannot be overlooked. Soldiers of the New South Wales Lancers, while sailing from England to Australia were asked to volunteer their services in the war, most disembarked in Cape Town to fight the Boers. However, those who returned to Sydney were subjected to public ridicule and

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<sup>30</sup> This number is based upon a highly conservative estimate. A mounted rifle squadron was typically made up of two troops and a headquarters/support element. The militia units before the outbreak of war were not necessarily full. However, fifty would have been the most even if the half squadron was completely full. Accordingly, any inaccuracy only increases support for the argument that, with a rising percentage of the half squadron volunteering their service, Sergeant Barham was increasingly duty bound to go to war. This diary entry has no date, but is listed on the back page of the diary. Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, p. 164.

<sup>31</sup> Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, unidentified press cutting.

<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, trans., Richard Talbert, *Plutarch on Sparta*, (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 161.

<sup>33</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, p. 9.

a government inquiry examining why they failed to go to war.<sup>34</sup> Aware of this incident, the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles would have wanted to ensure they were not seen to be avoiding their duty. Clearly, there was an understanding within the military and wider society that these men had a duty to fight. Mrs. Barham believed her husband's imperial duty came before his domestic duty and freed the Sergeant from his dilemma of duty, thereby enabling him to fight in the Boer War. In this way, soldiers of the Mounted Rifles were motivated to fight in the war because of their sense of duty.

Furthermore, for the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles, another factor influencing their involvement in the war was a desire to test their military skills. The South African War was the first time the Mounted Rifles were able to test their military abilities and the soldiers were acutely aware of this. A soldier in the New South Wales Corps stated, 'Recent events in South Africa have placed the valour of Australian soldiers beyond question. Sneers that thoughtless people used to level in this direction must now cease.'<sup>35</sup> For the soldiers, the war was perceived as their time to display their abilities and a chance to silence their critics. The term 'feather bed soldier' was one of the sneers leveled at the soldiers by 'thoughtless' people.<sup>36</sup> The phrase suggested that the soldiers were not real soldiers. Although, soldiers of the New South Wales Corps had previously seen action in the Sudan, only a small contingent of infantry had been sent. The soldiers had not seen much action and were perceived to be second rate

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<sup>34</sup> 'The returning lancers released from quarantine regimental inquiry today', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 December, 1899, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> 'State of the defences of New South Wales', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 March, 1900, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Australia and the Boer War, 1899-1902*, Australian War Memorial, <<http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/boer.asp>>, viewed 23 April 2011.

soldiers by their imperial allies.<sup>37</sup> Their training consisted of one night a week and Easter camps where they would retire to their tents at night.<sup>38</sup> The militia soldiers dressed up in flamboyant military uniforms and carried on as if they were serious, professional soldiers. However, they never campaigned or fought a real enemy. This led many civilians to perceive the militia soldiers' training to be a waste of money and time.<sup>39</sup> The South African War provided an opportunity to silence these critics. It would involve all the combat arms of the Corps, including the cavalry of which the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles were a part. Moreover, it was perceived to be a proper war. The Sudan had been a minor colonial conflict putting down a native rebellion.<sup>40</sup> The South African War was a war against a European enemy, who fought in a European style and with modern European weapons, including Kar 98 rifles and six pounder pom pom guns. As a result, the war would truly be the first time the soldiers fought a war. If successful, they would be able to claim that they were a professional force, able to provide a capable defence for the colony. Thus, the desire to test their military skills was an important factor in soldiers of the Mounted Rifles' decision to volunteer for service in the Boer War.

The civilians and soldiers of New South Wales alike expected the war would be fought in a similar way to earlier wars of the period. Trooper Steel, of the Mounted Rifles provided an insight into his understanding of war stating, 'if a soldier's horse is unwell and he takes another to fight this is excusable, but to sell and make money is

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<sup>37</sup> *Sudan (New South Wales Contingent) March-June 1885*, Australian War Memorial, <<http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/sudan.asp>>, viewed 23 April 2011.

<sup>38</sup> 'Military Intelligence', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 April, 1896, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Wilcox, *For Hearths and Homes*, pp. 39 – 42.

<sup>40</sup> *Sudan (New South Wales Contingent) March-June 1885*, Australian War Memorial, <<http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/sudan.asp>>, viewed 23 April 2011.

against the ethics of war and gives Australians a bad name.<sup>41</sup> For Steel, values were an important part of the war. Steel's mention of this horse selling suggests it was something of importance that needed to be recorded. The incident was clearly not a trivial matter. Steel's language suggests outrage at such an action taking place especially by a fellow colonial soldier. This outrage is derived from Steel's perspective of war. For Steel, a man of Victorian middle class sensibilities, the South African War was not a cheap mercantile pursuit. Rather, the war was an honourable and morally right heroic crusade for Empire. Huge armies would meet on the battlefield. Soldiers wearing colorful uniforms would form up in neat ranks and shoot at each other while Steel and his mounted chums would charge in and rout the enemy. At the end of the day the battle would be over, with a British victory, and everyone would return home, heroes. This Victorian middle class perspective of war was understood to be the conventional way war was fought. This perspective was not just confined to Steel. Roger Chickering and Stig Forster have argued that at the end of the nineteenth century western society understood war as national wars with mass armies.<sup>42</sup> It was these mass armies, which were part of this romanticised view of warfare. These understandings were developed from their world view and knowledge of warfare at the time. For these people war was understood in the nineteenth century style of Napoleonic battles. Thus, society and the military had a similar perspective of warfare, and had similar expectations of how the South African War would be fought.

Initially the New South Wales Mounted Rifles experienced the style of warfare they were expecting. Upon arriving in Cape Town, the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles were

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<sup>41</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 29 March, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> Roger Chickering and Stig Forster, *War in an age of revolution, 1775-1815*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 336-39.

moved up to the front lines where they were able to apply their training for the first time. The regimental documents outline, how, from the moment they disembarked the *Aberdeen* at Cape Town, the regiment was involved in a series of pitched battles.<sup>43</sup> In his diary, Sergeant Barham wrote, 'rouse 5.30 had breakfast and saddled up.'<sup>44</sup> The soldiers were fighting the type of war for which they had trained. Reveille would be early in the morning, followed by morning routine, after which the duties of that day would commence. The Sergeant went on to state, 'received orders at 9.30 to march to Bloemfontein.'<sup>45</sup> The reference to Bloemfontein, suggests the soldiers were involved in the set piece battle which took place there. These large engagements with the Boers reveal the soldiers fought the conventional war they were expecting. Similarly, Barham provides an account of a charge made by the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles at the Battle of Diamond Hill.<sup>46</sup> The charge across open ground while keeping a straight line was one of the skills the soldiers had trained in before the war.<sup>47</sup> In this way, the manoeuvres carried out in these set piece battles had been practised by the soldiers before the outbreak of the war. Consequently, the use and effectiveness of these tactics suggests the soldiers were fighting a war in the style they had expected. Conventional warfare is a form of warfare between two or more states where the belligerents' armies are both easily identifiable and concerned with fighting each other, as opposed to the civilian population.<sup>48</sup> Thus, partaking in set piece battles, seeking out Boer armies and fighting an enemy who openly displayed their identity,

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<sup>43</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, p. 290.

<sup>44</sup> For the Mounted Rifles this would have been a typical morning routine, for which they had trained. Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, 24 April, 1900, p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, 24 April, 1900, p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, 12 June, 1900, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, p. 86.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Devetak, Anthony Burke, and Jim George, *An introduction to international relations: Australian perspectives*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 394.

all indicates the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles initially experienced the conventional war they expected.

Within the set piece battles, the Mounted Rifles often played a secondary role.

Captain Maurice Hilliard of the Mounted Rifles wrote after the battle, ‘the regiment on the left flank of the hill, having escorted some guns into position, then advanced in extended order across the plain, dismounted and then with bayonets fixed climbed the side of the hill.’<sup>49</sup> During the battle, the New South Welshmen had been attached to French’s cavalry wing.<sup>50</sup> Their job of escorting the artillery into position reflects their secondary function in battle. Instead of being sent into the main line of battle, the Mounted Rifles were tasked to ensure other units could get into position and fight the enemy. Only once the battle had been joined were the Mounted Rifles sent into fight, and on the left flank of the British Army. In this way, the soldiers were on the periphery of the battle providing a secondary function. The secondary nature of their role within battle is confirmed by Wilcox who states, ‘Lieutenant General Hamilton’s infantry was sent up the centre of the hill once the flanks were secured.’<sup>51</sup> In this way, the infantry were intended to make the main contribution in securing the hill for the British, while the cavalry and artillery had the secondary role providing support to enable the infantry to achieve their objective. Thus, the Mounted Rifles often provided a combat support role within the major battles. Nevertheless, as the bayonet charge reveals, they were not only used to assist the main force. If the battle was not advancing as intended they could form a reserve force that could be used to decide the battle. In this way, the soldiers experienced short periods of violent combat,

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<sup>49</sup> Captain Maurice Hilliard, in, Craig Wilcox, *The Boer War: Australians and the war in South Africa 1899-1902, Research guide 9*, (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 1999).

<sup>50</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, p. 290.

<sup>51</sup> Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War*, p. 86.

unlike other units which were either constantly in combat such as the infantry or those in support roles which avoided the violence altogether. Thus, the Mounted Rifles function in the conventional war was often in a secondary role.

Furthermore, the Mounted Rifles' experience in this conventional war was often different from other units in the first contingent. The regimental orders of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles show that, the regiment was first attached to General French's column, then Le Gallias, and then to General Hamilton.<sup>52</sup> Their contribution was not perceived to be part of a wider cavalry wing, but a contribution in their own right. On 8 May 1900, Sergeant Barham mentioned in his diary that General Hitton had, 'complimented the men of A Squadron on their reconnaissance abilities.'<sup>53</sup> In addition, the regimental orders reveal the Mounted Rifles' actions at the battle of Diamond Hill were mentioned in dispatches.<sup>54</sup> Clearly, both accounts suggest the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles made important contributions in scouting and gaining information while out of battle and, while in battle, they provided an important capability and displayed excellence. To be mentioned in dispatches not only reflects a notable performance in battle, but that their contribution was noticed. In this way, the Mounted Rifles experience was unique even to the units with whom they shared the battlefield. Thus, as reflected from the Mounted Rifles experience in South Africa, different units had different combat experiences.

The casualty rate for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles was relatively small. The total number of casualties amounted to thirty seven over a period of twelve months in

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<sup>52</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, pp. 259-296.

<sup>53</sup> Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, 8 May, 1900, p. 37.

