

**BOER WAR COMMEMORATION SERVICE
(2ND BOER WAR, 11TH OCTOBER 1899 – 31 MAY 1902)
MOSMAN FRIDAY 1ST JUNE 2014
COLONEL ROB SHOEBRIDGE (RET'D)**

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

IN A LETTER IN THE LONDON TIMES ON 25 OCT 1901, BRITISH GENERAL SHERIDAN WROTE, AND I QUOTE:

“THE PROPER STRATEGY CONSISTS OF INFLICTING AS TELLING BLOWS AS POSSIBLE ON THE ENEMY’S ARMY, AND THEN IN CAUSING THE INHABITANTS SO MUCH SUFFERING THAT THEY MUST LONG FOR PEACE, AND FORCE THE GOVERNMENT TO DEMAND IT. THE PEOPLE MUST BE LEFT WITH NOTHING BUT THEIR EYES TO WEEP WITH OVER THE WAR.”¹

THIS SAD DESCRIPTION OF WAR COULD APPLY TO ANY CONFLICT, IN SOUTH AFRICA DURING THE SECOND BOER WAR FROM 1899 UNTIL 1902 OR IN AFGHANISTAN IN 2014.

THE WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA EXACTED A HIGH COST FROM ALL THOSE WILLINGLY, AND UNWILLINGLY, CAUGHT UP IN IT. FOR THE BRITISH, THE WAR THEY HAD EMBARKED ON, CONFIDENTLY EXPECTING TO WIN WITH 75,000 MEN, REQUIRED CLOSE TO 450,000. THE THREE MONTHS THEY THOUGHT IT WOULD TAKE TO PUT THE BOERS IN THEIR PLACE TOOK ALMOST THREE YEARS. ALMOST 22,000 BRITISH AND COLONIAL TROOPS DIED FIGHTING FOR THE BRITISH EMPIRE. 16,000 OF THE 22,000 PERISHED FROM DISEASE.

20,000 OR MORE AUSTRALIANS SERVED. OF THAT NUMBER APPROXIMATELY 1,000 DIED - 400 WERE KILLED IN ACTION OR DIED FROM WOUNDS SUSTAINED IN BATTLE, THE REMAINDER FROM DISEASE AND 43 WERE REPORTED MISSING

70 AUSTRALIAN WOMEN SERVED AS NURSES AND FANNY HINES BECAME THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN WOMAN TO DIE IN WAR.

¹ The Boer War, Tabitha Jackson, Macmillan Publishers, 1999, p.145

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT OF THE 88,000 MEN WHO FOUGHT ON THE BOER SIDE, 7,000 WERE KILLED. 28,000 NON-COMBATANTS DIED IN BRITISH CONCENTRATION CAMPS, THE VAST MAJORITY OF THEM SMALL CHILDREN.

THE NATIVE AFRICAN DEATH TOLL IS HARDER TO CALCULATE AS MANY DEATHS WENT UNRECORDED. RESEARCH IN 1999 SUGGESTED 20,000 DIED OF THE 150,000 INTERNED IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS PLUS ANOTHER 20,000 WHO DIED IN THE CONFLICT

THESE ARE NUMBERS THAT ARE EASY TO ROLL OF THE TONGUE IN 2014 BUT HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THE NATIONS AND SOCIETIES ENGAGED IN THE WAR. REGRETTABLY, THESE NUMBERS WERE SOON TO BE DWARFED BY THE HORROR AND CARNAGE OF WORLD WAR 1.

ALTHOUGH A VISIT TO ANY OF OUR LOCAL COUNCIL LIBRARIES WILL REVEAL A PAUCITY OF BOOKS ON THE BOER WAR, 2014 MARKS AN INCREASE IN THE COMMEMORATION OF THE END OF THE SECOND BOER WAR WITH COMMEMORATIVE SERVICES OCCURRING IN ALL CAPITALS AND A NUMBER OF REGIONAL CENTRES. PERHAPS THIS IS AS AN EXTENSION OF OUR PREPARATIONS TO CELEBRATE THE CENTENARY OF THE START OF WWI AND A HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF AUSTRALIAN SACRIFICES IN FOREIGN FIELDS. CERTAINLY IN THE PERIOD AFTER THE SECOND BOER WAR, OVERSHADOWED BY THE CATAclysmic EVENTS OF THE FIRST AND SECOND WORLD WARS, THE BOER WAR WAS RELEGATED TO THE VERY EDGE OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

HAS THIS WAR, THE FIRST MILITARY DEMONSTRATION OF A UNITED AUSTRALIAN FORCE DEPLOYED TO AN OVERSEAS THEATRE, BEEN FORGOTTEN?

