

Address by

Ms Ita Buttrose AO OBE

At the Boer War Day Commemoration

The Shrine, Melbourne – 31 May 2015

“I am honoured to have been asked to deliver the commemoration address on this special day – Boer War Day, when we honour the memory of Australians who served in South Africa from 1899-1902.

I think many Australians are not aware just how many Boer War veterans were “The Fathers of the ANZACS”, an appropriate description in this year, 2015, which marks the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign of World War One, and a year when we pay tribute to the ANZAC soldiers – our ANZAC centenary year.

More than 15 per cent of the Australians serving on the Gallipoli peninsula were Boer War veterans and there were many more whose fathers had served in South Africa. Around 30 per cent of Boer War veterans served again in World War One, and 37 per cent of our World War One generals (from Brigadier General up to Lieutenant General) had served in South Africa between 1899-1902. The ranks of the 1st Australian Imperial Force were fortunate to be seeded with a core of war experienced officers and senior non-commissioned officers. All six of Australia’s Boer War Victoria Cross recipients served again in one of the theatres of conflict from 1914-1918. Our servicemen and women did us proud in South Africa as they have done in all conflicts to which Australia has sent troops.

Our Mounted Infantry proved their worth as excellent horsemen and marksmen and in other fields like artillery, nursing, army service corps, Australians were considered among the best. All our service people were highly regarded and many British generals thought they were the best troops in South Africa at the time. Even the Boers respected our soldiers, regarding them as dangerous shooters who remained level-headed under fire.

2015 also marks the important 115th anniversary of the major turning point in the Boer War – the lifting of the three big sieges of Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith. These successes signalled the start of the guerrilla phase of the war. Although our troops proved to be especially skilled in these operations, guerrilla warfare involved fighting against an enemy dressed as, and indistinguishable from, civilians.

Many of our men returned home with post-traumatic stress and other serious conditions which were not as well understood or taken seriously as it is these days.

At the time of the Boer War Australia’s population was just over 3.7 million – not a lot of people in a country as big as ours. We can only imagine the hardships of a war, so far away from our shores that confronted our troops coming from a country as isolated and unsophisticated as the Australia of those times. Some of the ordeals they experienced are captured in this letter which Trooper Walter Pope wrote to his parents in the NSW countryside:

Camp Bloemfontein, March 15, 1900.

We have at length arrived at Bloemfontein and captured it after half an hour's fighting. Bloemfontein is now in the hands of the British, and the Orange Free State has surrendered unconditionally. We are camped about two miles out of the city, which as yet I have not seen, but I expect to get in for a look round in a few days.

The hardships that we have gone through have been very trying, and for nearly three weeks we have had nothing to eat but three hard biscuits a day, and now and again a drop of tea or coffee. On the march, especially when fighting our way, we are nearly always separated from the transport for days together, consequently, if we run short of biscuits we must starve until it comes up again. Hardship is not the name for what the troops have come through, for at intervals, our privations beggar description. Twice now we have been standing to our horses for 24-36 hours respectfully in a terrible thunder storm, and the rain teeming down in sheets.....of course wet to the bone, and then march on without drying our clothes. We have had to stop where we fought once, and a bitter cold night it was. All we could do was put on our great coats, put our arms through our bridle reins, drop down on the ground and sleep as best we could. I could go on for a long time, but I have not the space, I must reserve it until I get home.

I have quite determined to stop away from soldiering if I get home again, for when we get 800-900 casualties in one engagement, it makes a fellow very dubious."

The percentage of deaths and serious wounds was very high in the Boer War. Of the 23,000 Australians who served in South Africa about one third didn't serve in Australian contingents. When the war broke out thousands of Australians were already there working in the gold and diamond mines and signed up to fight. Approximately 1,000 paid the supreme sacrifice, being killed in action or dying from disease. This made the Boer War Australia's most costly war, outside of World Wars One and Two, in terms of lives lost. In fact, apart from the two world wars, there were more Australian lives lost in the Boer War than in all other conflicts combined. Many Australians are unaware of that fact.

Fortunately, the Boer War came to an end with the signing of the Peace of Vereeniging on May 31, 1902, which is why we are here today observing Boer War Day. Today is a day when we remember our ancestors who volunteered to serve our country in that bygone age. They did so at a most historic time for Australia because when we Federated and attained Nationhood on 1st January 1901 it marked almost the mid-point in the Boer War.

Our early contingents were sent by the six colonies but, following Federation, the Commonwealth became responsible for defence and took over those contingents still serving while any new units were designated Australian Commonwealth Horse. The Medical units were similarly designated as Commonwealth Army Medical Corps.

The memory of our first volunteers to serve the Australian Nation must never be allowed to disappear from the National consciousness. With that in mind I would like to say something about the National Boer War Memorial being planned on ANZAC Parade leading up to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Many people are working hard to bring it to reality.

You might be thinking "Why don't we have a National Memorial after the lapse of more than a century". Well, it's not so difficult to understand. When our servicemen

and women returned in 1902 the site for Canberra had not been selected. This didn't happen until 1908 and it wasn't until 1913 that Prime Minister Andrew Fisher and the Home Affairs Minister King O'Malley laid the foundation stone, but the following year Australia was plunged into world war one; most non-essential works went on hold pending the return of peace in 1918.

Parliament house and many other important works...schools, churches, Albert Hall, embassies, even the Canberra croquet club, took priority and the horrors of World War One forced the memory of our first soldiers to take a step backwards.

This process has continued for far too long. I'm sure we'd all agree that "it's now time"; we can't allow this long overdue recognition to keep drifting any longer. Completing this Memorial has now become a matter of National Honour.

This is not the first time I have been involved in a campaign to build a Memorial on ANZAC Parade in Canberra. It wasn't until 1999 that the Australian Service Nurses' National Memorial – I was Chair of the fundraising committee – was dedicated on ANZAC Parade. It honours all the nurses who have served in every war, including the Boer War, to which Australia has committed troops.

More than 60 Australian nurses went to the Boer War. Some were funded by governments or by privately raised funds; others went at their own expense. Sadly, the Boer War marked the death of the first Australian woman to die in war ...Nurse Frances Hines.

The Boer war now remains the only major war in which Australians have fought not to be commemorated on ANZAC Parade. A site has been dedicated on ANZAC Parade; a world-wide design competition has been conducted; a most impressive design has been approved. It will incorporate four magnificent bronze figures of Australian Mounted Infantry, each 1.5 times life-size.

The first of these bronze horsemen has been created by eminent Melbourne sculptor, Louis Laumen, and the finished figure, a stunning work of art, was unveiled in April this year. All four will be completed by April 2017 when they will be set up on the site which will be opened on Boer War Day 2017.

The design embraces the horseman as the bushman folk hero of Australian culture; an independent and resourceful Australian acclimatised to a tough existence on the land. The significance of the four troopers is that they represent a four-man section, a formation for fighting and patrolling. When they went into combat, three men would dismount while the fourth would lead the horses to cover. This display of interaction and observation will be reflected in the placement of the horses on the Memorial site.

It will make a superb addition to ANZAC Parade, and will complete a dream for many thousands of descendants of Boer War veterans. As well, it will create world-

wide attention, and will certainly be an object of pride for Australians and a drawcard for tourists visiting our National Capital.

I am personally committed to the National Boer War Memorial and hope that you can join me in seeing it to completion so that the debt we owe to our Boer War veterans is honourably discharged.