<sup>54</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, p. 259.

combat.<sup>55</sup> The soldiers were killed in small numbers over the course of the war. These deaths were reported in the colony's newspapers.<sup>56</sup> In the case of the Mounted Rifles, the soldiers who died did so in small numbers, and in a series of different engagements. The casualty rate rose slowly and the soldiers and general public perceived the war to be reasonably safe. However, different units had different experiences. The 5<sup>th</sup> Victorian Mounted Rifles were ambushed by a group of Boers. In the resulting action, sixteen were killed, forty two wounded and the rest either fled or were captured.<sup>57</sup> To have an entire unit routed with such a large amount of casualties in a single engagement would have led the soldiers and citizens of Victoria to perceive the war as a costly and dangerous experience, against a well trained enemy. The New South Wales Mounted Rifles experience differed, with a casualty rate that only gradually mounted over time, without a huge loss in any single engagement. In this way, the nature of casualties reflects the differences in how units perceived the war.

The war was not just about fighting. Every army has administrative and logistical requirements. Between battles, the Mounted Rifles were expected to take part in mundane general soldier duties. The regimental orders of the Mounted Rifles stated, 'On Cronje's surrender the Mounted Rifles were ordered to take control of his laager and the prisoners.'<sup>58</sup> After a battle there was a variety of things that needed to be done. In this case prisoners were required to be controlled and accounted for, enemy

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<sup>55</sup> This diary entry has no date, but is listed on the back page of the diary. Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, p. 164.

<sup>56</sup> The death of Trooper Bennett was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. This death was one of many listed in short notices within the paper. 'Trooper Bennett Dead', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August, 1900, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Craig Wilcox, 'The Companion Alphabetical entries: Boer War', in Peter Dennis, Jeffrey Grey, Ewan Morris, and Jean Prior, eds., *The Oxford companion to Australian military history*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 93-7.

<sup>58</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, p. 290.

weapons and possessions were to be collected and removed so they could not become of use to the enemy. For the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles, although there was no immediate danger, they had to remain focused and be ready to fight to ensure the Boer prisoners were not able to escape.<sup>59</sup> When he was not recording the details of battles, Steel described a war consisting of lots of garrison duty and long marches.<sup>60</sup> As it was unknown when or where the enemy would attack, the places which the Boers had been driven from had to be defended at all times. As a result, the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles were expected to garrison towns they had taken control of. In addition, while the British army moved supplies to the front by train, the soldiers were generally expected to march across country to meet the Boer. Accordingly, much of the time between battles consisted of chasing the Boers to their next town where a battle would be fought. Sergeant Barham describes a day where the Mounted Rifles were detailed to escort an artillery unit, and then manned an outpost by night.<sup>61</sup> As mounted soldiers, the New South Welshmen were expected to escort units moving between locations. This is because as highly mobile cavalrymen, the soldiers were able to scout ahead and defend the flanks, to fend off small bands of enemies and clear a path ahead. As militia soldiers before the war, they would have understood these actions to be part of soldiering. The lack of information about these actions, given to friends and family, suggests these duties between the battles were part of a normal day for the soldiers and did not rate mentioning. Furthermore, as these duties did not reflect the ‘exciting’ combat understanding of the war, they were not mentioned in the newspapers. In this way, the wider civilian population was

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<sup>59</sup> Steel refers to a Boer being shot trying while trying to escape, in this way the soldiers still had to be alert to the enemies tenacity. Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 2 March, 1900, p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 30 August, 1900, p. 134.

<sup>61</sup> Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, 3 May, 1900, p. 36.

unable to resonate with the experience of the soldiers. Thus, the general duties contributed to the soldiers' wartime experience.

For those back home, their understanding of the war was limited to what they were told in the media. *The Sydney Morning Herald* stated, briefly in December 1899, 'the *Aberdeen* has arrived at Cape Town. The troops of the New South Wales Infantry and Mounted Rifles have been dispatched to the front.'<sup>62</sup> This newspaper article is representative of the daily reports on the Mounted Rifles' experience in the war. The information provided contained limited information about the war. From these articles the civilians only knew that there was a war in which their soldiers were taking part and, perhaps conducting themselves well. As a result, the civilians only had a limited understanding of what was happening in the war and could have no true understanding of what the soldiers experienced in war. The only other way to receive information on the war was from the soldiers themselves. In a letter to his wife Sergeant Barham indicated that, information in his letters and in the newspapers was suppressed, and that newspapers reported battles that had taken place eight weeks beforehand.<sup>63</sup> In this way, the information about the war, received on the homefront was heavily curtailed. Even civilians who had relatives and friends at the front were not able to receive detailed information about the war. Consequently, they were unable to relate to the soldiers' experience.

The conventional nature of the war would not last. The large set piece battles were fought until the middle of 1900. Craig Wilcox has argued, 'the battle of Diamond Hill

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<sup>62</sup> 'Arrival of the Aberdeen', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 December, 1899, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> This entry is not dated but attached part of other documents at the beginning of the diary. Barham, *Diary of the Boer war*, unidentified press cutting.

was the last real battle of the war.’<sup>64</sup> The battle was fought on 12 June 1900, and had been the last in a series of set piece battles following the black week of 1899 after which the British had advanced, defeating every Boer army in its way. With the defeat of Botha’s army the Boers, having suffered consistent defeats and losses that unlike the British they could not sustain, began a guerilla war. With the Boers’ change of strategy, Diamond Hill can be seen as the end of the conventional war. As a result, none of the contingents following the first New South Wales Mounted Rifles fought a conventional war. Accordingly, the soldiers of the first contingent were the only ones to see action in a conventional war. Thus, their experience of the South African War can be understood to be distinctive compared to the majority of soldiers who fought. Moreover, as this was the first time the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles had seen action in a conventional war, they were the only ones to gain experience in this kind of warfare. Consequently, the New South Wales Mounted Rifles had a unique combat experience.

Steel and Barham had managed to survive all the major battles, but the war was far from over. At the initial outbreak of war the civilians were caught up in war fever. While the soldiers may also have been caught in this fever, they also desired to test their skills and felt duty bound to serve. Both civilians and soldiers expected a conventional war to be fought in a style reminiscent of the Napoleonic era. This style of war was what the New South Wales Mounted Rifles initially experienced. Even so, their role, the number of casualties and different experiences of combat all contributed to a different experience that other colonial and ‘Australian’ units did not have. It follows that there was no one Australian experience of the Boer War. Rather

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<sup>64</sup> Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War*, p. 86.

different units had a different experience and the examination of specific units can provide a more complex account of Australian involvement and experience in the South African War. By the middle of 1900, the conventional war had ended and the Boers had taken to fighting a guerilla war. With this change in the style of warfare, the soldier's experience underwent a radical and dangerous change.

## Chapter 2

### A Nasty Twist

Addressing his troops in Pretoria on 13 October 1900, Lord Roberts stated, ‘As you know the war is over, there are no more great battles to be won. No more large towns to be taken. The war has degenerated into guerilla warfare, which is the most annoying part of the campaign.’<sup>65</sup> Although the last major battle had been fought, the war in South Africa would not end until 1902.

While the British came to the realization that the war had become a guerilla war in October, the beginnings of this war were evident after the final major battle on 12 June 1900. Nothing in the previous experience or training of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles had prepared them for this change in the character of the campaign. Presented with an alien conflict the soldiers had difficulty comprehending their experience. Nevertheless, they were able to overcome the initial shock, and perform well. Similarly, the civilians of New South Wales also had difficulty understanding the change in the nature of the war. This lack of understanding contributed to their growing distance from the soldiers’ experience and the war, resulting in a lack of resonance with the soldiers’ experience. Thus, with the development of the guerilla war, the Mounted Rifles experienced an unusual war.

From the middle of 1900, the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles began to notice a change in the nature of the war. Field has argued, ‘following the battle of Diamond Hill the

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<sup>65</sup> Lord Roberts, *South Africa Dispatches, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1900 -23<sup>rd</sup> June 1902*, Mitchell Library, Q355.4868.

New South Wales Mounted Rifles were involved in a series of scraps against the Boers.<sup>66</sup> However, despite what some scholars have argued, these skirmishes were more than mere scraps or mopping up operations. Throughout July and August of 1900, short shoot outs with small groups of Boers were becoming common occurrences for the Mounted Rifles. Following a series of defeats where the Boer armies had been mauled, and facing superior numbers, the Boers could not withstand the British onslaught. In the drive to Pretoria, the British were only able to control the road into the city, allowing the remnants of the Boer army to freely roam the countryside.<sup>67</sup> Manoeuvring through the Free State to avoid contact with British cavalry units including the Mounted Rifles, raiding defenceless British outposts, and taking to the veldt all indicate De Wet's army was increasingly avoiding set piece battles to continue the fight against the British from July of 1900. Skirmishing was now the only way the Boers could provide any real resistance to the British Army. Although at the time De Wet's army was not openly a guerilla force, his soldiers were fighting in an asymmetrical manner. Consequently, the Mounted Rifles who were pursuing these soldiers encountered an enemy who no longer fought a conventional war. As a result of fighting an enemy who fought in such an irregular manner, the Mounted Rifles experience of the South African War suggests the guerilla phase of the war began as early as the middle of June 1900. In this way, the war took a new and unexpected turn.

With the changing nature of the war, the style of battles, which the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles were involved in, began to change. These battles were characterised by small scale regular engagements which ranged in severity. Sergeant Barham

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<sup>66</sup> Laurence Field, *The Forgotten War: Australian involvement in the South African conflict of 1899-1902*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1979), p. 118.

<sup>67</sup> Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War*, p. 213.

recorded being involved in a light skirmish with the Boers while patrolling one day.<sup>68</sup> Many of these skirmishes were of low intensity and involved a few shots being fired between small groups of soldiers. However, this did not make the war any less dangerous or brutal. The regimental orders provide an account of a battle in Rushburg, 'the reconnaissance element was split into two as the regiment advanced, severe fighting took place, resulting in a large number of Boers killed, taken prisoner and a enemy gun captured.'<sup>69</sup> The account outlines the Mounted Rifles' involvement in the Rushburg district where they were searching for elements of De Wet's army, which was still operating in the Orange Free State. The regiment caught up with the rear of the Boer army inflicting severe losses of manpower, food and equipment. Upon sighting the Boers near a farmhouse, a vicious shoot out ensued. Consequently, most of this fighting would have taken place at a reasonably close range. The exchange of rifle fire, which would begin when sighting the enemy, suggests these battles were fought in an ad hoc manner. Then to have captured prisoners and a Krupp gun the Mounted Rifles would have had to close in hand to hand combat with the Boers.<sup>70</sup> In this way, the soldiers experienced long marches looking for Boers, would come under fire for a short duration and then do it all again the next day. As a result, the fighting in these battles could be just as brutal as the conventional war, even though it was characterized by smaller and less tactically important skirmishes. Thus, as the war began to change the Mounted Rifle's battle experience was characterized by a series of small scale vicious actions.

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<sup>68</sup> Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, 13 August, 1900, p. 65.

<sup>69</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales mounted rifles*, p. 256.

<sup>70</sup> The Krupp gun became something of a trophy for the Mounted Rifles and they were able to take it back to Australia, where it still resides today, in the Australian War Memorial, in a better condition than it was during the South African War.



