

# A brief history of South Africa to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The major contribution made by Pam McGlenn to the development of this course is acknowledged*

## Pre-History

The earliest creatures that can be identified as ancestors of modern humans are classified as australopithecines (literally “southern apes”). The first specimen of these hominins to be found (in 1924) was the skull of a child from a quarry site at Taung in what is now the North-West province. of South Africa. Subsequently more australopithecine fossils were discovered in limestone caves farther northeast at Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, and Kromdraai (collectively designated a World Heritage site in 1999), where they had originally been deposited by predators and scavengers.

## Earliest occupants of South Africa known to history



### *Bushmen of the Kalahari*

The earliest occupants of South Africa - at least *the earliest of which we are aware* - were the San and Khoekhoe peoples (otherwise known individually as the Bushmen and Hottentots or Khoikhoi; collectively called the Khoisan). Both had lived in the southern tip of the continent for thousands of years before written history began with the arrival of the European seafarers. In fact it is known that human beings had been living in the region for more than 100, 000 years prior to this. The country is an archaeological treasure chest, sometimes called the cradle of mankind.

The hunter-gatherer San (Bushmen) ranged widely over the area while the pastoral Khoekhoe (Hottentot) lived in those comparatively well-watered areas, chiefly along the southern and western coastal strips, where adequate grazing was to be found. So it was with the latter that the early European settlers first came into contact - much to the disadvantage of the Khoekhoe. Diseases such as smallpox were imported by the

Europeans; there was some assimilation with the settlers and especially with the slaves who were to arrive in later years, and some straightforward extermination. As a result, the Khoekhoe have effectively disappeared as an identifiable group.

Other long-term inhabitants of the area that was to become South Africa were the Bantu-speaking people who had begun moving into the north-eastern and eastern regions from the north many hundreds of years before the arrival of the Europeans.

The Thulamela site in the northern Kruger National Park is estimated to have been first occupied in the 13th century. The ruins of Mapungubwe, where artefacts from as far away as China have been found, are the remains of a large trading settlement thought to stretch back to the 12th century. Agro-pastoralists, these people brought with them an Iron Age culture and sophisticated socio-political systems.



It was situated in the Limpopo Province on the border between South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana, 75 km from Messina. It sits close to the point where the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers meet and was the biggest kingdom on the African sub-continent. In the 1400's all the citizens of the kingdom left and all that remained

were the palaces and the settlements around them. Nobody knows why the people of Mapungubwe moved away, but the ruins give us a good idea of how these people lived and how their society and political structures grew over 400 years. Scholars believe that the climate in the area changed, which made it much harder to grow crops and feed animals. It was declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco in July 2003. A large number of artefacts from the royal family have been discovered at Mapungubwe.



*The best known of these objects is the golden rhinoceros. (left)*

Mapungubwe was declared a World Heritage Site because it shows proof of the changes in human values between 900 AD and 1300.

These changes led to great cultural and social changes in Southern Africa. It also shows the growth and death of the nation of Mapungubwe and its power as a trading civilisation. Mapungubwe traded with Arabia and India through East African ports. The ruins of the cities and their settlements show how a change in the climate can influence a civilisation and clearly shows how unstoppable change can bring about the death of a state.

### **The coming of the Europeans.**

The first of the European explorers to discover South Africa were the Portuguese. Bartholomew Diaz who rounded the southern-most point of the African continent as far as Algoa Bay. Then in 1497 came his countryman, Vasco Da Gama, who went further and sailed right around the Cape as far as present day Natal before going on to India. To the Portuguese the Cape was just a means of gaining access the riches of the East. The merchants brought these highly valued commodities to Lisbon where traders from other countries purchased them and Portugal grew rich from the sale of Eastern spices, carpets, perfumes and precious stones.