TODAY WE ARE GATHERED HERE TO REMEMBER AND REFLECT ON THE TWO BOER WARS, COMMEMORATING THE SIGNING OF THE TREATY OF VEREENIGIG ON 31 MAY 1902, 102 YEARS AGO.

WHAT DID THIS WAR MEAN TO AUSTRALIA?

- IT WAS THE FIRST WAR IN WHICH THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA FOUGHT. TROOPS FROM THE AUSTRALIAN COLONIES HAD ORIGINALLY DEPLOYED REPRESENTING THEIR STATES, BUT BECAME COMMONWEALTH FORCES ON FEDERATION. THEY WERE WIDELY CONSIDERED TO BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE ON THE BRITISH SIDE AND WITH A HIGH DEGREE OF BUSH CRAFT, HORSEMANSHIP AND MARKSMANSHIP THEY WERE BEST ABLE TO MATCH THE BOER TACTICS OF HIGH MOBILITY WARFARE
- IN REALITY THE ONLY CLEAR INDICATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN MEN'S NEW ALLEGIANCE TO THE COMMONWEALTH WAS IN THE FORM OF THE CHANGE IN HAT BADGE FROM THE COLONIAL TROOPS ORIGINAL BADGES OF THEIR HOME COLONY TO THE RISING SUN BADGE, NOW THE WORLD RECOGNISED SYMBOL OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY
- AS A NATION IT WAS THE FIRST OF MANY WARS, UP UNTIL TODAY, WHERE AUSTRALIAN FORCES WERE DEPLOYED IN RESPONSE TO THE POLITICO – MILITARY STRATEGIC PURSUITS OF ANOTHER NATION. IN THE BOER WAR FOR GOLD, IN LATER CONFLICTS TO SECURE OTHER RESOURCES
- SIX AUSTRALIANS WERE DECORATED WITH THE VICTORIA CROSS
- BETWEEN 1899 AND 1902 APPROXIMATELY 50 ABORIGINAL TRACKERS WERE DEPLOYED TO SOUTH AFRICA AT THE DIRECT REQUEST OF LORD KITCHENER, THE BRITISH COMMANDER IN CHIEF. A GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC CLAIMS THEY WERE DENIED ENTRY BACK INTO AUSTRALIA IN 1902 BECAUSE OF THE IMMIGRATION PROTECTION ACT, THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY. HOW ENCOURAGING THAT WE HAVE MOVED FORWARD AND NOW WELCOME IN AUSTRALIA THE AFGHANS WHO ASSISTED THE AUSTRALIAN FORCES IN THE MOST RECENT WAR
- IT WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT MODERN JOURNALISM COVERED A WAR – 58 CORRESPONDENTS WITH THE BRITISH AND COLONIAL ARMY, INCLUDING WINSTON CHURCHILL. THE EVENTUAL IMPACT OF THE PRESS REPORTED HORRORS OF THE WAR ON PUBLIC OPINION ARE REFLECTED IN THIS STATEMENT BY DAVID LLOYD GEORGE IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS IN JULY 1900 - "A WAR OF ANNEXATION AGAINST A PROUD PEOPLE MUST BE A WAR OF EXTERMINATION, AND THAT IS UNFORTUNATELY WHAT IT SEEMS WE ARE NOW COMMITTING OURSELVES TO - BURNING HOMESTEADS AND TURNING WOMEN AND CHILDREN OUT OF THEIR HOMES."²

THE SECOND BOER WAR HAS AN UNCANNY WAY OF POINTING US TO ISSUES AND EMOTIONS IN OUR OWN TIMES.