The Krupp gun captured by the Mounted Rifles. *Krupp gun*. 22 July 2011. Photographer, Stephen Francis. Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

As the South African War progressed into the latter half of its second year, the war had completely morphed into a guerilla war. The exact definition of a guerilla war can be tedious as there are many actions involved in this kind of irregular warfare that have similarities with other types of conflict. However, guerilla warfare fundamentally consists of a conflict where small groups of combatants use their high mobility to harass a larger and less mobile conventional army, often striking and then melting away, while their attacks are not only limited to the enemy soldiers but also resources<sup>71</sup>. The change in the nature of the South African War is clearly emphasized by the Boer General, De Wet, who having escaped Mailsburg and returned to Orange Free State in September 1900 stated:

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<sup>71</sup> T Maguire, *Guerilla or partisan warfare*, (London: Hugh Rees, 1904), p. 105.

It was now that I conceived the great plan of bringing under arms all Burghers who had laid down their weapons, and taken the oath of neutrality and sending them to operate in every part of the state.<sup>72</sup>

De Wet had made it clear that he intended the Boers to carry on the struggle against the British in a new manner. The British army including their colonial soldiers such as Steel and Barham, were tasked with guarding roads, garrisoning towns and roaming the countryside for the painfully persistent hardcore of the Boer armies who had still refused to give up the fight. Under the new strategy, De Wet emphasized that his soldiers would operate in every part of the state. Although severely outnumbered, and not powerful enough to meet the British in open warfare, the Boers sought to harass their enemy, both through attacking the defences along the roads and getting around British policies designed to stop the Boers fighting. Moreover, a much larger and highly organized British force was not highly mobile.<sup>73</sup> As a result, the nature of the Boer strategy used towards the end of the war consisted of guerilla warfare. As the Mounted Rifles were involved in the region, the nature of the war experienced by the Mounted Rifles also included guerilla warfare, which they were unprepared for.

Nevertheless, once the Boer armies were thoroughly battered, the British were of the opinion that the war was over, however it was evident to the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles that a different style of war had begun. In October with Boer guerrillas roaming all over the Orange Free State, Lord Roberts reported to the war office,

Subsequent to the occupation of Johannesburg the organized forces of the enemy were materially reduced in numbers, many of the Burghers in arms

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<sup>72</sup> Christiaan Rudolf De Wet, *Three Years War*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), p. 199.

<sup>73</sup> Edward Spiers, 'The late Victoria army, 1868-1914', in David Chandler, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated history of the British Army*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 189-215.

against us returning to their farms, surrendering their rifles, and voluntarily taking the oath of neutrality. But the submission only proved real when the Burghers were protected from outside interference by the actual presence of troops. Whenever a Boer commando has traversed a district, the inhabitants of which had ostensibly resumed their peaceful vocations, a considerable part of the male population again joined the enemy and engaged in active hostilities.<sup>74</sup>

In this way, by the October of 1900 the British realized that they had not won the war or pacified the population. They only commanded their enemy's cities and the roads which connected them. This situation was not news to the Australians. The diaries of the Mounted Rifles describe a guerilla war being conducted earlier in the war. Sergeant Barham's diary stated, 'Marched into town without opposition, plenty of English residents, who treated us well, Boers driven from kopjes three miles from town, three of five horses were shot while on advance guard.'<sup>75</sup> The Boers did not even try to defend the town, but waited on its outskirts to skirmish with the Mounted Rifles as they sought to move across the countryside. The Boers were not trying to defend ground but sought to maintain a constant presence in the region so they could continue the war. It is most likely that after this group of Boers was driven from the kopje outside of the town, they would have continued to operate within the area constantly skirmishing with imperial and colonial soldiers. Thus, the remnants of the Boer armies were openly waging a guerilla campaign.

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<sup>74</sup>Lord Roberts, *South Africa Dispatches*.

<sup>75</sup> This was shortly after the Battle of Diamond Hill, clearly the Boers were not keen to end the war. A kopje is a Dutch word meaning, small hill. Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, 23 June, 1900, p. 50.

The guerilla style of warfare was completely new to the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles. Wallace has suggested the experience of the Boer War was common among all the Australian units.<sup>76</sup> Although the majority of Australian soldiers served in cavalry roles and experienced the guerilla phase of the war, Wallace's account overlooks the differences experienced by the different units. However, most importantly, Wallace fails to examine the novelty of the guerilla war itself. The Mounted Rifles found themselves fighting a war they had not expected. Their training and understanding of war was the exact opposite to what the soldiers were now experiencing.<sup>77</sup> As a result, the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles had no expectation of how to fight the war, they had to adapt and operate as needed. In this way, they had nothing to help them understand the war, unlike the British Army, which had gained an understanding of irregular warfare through exposure to this style of warfare during the Victorian era.<sup>78</sup> Thus, the experience of the South African War was unique for the Mounted Rifles.

The soldiers' attitude towards their experience was characterized by uncertainty, fear and in some cases disillusionment. Although only colonial militia soldiers at the outbreak of war, the Mounted Rifles had been a motivated professional force.<sup>79</sup>

Towards the end of the first Mounted Rifles' deployment, Steel wrote,

There are Boers hanging around our position, the stench from their dead is bad, the gun brought up is expensive to fire and useless unless the Boers attack us in close, in numbers and in formation, which

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<sup>76</sup> Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War*, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Craig Stockings, *The making and breaking of the post-federation army, 1901-1909*, (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2007), p. 102.

<sup>78</sup> Maguire, *Guerilla or partisan warfare*, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Stockings, *The making and breaking of the post-federation army*, pp. 101-103.

they don't do, garrison duty is very monotonous, men get very slack, and I don't know when we will be relieved and haven't be paid since September.'<sup>80</sup>

This diary entry was written soon after Steel had returned from hospital to the front and three months before leaving for Sydney. Consequently, Steel would have been nervous about surviving the last few weeks of combat. Additionally, the monotonous nature of the fighting and style the enemy fought in would have made him agitated. As a result, the nature of the fighting during the guerilla phase of the South African War resulted in many units operating on their own. In the conventional battles, the Mounted Rifles had the support of other combat units and operated in conjunction with different units. However, they were now expected to either, undertake long searches for Boers or defend outposts that came under frequent attack, with limited support. The defence of the outposts, although a normal garrison duty, was not considered to be warfare by Steel and his comrades. The soldiers thought they should be advancing against the enemy. As a result, being confined to an outpost the soldiers did not feel as if they were fighting a real war and thus, their standards, by which they had understood soldiering, slipped. Although, the drop in standards was more likely the result of an adaptation to their environment and the style of the war. Nevertheless, the difference in combat created a sense of uncertainty among the soldiers. The diary suggests Steel and his troop occupied an isolated outpost that was constantly attacked. The isolation meant that there were no other units apart from a useless gun to provide fire support or reinforcement. This isolation combined with constant attacks could have created a sense of fear in Steel, and would account for the overwhelmingly negative tone of his diary. Thus, the soldiers' experience during the guerilla campaign created feelings of uncertainty and fear and in Steel's case a lack of morale.

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<sup>80</sup> This was written soon after Steel had returned from hospital. He had been admitted to hospital due to sickness. Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 23 October, 1900, p. 163.

Furthermore, this lack of familiarity was reflected in the trouble the soldiers had in understanding a guerilla war. In his diary Steel described the war as, ‘a war without cessation, of winter quarters, horsemen, great marches, an enemy who always flees and a war of great humanity on both sides, all of which I thought impossible.’<sup>81</sup> The lack of precedence suggests this was an unfamiliar conflict for the Mounted Rifles. One of Steel’s observations was acts of humanity displayed by both sides. During the war, some of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles had treated their vanquished enemy in an honourable and just manner. Steel’s account of the treatment of Boer prisoners of war indicates the Mounted Rifles treated their enemy fairly.<sup>82</sup> However, the nature of the conflict, especially during the guerilla phase, also involved brutal skirmishes, commandeering, the rounding up of civilians and in some cases the execution of Boer prisoners.<sup>83</sup> Such actions make it appear the war was not as humane as Steel suggests.

Furthermore, the complexity of the guerilla war made it difficult for the soldiers to make sense of their experience. Again, Steel’s difficulty understanding the war is reflected in his diary. On 30 November 1900 he wrote, ‘I have had many discussions with the Dutch and they are courteous and kindly among the better classes.’<sup>84</sup> Here Steel suggests that the more well to do in Boer society were decent individuals. However, individuals of high status within this society were often Burghers, consequently, they were land owners and farmers. It was these same people of the

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<sup>81</sup> This was written towards the end of Steel’s service in the war and seems to be a reflection of his experience. Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 1 September, 1900, p. 134.

<sup>82</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 1 September, 1900, p. 134.

<sup>83</sup> Although the New South Wales Mounted Rifles did not execute prisoners, there were other units which were part of the British Army that did.

<sup>84</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 30 November, 1900, p. 195.

‘better classes’ who comprised the ranks of the Boer republics’ armies. Steel did not describe the enemy on the veldt as kindly or courteous. General De Wet, whom the Mounted Rifles pursued through Mailsburg was one of these rich Burghers. Similarly, even these kindly Boers were not as friendly as Steel suggested. Andrew ‘Banjo’ Paterson, a war correspondent covering the South African War, wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, ‘Back to the laager again, back to the laager again, it was only in fun that I gave up my gun, I’m back to the laager again.’<sup>85</sup> Paterson was commenting on how he perceived the British to be allowing the enemy to escape and fight again. The Boers would hand in rifles, however, these were their grandfathers’ antiquated firearms, likely used in the fighting with native tribes during the treks.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, Steel’s kindly Boers would hand in their rifles and promise not to take up arms against the British and when the Mounted Rifles had left, they would grab their brand new Mauser, join the closest commando, and take pot shots at the Australians. Steel’s perception of good and bad Boers suggests he still had a naïve understanding of the nature of the conflict. The enemy would align with or oppose the Mounted Rifles depending on the circumstances. These constant changes made it difficult for the Mounted Rifles to have a firm understanding of what was going on.

Furthermore, as the nature of guerilla warfare was different, a unique set of combat abilities were required to fight effectively in this style of combat. Once the British realized how the strategy of the South African War had changed they were quick to realize that it required different tactics. This was evident with the creation of the blockhouse system and the need to defend the roads. Moreover, the need to counter

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<sup>85</sup> Andrew Paterson, ‘Mr. A. B. Paterson, from Cape Colony to the Transvaal’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September, 1900, p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> For more information on the Voortrekkers see, Johannes Meintjes, *The Voortrekkers: the story of the Great Trek and the making of South Africa*, (London: Cassell, 1973).

the guerilla style of warfare not only affected the overall tactics of the British, but also the way soldiers fought the enemy. Lord Kitchener understood the best men for this kind of work were those who could undertake long hard riding.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the nature of the war demanded soldiers who were highly mobile and able to fight the Boers in the same way that the Boers fought the British. Through adopting mobile units who could ride all day and take care of themselves, the British were able to take the war to the Boers and contain their ability to operate freely. While historians have asserted the Australian soldiers performed poorly in the guerilla phase of the war, it would appear the Mounted Rifles did not.<sup>88</sup> Given Kitchener's desire for men of agricultural backgrounds, who were familiar with horses and his preference for Australians over British regular and yeomanry cavalrymen, it would appear the colonials were perceived to be well suited for the role. The soldiers of the Mounted Rifles such as Steel and Barham were already in South Africa fighting the Boers. Their actions as well as those by other mounted colonial units must have encountered significant success to impress their British superiors, and was reflected in Kitchener's preference for Australian cavalry.<sup>89</sup> The Mounted Rifles were part of a wider Australian cavalry force that had a unique set of abilities, which enabled them to excel in this style of warfare and contribute to British success, which in doing so made a name for the Australian soldiers.

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<sup>87</sup> Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, p.188.

<sup>88</sup> Field has pointed out that soldiers of the later contingents, which fought during the guerilla phase of the South African War sometimes performed poorly. By this stage the majority of fighting had been done and the Australian colonies had taken relatively light casualties, these conditions combined with recent recession and drought made service in the war attractive to many. Consequently, the soldiers enlisting in later contingents often had no military experience. Entire units were raised, such as those named 'Bushmen', with no experienced soldiers in their ranks and unsurprisingly they often performed poorly compared to the professional soldiers of the Mounted Rifles. Field, *The Forgotten War*, pp. 152-3.

<sup>89</sup> While Bill Gammage has argued the British expected the Australians to provide a secondary role in the conflict. However, Kitchener's desire for Australians suggests they were increasingly providing a real military capability. Bill Gammage, 'The Crucible: The establishment of the Anzac tradition 1899-1918', in M McKernan and M Browne, eds., *Australia two centuries of war and peace*, (Canberra: Australian War Memorial in association with Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 147-66.

Furthermore, these differences between the Imperial soldier and the New South Wales militiaman indicate the Australian soldier was more adept at the guerilla campaign than the British. Steel stated,

The fact is the British officer and soldier has the guts, endurance, and courage of their race, but it has been cultivated in an artificial sphere. With the decline of agriculture the country life of Britain has declined, with the decline of country life followed the decline of rugged independence and robust initiative.<sup>90</sup>

Here, Steel suggests that a country lifestyle was able to create superior soldiers. In a letter to a colonel in Sydney, Captain Hilliard of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles wrote, a ‘British officer said that the Australian soldiers have proved themselves excellent soldiers.’<sup>91</sup> The Mounted Rifles were not lacking in ability. They clearly displayed a fighting style that was comprised of independence and initiative. This was not as regimented as the British style, which made them effective fighters in guerilla war situations. With the majority of the Mounted Rifles coming from an agricultural background and making such an impression on the fighting, it is clear why many people of the time believed, rightly or wrongly, that an agricultural lifestyle was linked to martial superiority.<sup>92</sup> For the citizens back in New South Wales, a soldier’s ability being linked to agriculture was reassuring news. The colony did not have a large army or the long military traditions of European nations.

However, they did have a sizable population involved in agriculture. Additionally, in

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<sup>90</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 30 June, 1900, p. 105.

<sup>91</sup> Captain Hilliard, *Letter from Capt. M. A. Hilliard, NSW Mounted Rifles, serving in South Africa, to unnamed colonel at HQ NSW Military Forces, Sydney, 11 July 1900*, AWM1, 4/22, Australian War Memorial, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> The regimental orders indicate the majority of soldiers in the New South Wales Mounted Rifles came from a rural background, even those who did not work on the land lived in country towns and thus, were part of the rural culture. *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, p. 3.

english the word Boer means farmer. Consequently, the Mounted Rifles enemies were often soldiers who were primarily civilians with a rural background accustomed to surviving in rugged conditions with only their robust initiative. With their rural backgrounds, the Mounted Rifles were able to think, fight and act like the Boer. As a result, in this guerilla war, the Australian type was not a detriment but a complement to the British war effort. Thus, the Mounted Rifles were proficient fighters in their own way.

Furthermore, the Mounted Rifles' involvement in the South African War contributed to the development of a unique Australian type. This was the first time the antipodes had been involved in a war.<sup>93</sup> The soldiers of the Australian colonies were overwhelmingly comprised of cavalry soldiers.<sup>94</sup> Their role as scouting and skirmishing cavalry contributed to the belief that the soldiers were undisciplined, unprofessional but resourceful. In this way, a stereotype of the colonial soldier was developed in contrast to their imperial cousin who was regarded as a highly disciplined professional soldier. Thus, the Mounted Rifles actions on the veldt contributed to the stereotype of the wild colonial soldier.

The guerilla phase of the war did not only involve small skirmishes. The Mounted Rifles were involved in some 'unsavory duties'. These actions were part of the British policy to combat the Boer guerillas. Both Sergeant Barham and Private Steel refer to conducting disreputable acts during their time in the war. Interestingly the regimental

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<sup>93</sup> As only New South Wales had been involved in the Sudan the South African War was the first time all of the British colonies had been involved in a war.

<sup>94</sup> Field's analysis of the Australian contingents makes it clear most Australians fought in a mounted role. Field, *The forgotten war*, pp. 193-96.

orders do not make any acknowledgment of these actions. In his diary Steel stated, 'no one can fight on an empty stomach, we commandeer the Dutchmen's sheep and chickens.'<sup>95</sup> Here Steel has attempted to put his actions in the most positive light by using his hunger as an excuse. Nevertheless, wars are wars, and the practice of commandeering here seems to hardly be a crime against humanity. In a letter to his wife, Sergeant Barham was more direct with what commandeering involved: 'commandeering involves anything that would be considered thievery back home.'<sup>96</sup> In this way, the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles did engage in unsavory duties during the guerilla war. Although it was not professional and honourable behaviour, since the beginning of time the holy trinity of warfare had been pillage, plunder and rape.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, this was not the typical collateral damage of war, but part of a wider British strategy to wear down their enemies will and ability to fight. The Mounted Rifles were heavily involved in this British strategy targeting Boer civilians. Steel outlined, 'the Boer women being sent from Pretoria were very spiteful of the Australians when they tried to give the children biscuits.'<sup>98</sup> Understandably these women were spiteful. They, along with their children, were being forced at gunpoint onto trains, to be sent to British concentration camps. Steel's lack of detail again betrays his embarrassment with the behaviour that he was involved in. Unlike the commandeering of food, often from abandoned farms, these actions were truly 'unsavoury'. However, the soldiers' provision of food for the children and Steel's shame in these actions suggests the Mounted Rifles were not pleased with having to carry out these tasks. Thus, while the Mounted Rifles were involved in these unsavoury activities, they did not take to them with enthusiasm.

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<sup>95</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 11 May, 1900, p. 70.

<sup>96</sup> Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, unidentified press cutting.

<sup>97</sup> Azar Gat, *A history of military thought: from the enlightenment to the Cold War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 269.

<sup>98</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 12 August, 1900, p. 124.

However, the British were not the only ones to use questionable tactics during this stage of the war. Steel provides an account of an incident stating, ‘we came under fire from a farm house flying a white flag, when searched, Mauser rifles, ammunition and ammunition for a 15 pounder were found, we were ordered to burn the house down, none of the officers or the men care for this kind of work but it is war.’<sup>99</sup> The soldiers’ understanding of war had previously not included burning down civilian residences, even if they openly supported the enemy. The Mounted Rifles were not accustomed to this kind of behaviour in warfare. Nevertheless, this house can be considered a legitimate military target, an enemy combatant had fired upon the soldiers and the house was being used as a storage area for a Boer army. Tactics such as engaging in hostilities while under a flag of truce and using civilian farms to hide arms were an affront to both sides’ understanding of warfare.<sup>100</sup> In this way, both sides of the conflict were involved in disreputable tactics.

As the nature of the war changed, the civilians of New South Wales began to lose interest in the war. The changing nature of the war made it difficult for the media to report. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, ‘Australian soldiers on sentry all night, rained on.’<sup>101</sup> This headline, published after the last major battle, formed the centerpiece of the *Herald’s* reporting on the war for the day. It provided no information about the war. The civilians expected to read about the outcome of a major battle and what their soldiers had achieved; instead they found headlines that may as well have described what the soldiers had for breakfast. The nature of the

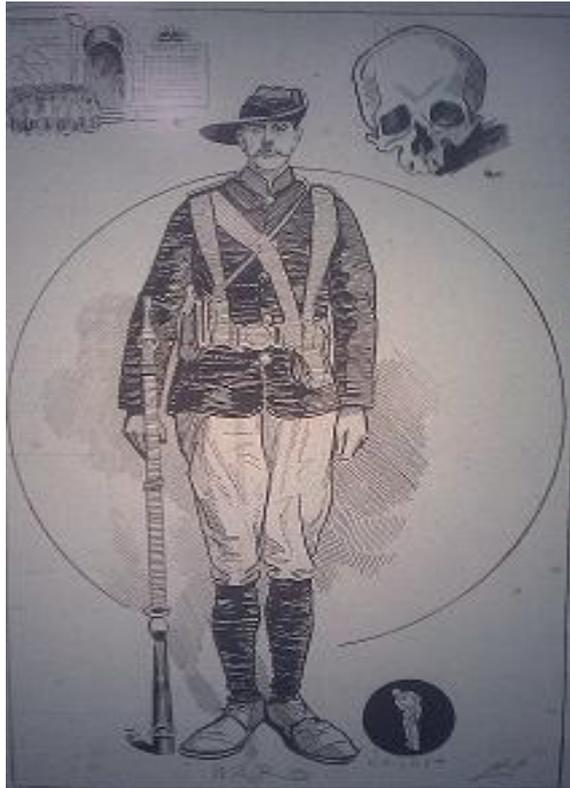
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<sup>99</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 3 October, 1900, p. 157.

<sup>100</sup> Michael Howard, ‘Constraints on warfare’, in Michael Howard, George Andreopoulos and Mark Shulman, eds., *The laws of war: constraints on warfare in the Western world*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 1-12.

<sup>101</sup> ‘New South Wales soldiers at the front’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 July, 1900, p. 7.

guerilla war made it difficult to know how the campaign was progressing for the British. Also, the use of 'colonial' to describe any colonial soldier made it difficult for the media to know what their soldiers were doing. In a conventional war, the soldiers had a fixed base and fought in planned battles. This allowed the media to provide detailed information about their soldiers' progress, within the limits of censorship. However, in this unconventional war, the Boer armies that were constantly moving had no fixed base from which to operate. In this way, the Mounted Rifles could not be sent to attack an enemy position. Rather they were expected to defend outposts and search for the Boers. As they were constantly on the move and just as regularly fighting in small skirmishes, it was difficult for the war correspondents to cover everything that was happening and then to condense it into something the civilian population could understand. As a result, the information on the war, which was available to the public, was limited. Accordingly, as they were not highly informed about the war they could not understand it. Thus, as the nature of the war changed, the reporting of the war became more mundane and the civilians began to lose interest.



The cartoon alludes to the interest in the war, within New South Wales, during the war's conventional phase. *The Bulletin*, 27 January 1900, p. 17.