- WHEN PEOPLE TAKE UP A FIGHT AGAINST A MIGHTY POWER AND TURN IT INTO A GUERILLA WAR, LOOK BACK TO THE BOER WAR.
- COUNTER-INSURGENCY CONCEPTS USED BY THE BRITISH IN WWII, COMMONWEALTH FORCES IN MALAYA AND ANZACS IN VIETNAM, IN A STRANGE COMPLIMENT, WERE BORN IN THE TACTICS OF THE BOERS
- IN AN EQUALLY STRANGE TWIST, THE BRITISH ADOPTED THE WORD *COMMANDO* FROM THE BOER EQUIVALENT.
- WHEN A POWER FINDS ITSELF RUN RAGGED BY PEOPLE IT THOUGHT IT COULD SQUASH WITHIN WEEKS, LOOK BACK TO THE BOER WAR.
- WHEN CIVILIANS HAVE THEIR HOMES LOOTED AND BURNED AND ARE HERDED INTO CATTLE TRUCKS AND PACKED OFF TO CONCENTRATION CAMPS, LEADING TO THE DEATH OF 27,927 BOER CIVILIANS IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS, LOOK BACK TO THE BOER WAR.
- MORE CIVILIAN LOSSES THAN MILITARY AND THE SYSTEMATIC TARGETTING OF A WHOLE NATION? THE BOER WAR.
- BOTH SIDES RIVEN WITH INTERNAL DISPUTES AS TO THE JUSTNESS OF THE CAUSE WITH AN ASSOCIATED LOSS OF PUBLIC SUPPORT. THE BOER WAR.³
- A WAR OVER CONTROL OF THE WITWATERSRAND GOLD MINES - A RESOURCE THEME COMMON IN WARS THEN AND NOW

WHILE WE CAN REFLECT ON THESE LESSONS OF HISTORY, AND THEIR PARALLELS TODAY, WE ALSO REFLECT ON THE LOSSES SUSTAINED BY A

² Ibid-p. 130. David Lloyd George to the House of Commons, July 1900

³ Ibid, p.7

YOUNG NATION, SADLY TO BE REPEATED WITH GREATER INTENSITY 12 YEARS AFTER THE SIGNING OF THE TREATY WE COMMEMORATE TODAY.

I WOULD LIKE TO CONCLUDE WITH SOME WORDS FROM RUDYARD KIPLING'S POEM *LICHTENBERG*, NAMED AFTER A TOWN IN THE TRANSVAAL FOUGHT OVER BY AUSTRALIANS. THE POEM RELATES THE STORY OF ONE AUSTRALIAN TROOPER AND HIS JOURNEY TOWARDS DEATH IN A FOREIGN LAND:

SMELLS ARE SURER THAN SOUNDS OR SIGHTS
TO MAKE YOUR HEART-STRINGS CRACK
THEY START THOSE AWFUL VOICES O'NIGHTS
THAT WHISPER "OLD MAN, COME BACK!"
THAT MUST BE WHY THE BIG THINGS PASS
AND THE LITTLE THINGS REMAIN
LIKE THE SMELLOF WATTLE BY LICHTENBERG
RIDING IN, IN THE RAIN

THERE WAS SOME SILLY FIRE ON THE FLANK
AND THE SMALL WET DRIZZLING DOWN –
THERE WERE SOLD-OUT SHOPS AND THE BANK
AND THE WET, WIDE-OPEN TOWN;
AND WE WERE DOING ESCORT DUTY
TO SOMEBODY'S BAGGAGE TRAIN
AND I SMELT WATTLE BY LICHTENBERG
RIDING IN, IN THE RAIN

IT WAS ALL AUSTRALIA TO ME –
ALL I HAD FOUND OR MISSED
EVERY FACE I WAS CRAZY TO SEE
AND EVERY WOMEN I'D KISSED;
ALL THAT I SHOULDN'T HA DONE, GOD KNOWS
(AS HE KNOWS I'LL DO IT AGAIN)
THAT SMELL OF THE WATTLE ROUND LICHTENBERG
RIDING IN, IN THE RAIN

AND I SAW SYDNEY THE SAME AS EVER,
THE PICNICS AND BRASS BANDS;
AND MY LITTLE HOMESTEAD ON THE HUNTER RIVER
AND MY NEW VINES JOINING HANDS.
IT ALL CAME OVER ME IN ONE ACT
QUICK AS A SHOT THROUGH THE BRAIN –
WITH THE SMELL OF THE WATTLE ROUND LICHTENBERG
RIDING IN, IN THE RAIN

I HAVE FORGOTTEN A HUNDRED FIGHTS
BUT ONE I SHALL NOT FORGET –
WITH THE RAINDROPS BUNGING UP MY SIGHTS
AND MY EYES BUNGED UP WITH WET;
AND THROUGH THE CRACK AND THE STINK OF THE CORDITE
(AH CHRIST! MY COUNTRY AGAIN!)
THE SMELL OF THE WATTLE BY LICHTENBERG,
RIDING IN, IN THE RAIN

LEST WE FORGET