This lack of information about the war resulted in the majority of civilians in New South Wales having limited resonance with the war. A cartoon in *The Bulletin* indicates how attached to the war the civilians were. On 27 January 1900, a cartoon alluded to the important issues facing the civilians that week. In this cartoon, the Boer War is presented in the form of a soldier dressed in the uniform of the New South Wales Corps, as indicated by the slouch hat, jacket and trousers. The image of the soldier is large and located in the centre of the page. The cricket match is much smaller and on the periphery of the page. This suggests that, initially the editors of *The Bulletin* perceived New South Wales involvement in the Boer War to be of high importance to their society. However, as the nature of the war changed, a steady decline in the media's coverage of the war is evident. The main cartoon in *The Bulletin* on 5 November 1900 depicted political issues facing the newly federated

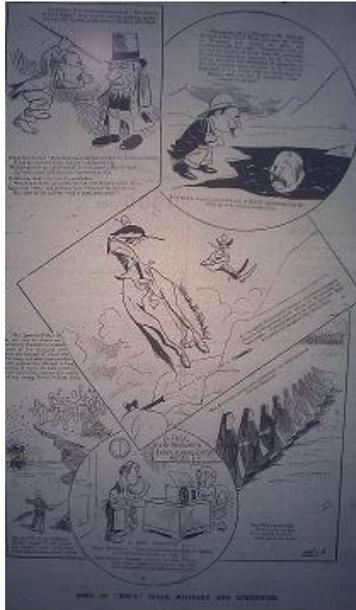
nation. Within this cartoon, a civilian is depicted wearing the clothes and resting on the tools of the working person. From this cartoon, it would appear there was no war taking place. Instead, the newspaper focused on issues that directly affected the lives of its readers. The lack of desire to run stories about the guerilla campaign contrasts with the publication of stories recounting conventional battles. This suggests the civilians understood and were interested in the conventional war. However, an asymmetrical war, which was being fought in the Boer republics, would not resonate with the civilians. Moreover, *The Bulletin* was not a charity, the entire purpose of the newspaper was to make money. Consequently, the editors decided to cover other issues than the war, as they knew that their readers, the citizens of New South Wales, were not interested in the war and would be more likely to buy the paper if it covered other, more relevant issues. Thus, the papers did not write extensively on the war resulting in a lack of information for the civilians.



This cartoon indicates, as the war progressed into its guerilla phase the media sought to avoid the wars coverage in favour of issues at home, that affected ordinary civilians. *The Bulletin*, 5 November 1900, p. 17.

Furthermore, the civilians of New South Wales did not understand the war and consequently it did not resonate with them. Another cartoon in *The Bulletin* shaped the civilian population's understanding of the war. The picture depicts a Boer, poorly hidden behind a kopje firing at a short and skinny New South Wales soldier, whose horse has jumped into the air, while another Boer is depicted jumping like a kangaroo. The cartoon is specifically alluding to the guerilla nature of the conflict as seen by the sniping in the picture. The exaggeration of the cartoon is intended to depict the South African War as a farcical hunt. In this way, the nature of the imagery used in the cartoon is intended to make a mockery of the South African War. This suggests that the people of New South Wales perceived the guerilla warfare to be ridiculous, this was because the civilians did not understand this style of warfare.

Consequently, they did not perceive the war to be serious or dangerous. As the nature of the war was completely alien to the civilians understanding of warfare, they did not perceive the Boer War to be a serious war. Thus, as the civilians did not understand the war they could not understand the soldiers' experience.



The centre cartoon reveals the absurdity with which the civilians perceived their soldier's involvement in the war. *The Bulletin*, 13 January 1900, p. 17.

Therefore, after the series of major battles the war was not won but continued as a guerilla war. Although it was not until later in the second year of the war that the British realized they were fighting a guerilla war, the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles had experienced this style of warfare since the end of the major battles. For these colonial soldiers this style of war was unique because it was the first time they had ever experienced a guerilla war. Although it was an alien style of warfare, because of their role as cavalry soldiers and civilian backgrounds, the Mounted Rifles were able to successfully fight the Boers in a way that the imperial soldiers could not. This earned them the respect of professional soldiers and marked the beginning of a colonial soldier type. Nevertheless, the Mounted Rifles experience

during the guerilla war was not one of a heroic coming of age, the soldiers had difficulty in understanding the nature of warfare and coming to terms with the actions that they were expected perform. Consequently, many became disillusioned and uncertain. These differences in the reality of the war, compared to the expectations, were not only experienced by the soldiers. The civilians of New South Wales also had difficulty fitting the experience of the Mounted Rifles into their world view. As a result of their inability to align the nature of the conflict with their perception of warfare, many civilians lost interest in the South African War.

## Chapter 3

### Welcome Home

When Private Steel sighted land from the deck of the *Orient* on 4 January 1901, he expressed his excitement at seeing Australia again.<sup>102</sup> However, it would be another four days before the soldiers would disembark in Sydney.<sup>103</sup> The first contingent of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles arrived in Sydney on 8 January 1901. While the soldiers may have been excited to be home, the public was not as enthusiastic. Upon their return, there was no large crowd to greet them. The Mounted Rifles moved from the wharf to Victoria Barracks, where they had an official ceremony. From there they returned home, and were greeted by friends and family, before returning to obscurity. How was the soldiers' experience understood and remembered, and why did their exploits seem to matter so little to the people of New South Wales?

Having spent months riding hard from kopje to kopje, across the humid veldt, while dodging the bullets of the Boers, the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles were pleased to be home. Upon their arrival, they encountered a society that appeared indifferent towards them and their exploits. Historians have debated over the amount of support and opposition towards the South African War. However, the reality is that opinions at either end of the spectrum were not widespread. For most citizens, the war had little resonance at all. They had been largely kept in the dark about the nature of the soldiers' experience and it did not affect their daily lives. Even the soldiers had difficulty coming to terms with the memory of their war experience. Many of those

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<sup>102</sup> It was the first time Steel had seen home in over a year, of course he would have been excited. Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 4 January 1901, p. 231.

<sup>103</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 8 January 1901p. 233.

who had served had trouble understanding their experience of war, and developed a negative memory of the war. This lack of resonance is reflected in the Mounted Rifles' quiet return to Australia, the nature of monuments, newspaper articles, ceremonies and soldiers' diaries, which all reflect a society neither opposed to, nor supportive of, the war and its memory.

As the *Orient* departed from Cape Town, the soldiers would have undoubtedly been relieved to have survived the war. True to form, Steel himself expressed little happiness, instead outlining his gripes about life aboard the *Orient* and the differences between units on the ship.<sup>104</sup> This basically sums up Steel's understanding of the war. As a private soldier, Steel's understanding of the war, was based upon what he had directly seen and been involved in. Thus, his memory of the war was formed around his individual experiences.

Although Barham, as a sergeant, had been exposed to the same experiences, as his soldiers, in many ways his understanding of the war was different. Like Steel, Barham had encountered a war for which he was not trained. However, while in Cape Town, he provided insight into a different experience of the war. Having completed some administrative work in regards to his soldiers' return home Barham stated, 'passes issued, all anxious about the date of going home.'<sup>105</sup> As a sergeant, Barham was responsible for logistics within his squadron, the welfare of his men and maintaining discipline. The nature of his role allowed him to have a greater understanding of what was going on, and his experience of the war did not solely

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<sup>104</sup> The New South Wales Mounted Rifles were not the only soldiers on the ship. Other soldiers from the New South Wales Corps including infantry and lancers, were also aboard. Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 28 November, 1900, p. 190.

<sup>105</sup> Barham wrote this while still in South Africa. Before departing, the Mounted Rifles spent some time in Cape Town. Barham, *Diary of the Boer War*, 10 November, 1900, p. 90.

revolve around what was happening to him. Thus, Barham's memory of the war was influenced by actions and events outside of his specific unit.

The return of the Mounted Rifles in Sydney seems to have attracted little public attention. If the wharf was full of citizens waiting eagerly to greet their state's heroes, Steel certainly did not mention it in his diary. Instead, he described how the soldiers marched from the dock to Victoria Barracks, where a ceremony was held.<sup>106</sup> The barracks was the site of the military establishment within Sydney, its high sandstone walls marking a physical barrier between it and the wider civilian society. At the barracks, in a formal ceremony, the soldiers were received by the Governor, Premier, and other government representatives.<sup>107</sup> This initial welcome was an official ceremony. The speeches were all given by government officials who extolled the military achievements of the soldiers. No ordinary citizens seem to have been involved or even present. Attended by soldiers, government and military officials, it reflected the separation of the war from society. This low-key return suggests that for most civilians in New South Wales, the return of the Mounted Rifles was almost irrelevant. By this time, the war did not resonate with most of civilian society.<sup>108</sup> However, the politicians who presented the speeches were heavily supportive of the war. They interpreted the soldiers' achievements as important to the prestige of their state and a reflection of their loyalty to Empire. The political perspective on the war was entwined with ideals of nostalgia and jingoism.

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<sup>106</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 8 January 1901, p. 233.

<sup>107</sup> This ceremony seems to have been in the form of a parade. Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 8 January 1901, p. 233.

<sup>108</sup> Jeffrey Grey has suggested the public was becoming disenchanted with a long war, which did not conform to their expectations. Grey, *A military history of Australia*, p. 60.

The soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles received a much warmer welcome when they reached their home towns. The *Bathurst Free Press* stated that,

the streets were lined and special tickets were needed to gain access to the train station, decorations of union jacks adorned public and private residences, and a welcome banner was suspended across the main street, concluding with a ceremony at the post office.<sup>109</sup>

With the large public attendance and decorations throughout the city, the ceremony could indeed be described as a grand reception. Steel reveals the soldiers were not only provided with a parade, but also, a banquet and a speech from the Mayor.<sup>110</sup> Thus, the returning soldiers were given an extremely warm welcome by their home town.

However, these exuberant celebrations do not necessarily suggest a high level of support for the war among the citizens of Bathurst. There would have always been a ceremony, even if the war was opposed. A half squadron from the regiment was based in the town, and some of the soldiers, including Barham, were well known within the local community.<sup>111</sup> Accordingly, the friends and family of these soldiers would have been eager to welcome them home.<sup>112</sup> In describing the actions of the local soldiers, the *Bathurst Free Press* went on to state, ‘the soldiers’ involvement in the war had established a splendid name for the young nation of Australia.’<sup>113</sup> For some people their support for the soldiers was because they understood the Mounted Rifles’ actions to be entwined with national pride. As a result, for these individuals

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<sup>109</sup> ‘Return of the Bathurst Troops’, *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 11 January, 1901, p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 8 January, 1901, p. 233.

<sup>111</sup> Ralph Sutton, Ken Thompson and Bill Storer, *Military forces in New South Wales: an introduction, Part 1, 1788-1904*, (Paddington: Army Museum Sydney, 2000), p. 65.

<sup>112</sup> Although not specifically related to the South African War, Garton examines the common experience surrounding soldiers’ return from war. Many of these experiences transcend the specific conflict. Stephen Garton, *The cost of war: Australians return*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>113</sup> ‘Return of the Bathurst Troops’, *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 11 January, 1901, p. 2.

the Mounted Rifles' involvement in the war was not only a fight for the British Empire, but also a display of the young nation's abilities. However, the ceremony at Bathurst did not rate a mention in the main newspapers of New South Wales, such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Bulletin*. The detailed coverage in the local paper, and its absence in other media, suggests the return of soldiers from the South African War was irrelevant to people who had no relationship with the soldiers. The war did not affect the majority of people, and as a result, they did not care about the soldiers' experience. Thus, the outpouring of support from the local population towards the Mounted Rifles was limited to friends and family welcoming home loved ones, and a sense of national pride rather than support for the war.

For the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles, the return to civilian life was relatively easy for them because the regiment had been a militia unit before the war. Many of the soldiers in the later contingents, would experience greater difficulty when returning to civilian life in Australia.<sup>114</sup> Many of these later volunteer units, comprised unemployed people, without prior military training.<sup>115</sup> As a result, soldiers of the later contingents did not have a job to return to once they arrived back in Australia, and this lack of employment contributed to their difficulty in adjusting to civilian life. However, the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles did not have as much difficulty returning to society. As militia soldiers, the majority of those within the unit's ranks would have had a civilian occupation outside of the military, and were able to return to it after the war. Before the war, Sergeant Barham had been a butcher and upon his

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<sup>114</sup> Field has pointed to the difficulties returning soldiers faced, particularly in relation to pay. Field, *The forgotten war*, p. 176.

<sup>115</sup> Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, p. 190.

return from the war, he was able to return to work, which assisted his return to normal life.<sup>116</sup>

Once the ceremonies had concluded, the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles set about the task of truly returning home. Having returned, some found their involvement in the war caused them personal problems. Steel, 'was outraged by the delay in discharges, and lack of change to the old methods, which he perceived to be 'useless'.'<sup>117</sup> He goes on to state, '[they] neglect to make use of men experienced in war'.<sup>118</sup> Steel's comment reveals an outrage that soldiers who have already seen action were not being included again in new contingents being sent to South Africa. However, soldiers were able to serve in multiple deployments.<sup>119</sup> Thus, it would seem Steel was not wanted for service again, and this may have contributed to his negative memory of the war. When Steel was finally discharged he stated, 'Fixing up matters in regards to pay and luggage.'<sup>120</sup> However, Steel's pay issue would not be completely resolved for some time. A royal commission after the war found, Steel and eight other soldiers who had served in South Africa were still owed money for their service.<sup>121</sup> This inquiry was concluded nine years after the end of the war, and would have further contributed to his negative memory of his wartime experience. Thus, some of the returning soldiers had many loose ends to tie up before they could move on.

The lack of ceremonies and public marches conducted by the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles, in the years following their return suggests that their experience of the war

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<sup>116</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, p. 9.

<sup>117</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 31 January, 1901, p. 235

<sup>118</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, 31 January, 1901, p. 235.

<sup>119</sup> Soldiers with experience often served again in leadership roles. Field, *The forgotten war*, p. 148.

<sup>120</sup> Steel, *In the ranks of the Mounted Rifles*, June 1, 1901, p. 235.

<sup>121</sup> *Minutes of Evidence and Proceedings: Royal Commission of Inquiry re claims of members of New South Wales Contingents in South Africa 1907*, 1477, 8/385, State Records.

was remembered as a duty rather than something that defined them. Their involvement in the South African War would have remained in their memory for the rest of their lives, but as part time soldiers, the men of the Mounted Rifles were expected to fight wars. For them, their experience was understood to be part of their duty and not something that defined who they were. As a result, when they returned home the soldiers sought to return to their previous civilian lifestyle.

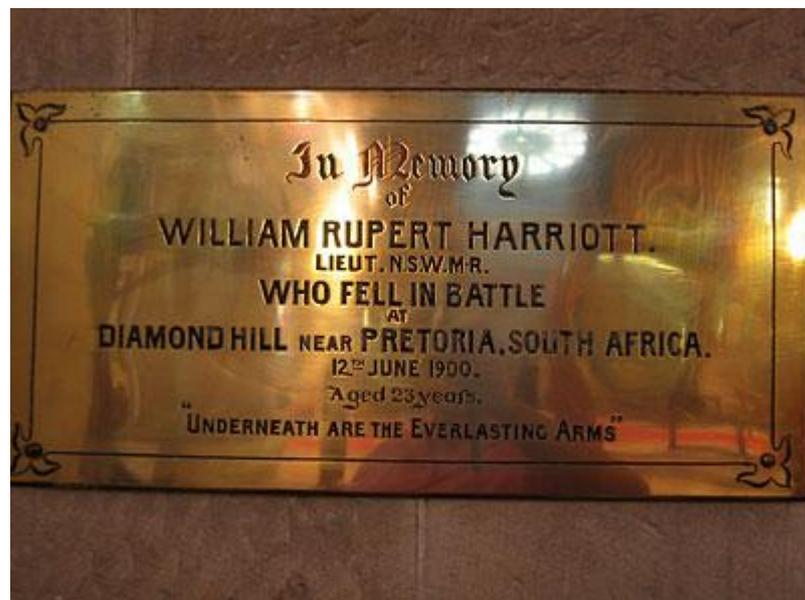
The style and nature of statues erected to the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles following their return from the war, reflects how their society understood, remembered, and forgot their wartime experience. Throughout history humans have erected monuments as a testament to their civilization. A statue's location, style and iconography are all unique to the statue's original time and place. These unique features of a statue, which are embedded with meaning, allude to the identity of the society that erected the monument. Sergiusz Michalski claims, 'in the late 1800s public monuments became an artistic, political and social domain in their own right.'<sup>122</sup> With statue mania spreading across Europe in the late nineteenth century, statues had become a popular monument within the public sphere.<sup>123</sup> Public statues had a variety of functions depending upon their location. They could display the deeds of great individuals and the values and culture of a nation, or they might assert dominance over a conquered people. As a British colony, Sydney's European roots ensured these European ideas of monumentalisation were followed. Maurice Halbwachs has suggested, 'an individual's memory depends upon the recollections of

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<sup>122</sup> Sergiusz Michalski, *Public monuments: art in political bondage 1870-1997*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>123</sup> Robert Aldrich, *Vestiges of the colonial Empire in France: monuments, museums, and colonial memories*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 157.

others and the great frameworks of memory within a society.’<sup>124</sup> Monuments create one such ‘great framework’. As a result, monuments have the ability to provide the memory of past deeds. In the case of the Mounted Rifles, monuments can reflect how their experience was remembered. Moreover, the memorials to soldiers of the Mounted Rifles were made to immortalise the memory of soldiers who fought for the Empire. If the war was truly unpopular few of these monuments would have been erected. While if it had been popular, there would have been many more made. Thus, as statues are monuments embedded with meaning. The monuments to the soldiers of the Mounted Rifles erected after the war, can provide insights into how the veterans and civilian population remembered and understood the soldiers’ experience of the South African War.



Lieutenant Harriott’s memorial plaque. (2008), Photographer, Ms Jane Williamson. *Lieutenant Harriott’s memorial plaque*. Courtesy of, [www.registerofwarmemorialsinnewsouthwales.com](http://www.registerofwarmemorialsinnewsouthwales.com).

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<sup>124</sup> Lewis Coser, trans., Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 42.

The location of the Harriott war memorial indicates the private memorialisation of soldiers who died fighting in the New South Wales Mounted Rifles. The Harriott plaque and gates are located at St Thomas' Anglican Church in North Sydney. The gates are located at the front of the church while the plaque is located to the side where there is a cemetery. Many European war monuments and statues, which would eventually be erected to the soldiers of this war, were made accessible to the public's collective memory and culture through the memorial's placement in a central location.<sup>125</sup> However, Lieutenant Harriott's memorial plaque is located in a private place. In this way, the monument's location reflects a desire to go unnoticed by the wider society. It is only meant to be known and remembered by a certain group of people. The enlistment records of the Mounted Rifles reveal Harriott was an Anglican from North Sydney.<sup>126</sup> To be located in this church, which was in the same suburb and of the same denomination as the Lieutenant, suggests he would have been a member of the church's congregation. Hence, the monument's location emphasizes Harriott the deceased member of the parish, not Harriott the New South Wales soldier. Thus, the other members of the church would have had some kind of relationship with him. Accordingly, they would have know that he was in South Africa fighting with the New South Wales contingent, and the news of his death would have been received with attention and sorrow by the entire congregation. In this way, the monument's location suggests these people, who were a part of Harriott's life, were the only ones intended to remember him through this memorial.

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<sup>125</sup> Halbwachs has argued a person's memory is created from the frameworks of memory in their society. As war memorials are one such framework, their position in a central place in the community can influence the community's collective memory. Lewis Coser, trans., Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 42.

<sup>126</sup> *Boer War: regimental orders for the New South Wales Mounted Rifles*, p. 9.

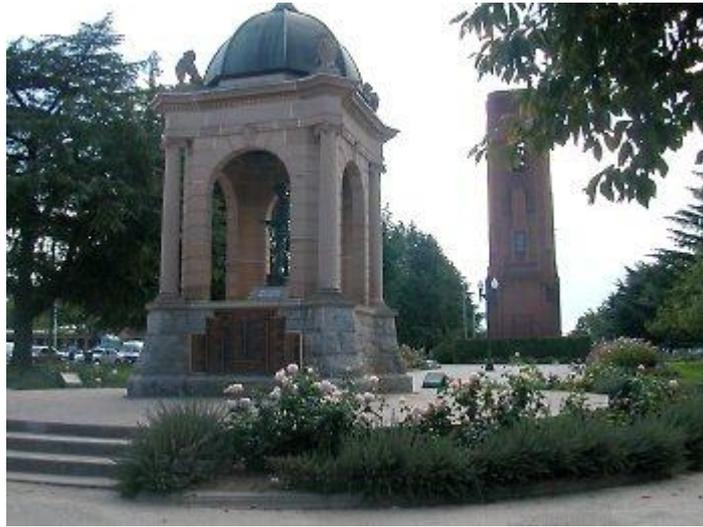


Both pictures combine to make the Lieutenant Harriott memorial gate at St. Thomas' Church, North Sydney. *Lieutenant Harriott's memorial gate*. 20 August 2011. Photographer, Stephen Francis. Courtesy of St. Thomas' Church.

The Harriott memorial's physical features reflect the personal nature surrounding the memory of the Mounted Rifles soldiers who died. Inscribed upon the gates are the words, 'erected by his personal friends'. Monuments, especially to the memory of the military are often erected by the state. In the case of those who died in the Mounted Rifles, the monuments were created by individuals who had a close relationship with the fallen. In this way, the memory of the Mounted Rifles dead can reflect a private and personal memory. On the plaque, the only reference to Harriott's involvement in the Boer War is found in the words, 'died in battle, in South Africa, 23 August 1900.' This plaque does not explicitly make mention of the character of the South African War. It does not exalt the deeds and military exploits of the Lieutenant. At the time of the monument's erection, the war was not unpopular. Even historians who have argued for the unpopularity of the war have suggested this came well after Harriott's death.<sup>127</sup> It was not until after the major battles of the war had ceased and skirmishing by the Boers and a scorched earth policy by the British had begun that opposition began. Thus, there would have been no question of omitting Harriott's military exploits because of a desire to have him remembered in a positive light and anxiety

<sup>127</sup> Grey, *A military history of Australia*, p. 60.

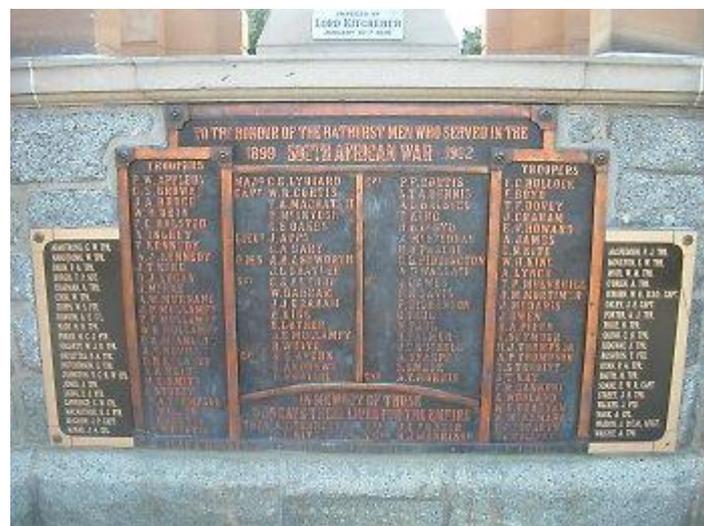
over what he had done. Rather, it reflects a desire for his friends to remember him as a person. The friends left behind had not experienced the war, and they had little understanding of its character. They could not remember Harriott the mounted rifleman. They could only remember him as their dead friend.



Bathurst South African War Memorial in the foreground. Note the soldier in the middle of the cupola. (2010). Photographer Peter Levarre-Waters. *Bathurst South African War Memorial*. Courtesy of, [www.warmemorialsinnewsouthwales.com](http://www.warmemorialsinnewsouthwales.com).

The location of the Bathurst South African War Memorial emphasizes the local nature of the soldiers' remembrance. The memorial stands in Machattie Park in the centre of Bathurst, bounded by the major thoroughfares of William, George, Church and Russell Streets, and surrounded by churches and shopping centers. Today the local First World War memorial is located opposite the South African monument. The central location of both suggests they are meant to be noticed by the local community. Nevertheless, their location within the middle of the park, surrounded by grass, trees and gardens, creates a peaceful and secluded atmosphere. The monument reflects a community remembrance to those who fought in the South African War. Although the monument is not overtly to the Mounted Rifles, as it includes the names of other contingents and formations from New South Wales, many of the soldiers

from the Mounted Rifles, including Steel and Barham, are mentioned in the monument. However, unlike other memorials that seek to remember those who died or fought in the war, the Bathurst War Memorial is only remembering those who fought from the town.<sup>128</sup> The men from other towns and states are not included in the Bathurst memory of the war. Accordingly, the memorial reflects a society which was not seeking to glorify their war dead. The Bathurst memorial to the South African War emphasises a community that sought to remember the individuals from their community and not the wider colonial experience of the war.



Bathurst War Memorial, honour roll plaque. (2010) Photographer Peter Levarre-Waters. *Bathurst South African War Memorial*. Courtesy of, [www.warmemorialsinnewsouthwales.com](http://www.warmemorialsinnewsouthwales.com).

Furthermore, the Bathurst monument's physical features reflect how the nature of the war was remembered. The approach to the monument is flanked by gardens, while at the front there are three stairs that lead to the memorial's main structure. The memorial is a cupola, with four supporting sandstone lions, an arched sandstone structure with an enclosed bronze figure of an Australian soldier, and four columns on the outside. The inscription on the front bottom of the monument reads, 'In memory

<sup>128</sup> Many war memorials seek to present a wider memory of the war. For more information about war memorials in Australia see, Kenneth Inglis, *Sacred places: war memorials in the Australian landscape*, (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008).

of those who gave their lives for Empire'. The plaque, upon which these words are inscribed, lists five names of soldiers who died, one being Trooper Bennett, a soldier from the Mounted Rifles who was shot at Riversdale.<sup>129</sup> For the people of Bathurst, the South African War had been not for freedom or defence of their country, but on behalf of the British Empire. From the Bathurst area, these were the only five soldiers to die whilst serving in New South Wales units, and it was for the Empire that they had died. However, the monument was not just to remember those who had died. On the top of the plaque, on the front of the monument an inscription reads, "To the honour of the Bathurst men who served in the South African War, 1899 - 1902," under this inscription are one hundred and twenty nine names including those of Private Steel and Sergeant Barham. The inscription reveals an intention to revere the names of individuals that appear on the monument. Nevertheless, this reverence focuses upon a local nature, not remembering the larger New South Wales, or even Australian experience. The people of Bathurst's memory of the war was characterized by their personal contribution to the war. The statue of the soldier in the middle of the cupola stands dressed in the uniform of New South Wales colonial soldiers, with a slouch hat and bandolier slung over his shoulder. The style of clothing, while militaristic, was not in the same regimented fashion of the British Army. The depiction of all the soldiers from the area in this manner reflects society's collective memory of the soldiers. These soldiers, including the Mounted Rifles, were remembered as a distinct Australian type for which they all had played a role in

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<sup>129</sup> The other names on the plaque are Trooper Kite, Trooper Morrison, Private Frazer and Lieutenant Handcock. The Lieutenant is the same infamous Handcock who served with Breaker Morant in the Bushveldt Carabineers, his name is only just on the bottom of the plaque as it was added in the 1960s, well after the unveiling of the monument on 10 January 1910 by Lord Kitchener. 'Letters from the front: the late Private A.T. Bennett', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August, 1900, p. 2.

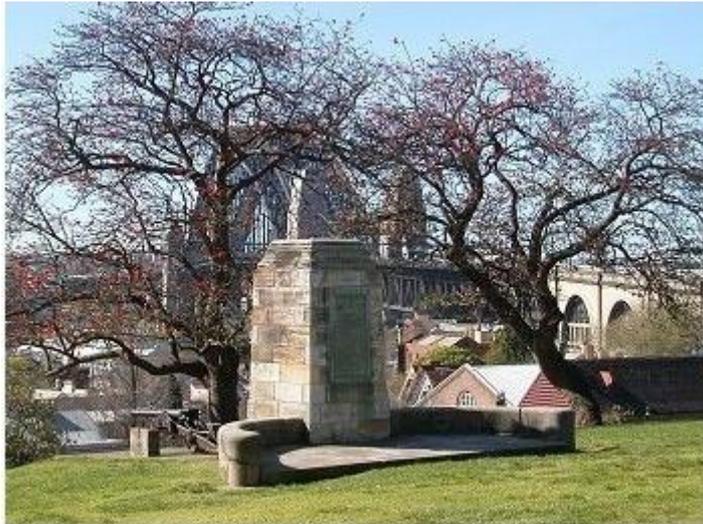
creating, through their actions in combat.<sup>130</sup> Thus, the physical features of the Bathurst statue suggest that the local community's desire to remember the war was more to do with their local involvement and achievements rather than support for an imperial war and its memory.

Although monuments were erected to individuals who had served in the Mounted Rifles during the first two years of the South African War, there were few monuments to the soldiers outside of their local communities. A concerned veteran and soldier of the New South Wales Corps wrote to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* stating, 'it has now been ten years since the end of the South African War, and there is still no monument to the soldiers of New South Wales who fought in the war.'<sup>131</sup> The wider civilian population of New South Wales did not seek a monument for those who had fought in the war, and ten years on, they seemed unlikely to do so. In this way, the rest of society had moved on except for those who had fought in the war. The politicians had not perceived a state monument was needed to remember those who had fought in the war. Thus, memory of the war in New South Wales was confined to private remembrance rather than state remembrance, as the majority of people did not have any connection with the war and its soldiers.

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<sup>130</sup> The Australian soldiers were distinctive from the other soldiers of the British Empire. Jones has argued the Australians were a rough and tumble lot who fought on their own initiative. Ian Jones, *The Australian Light Horse*, (Sydney: Time Life Books Australia in association with John Ferguson, 1987).

<sup>131</sup> 'The Soldiers' Monument', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 April, 1910, p. 7.



The South African War Memorial at the Rocks, Sydney. (2007) Photographer Mr. Rusty Priest. *The South African War Memorial*, Courtesy of, [www.warmemorialsinnewsouthwales.com](http://www.warmemorialsinnewsouthwales.com).

When a monument to the soldiers of New South Wales who had served in the Boer War was finally erected, it did not indicate an acceptance by the majority of the civilian population. The New South Wales monument, known as the South African War Memorial, is located at the Rocks in Sydney's Observatory Park.<sup>132</sup> It overlooks Sydney Harbour, including the Harbour Bridge. Surrounding the monument are two trees and an open grassed area. As the State's monument to soldiers of the Boer War, its location within the largest city of New South Wales is fitting. However, its position within Sydney is curious. The monument is located on the fringe of the Rocks. This is not in an area where people often congregate or pass through and as a result, the memorial is isolated. Whilst it provides an atmosphere of remembrance, it is not in an area where the general public will notice it. Although one function of monuments is to provide a place for remembrance, as a state monument, the South African War Memorial could be expected to be placed in a monumental precinct in the heart of the city. Being positioned in such an obscure location suggests the

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<sup>132</sup> *South African War Memorial: The Rocks, Sydney*, Register of War Memorials in New South Wales, < <http://www.warmemorialsnsw.asn.au/details.cfm?MemNo=318>>, viewed 23 April 2011.

memory of the soldiers who fought in the Transvaal War was not something central to the collective memory of the wider community. In this way, the monument's location suggests the memory of the war, including that of the Mounted Rifles was a niche in the psyche of New South Wales society.

While the monument is inclusive of those who served, as a state monument should be, its physical features are extremely plain. The monument consists of a stone semi-circular base and metal plate attached to a stone pillar. Upon the metal plate, the names of commanding officers, units and the number of soldiers, horses and nurses are inscribed. The Mounted Rifles, along with every other unit from each contingent that served, are mentioned on the plaque. However, the mention of horses is unique to the monument. The soldiers of mounted units had a special relationship with their horses. For these soldiers the horse and rider were considered one. Consequently, without each other they could not function in their intended role. Through this relationship, they warranted mention on the monument. The inclusion of nurses is in some ways more surprising. Nurses, who play no less an essential role in wars, are often overlooked in memory and memorialisation of warfare.<sup>133</sup> Other monuments to the soldiers of the Boer War within New South Wales do not make mention of their service. Accordingly, the nurses' inclusion in the state monument, is a reflection of the memorial's inclusiveness of all the groups that contributed to the state's involvement in the South African War. While inclusive, for a state monument, it is also lacking. The monument's stone consists of blocks put together in a similar fashion to a house, and the style consists of small pillar, making the monument an

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<sup>133</sup> Chilla Bulbeck has argued the memorialisation of warfare has often overlooked women's contribution to their nations war effort. Chilla Bullbeck, 'Women of substance: The depiction of women in Australian monuments', *Hecate*, vol. 18, no. 2, (1992), p. 8-18.

extremely plain dull stone pillar, lacking in architectural grandeur.<sup>134</sup> Even the Bathurst monument was a grander monument than the State monument. The plain style of the State monument suggests the people of New South Wales were not interested in commemorating their involvement in the war.

Furthermore, as reflected in the State monument's unveiling ceremony, the memorial is a testament to the lack of public memory towards New South Wales' involvement in the South African War. The monument was formally unveiled on 2 June 1940, thirty eight years after the South African War had ended. The delay in erecting a state memorial to the soldiers of the Boer War implies that, society did not embrace the soldier's experience of the war. Nevertheless, eventually New South Wales built a state monument to the war. Although one was eventually erected, it was not because society suddenly decided a monument was needed. The ceremony was not made public in any newspapers, and unlike other monuments that were erected within the community, it was not commented on after the event.<sup>135</sup> The lack of information about the ceremony suggests it was not important to society. The unveiling of the South African War Memorial was a private event. The program for the unveiling of South African War Memorial provides insight into the nature of the ceremony that was attended by veterans of the South African campaign, including the chaplains, and had the purpose of dedicating the memorial and commemorating those who fought.<sup>136</sup> The lack of public interest and involvement in the ceremony suggests it was a private event attended by the wars' veterans. As a result, the absence of civilian interest and

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<sup>134</sup> The monuments to the soldiers of the South African War were often grandiose. For more information and examples of the style of monuments see, Inglis, *Sacred places*.

<sup>135</sup> Even the Bathurst memorial was publicized in the media. 'At Bathurst, crowd of ten thousand, Soldiers Memorial unveiled,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 January, 1910, p. 7.

<sup>136</sup> *South African War Memorial: The Rocks, Sydney, Order of Dedication Service of the New South Wales South African Soldiers' War Memorial*, Register of War Memorials in New South Wales, <<http://www.warmemorialsnsw.asn.au/details.cfm?MemNo=318>>, viewed 23 April 2011

presence at the ceremony suggests they did not empathise with the soldiers' experience in the war. With such a vast gap between the war and the monument's unveiling, it must be asked, why? Even Bathurst managed to scrape together the funds for a monument, dedicated to 131 people in the local area, long before the state of New South Wales erected a monument to the soldiers. Between the end of the South African War and the monument's erection, one world war had been fought and another was currently in progress. As a result of these wars, commemoration of the Anzacs had begun to take place in Australia.<sup>137</sup> With the development of the Anzac commemoration, they were able to align themselves in the remembrance of Australian soldiers'. Thus, the veterans of the South African War were able to commemorate their service in this war to a wider audience.

When the soldiers of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles returned to Australia they found a society that did not understand their experiences and had little interest in remembering their achievements. While the soldiers were not subject to abuse, they also found that the majority of people were not overly welcoming towards them. For some soldiers, the memory of the war was negative as they struggled to understand the nature of their experience and had difficulties upon their return. However, in the case of the Mounted Rifles, having done their duty for Queen and Empire, most readjusted to society, taking up their lives where they had left them before going to war. Although the veterans continued to live with their experience, society continued to move further away from the memory of Australia's involvement in the war. However, the Mounted Rifles' experience was remembered by a niche of the community. This memory continued to focus on local and personal relations, boasting

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<sup>137</sup> Mark McKenna, 'Anzac Day: How did it become Australia's national day?' in Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, eds., *What's wrong with Anzac?: the militarization of Australian history*, (Sydney: New South, 2010), pp. 110-134.

of their achievements, and remembering the dead. It was only through local and personal relations that the soldiers' experience was acknowledged and remembered. Nevertheless, this experience and memory did not completely align with the Mounted Rifles' experience of the war. For those who had fought the memory of the war was something intensely personal.

## Conclusion

The first contingent of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles made an important contribution to the British war effort. The importance of the soldiers' contribution to the early conventional war is evidenced by their role in assisting the movement of allied soldiers, reconnaissance, and leading cavalry charges in battles to force a decision. For these actions they received numerous commendations. During the guerilla phase of the war, the soldiers were invaluable in their ability to take the war to the Boers. Their involvement in the conventional phase of the war, which most soldiers were not a part of and their ability to adapt to the changing guerilla warfare, both point to the uniqueness of their experience. The civilians' lack of resonance with the soldier's experience is evidenced by the general indifference the public held towards their soldiers' involvement in the war. This has all been made clear through a thorough examination of all the relevant documents surrounding the Mounted Rifles involvement in the war combined with the wider scholarship, which has been able to place the soldiers' involvement within the bigger picture.

In this way, the first contingent of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles had a similar experience to other Australian units. Like other Australians, they had fought a guerilla war against the Boers. However, their experience differed significantly, they were singled out for commendation and fought in conventional battles many other units could only dream of. The Mounted Rifles' inclusion within the historical narrative provides a more complex perspective of the Australian involvement in the South African War.

Furthermore, this understanding of the Mounted Rifles role in the South African War has been made possible by a narrow examination of the particular unit. This thesis provides the groundwork for further examination of a state by state and unit by unit examination of Australia's involvement in the South African War. Through this a more complex and textured understanding of Australia's involvement in the war can be reached, revealing how the war was different and similar throughout the various colonies which can provide a more accurate picture of Australian involvement in the Transvaal war. In this way, more information surrounding the 'Australian' experience of the war can be gained through a detailed analysis of an individual unit's role. Rather than a general chronological narrative from the beginning to the end of the war, which mentions some units as they randomly appear. This is not to say the generalized accounts are useless, they are important in a non academic sense. However, for a greater academic and official national understanding of Australia's Boer War experience many of these narrower histories are required.

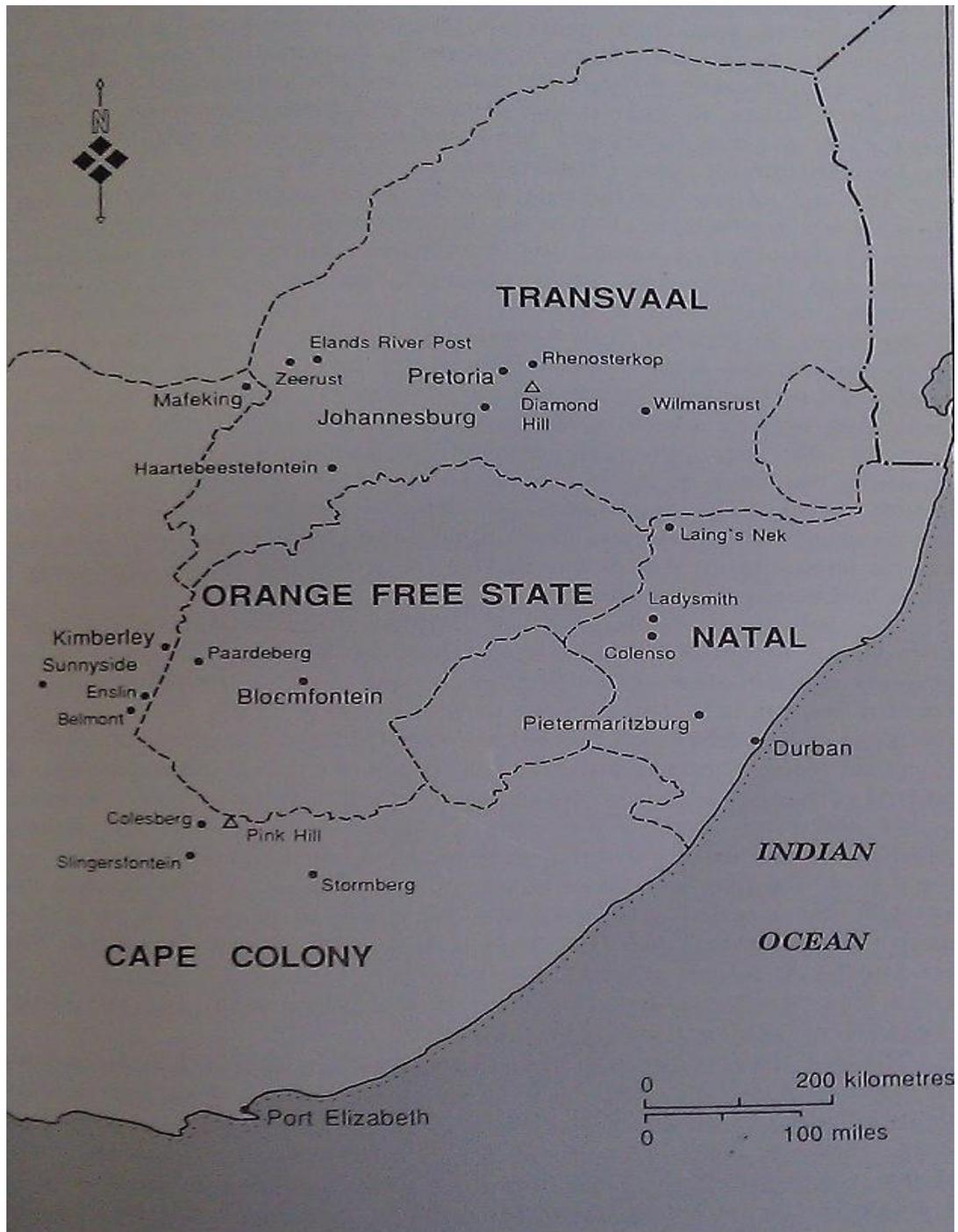
The thesis is not just important for providing more knowledge about Australian involvement in the South African War. From the Mounted Rifles involvement during the guerilla phase of the war, it is clear the concept of unconventional warfare is not something new to the Australian Army. The soldiers' early success in guerilla warfare contributed to the development of an Australian soldier type, known for their horsemanship, resourcefulness and fighting qualities.

Their involvement in the war also reveals that Australia's colonial history is not just a story of European migration. The colonial states were players in a wider imperial

network, as evidenced by their involvement in the war. At least in regards to the first contingents, Australian historiography must examine the colonies' involvement from an imperial perspective. This may allow for an enhanced understanding of the Australian colonies place within the British Empire. It can also provide insights as to how, through involvement in this imperial network, the Australian people could determine their destiny by shaping world events. Thus, while the metropole was the centre of the Empire, the antipodes provided an important contribution to the Empire's development and direction.

## Appendix

### *Key locations during the Boer War*



Map of Cape Colony, Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Courtesy of Jeffery Grey. Jeffery Grey, *A military history of Australia*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 59.

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