Although the Portuguese basked in the nautical achievement of having successfully navigating the Cape, they showed little interest in colonization. The area's fierce weather and rocky shoreline posed a threat to their caravels, (ships) and many of their attempts to trade with the local Khoikhoi (a nomadic people, who inhabited what is now southern and western South Africa) ended in conflict. The Portuguese found the Mozambican coast more attractive, with appealing bays to use as way stations, prawns, and links to gold ore in the interior. However, while in 1595 Cornelius Houtman, a Dutchman, sailed around the Cape to Java, in modern Indonesia, the long period of Portuguese monopoly of the profitable trade with the East was clearly coming to an end.

At this stage it became clear that a stopover at the Cape would be ideal for ships of all nations. Up until then the route to the East was long and arduous. The ships went down the West African coast, touching Sierra Leone and thence across the Atlantic Ocean to Brazil. They then re-crossed in an easterly direction back over the Atlantic passing the southern coast of Africa and from there on to the East Indian Islands. By

the end of the journey they were extremely tired and quite frequently out of supplies. Scurvy was rampant, its causes and cures still unknown at this stage, and many seamen died on the voyage. A port on the South African coast for ships was becoming an absolute necessity.

Both the Dutch and the English conducted their commercial activities through chartered companies. In 1600 the English East India Company was founded, and two years later, in 1602, various Dutch companies united to form the VOC, which to us is better known as the Dutch East India Company.

As early as 1619, representatives of the English and Dutch Companies met to consider how best to solve the need for a calling station. They failed to reach any agreement, although the suitability of Table Valley for a permanent calling station was vaguely recognised. An Attempt in 1620 by two members of the English Company to annex the land adjacent to Table Bay in the name of King James 1 was unsuccessful because of lack of support from the English Govt. In 1647 a vessel belonging to the Dutch East India Company was wrecked in Table Bay. Its crew moved into Table Valley where they stayed for six months. To sustain themselves they grew vegetables and bartered with the local people for meat. The district had a favourable climate and fertile land and was thus suitable for settlement. When the crew returned home they gave such a glowing report that it was decided that it was the right place for a European settlement.



In 1652 Dutchman Jan van Riebeeck and 90 men landed at the Cape of Good Hope, (left) under instructions from the Dutch East India Company to build a fort and develop a vegetable garden for the benefit of ships on the Eastern trade route. Their relationship with the Khoekhoe was initially one of bartering, but a mutual animosity developed over issues such as cattle theft - and, no doubt, the growing suspicion on the part of the Khoekhoe that Van Riebeeck's outpost was becoming a threat to them By the time Van Riebeeck left

ten years later, 250 white people were living in what was beginning to look like a developing colony

While the new settlement traded out of necessity with the neighbouring Khoikhoi, it wasn't a friendly relationship, and the authorities made deliberate attempts to restrict contact. Partly as a consequence, \*VOC employees found themselves faced with a labour shortage. To remedy this, they released a small number of Dutch from their contracts and permitted them to establish farms, with which they would supply the VOC settlement from their harvests. This arrangement proved highly successful, producing abundant supplies of fruit, vegetables, wheat, and wine; and later, livestock was raised. This small initial group of free burghers, as these farmers were known, steadily increased and began to expand their farms further north and east

[\*The Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC)]

The majority of burghers had Dutch ancestry and belonged to the Calvinist Reformed Church of the Netherlands, but there were also numerous Germans and some Scandinavians. In 1688 the Dutch and the Germans were joined by the French Huguenots (Protestants) who were fleeing religious persecution under the Catholic King Louis XIV.

In addition to establishing the free burgher system, van Riebeeck and the VOC began to import large numbers of slaves, primarily from Madagascar and Indonesia. These slaves often married Dutch settlers, and their descendants became known as the Cape Coloureds and Cape Malays. A significant number of the offspring from the White and slave unions were absorbed into the local Afrikaans speaking white population. With this expanded labour force, the areas occupied by the VOC spread to the north and east, bringing about clashes with the Khoikhoi. The newcomers drove the Khoisan from their traditional lands, decimated them with introduced diseases, and destroyed them with superior weapons when they fought back, which they did in a number of major wars and with guerrilla resistance movements that continued into the 19th century. Most survivors were left with no option but to work for the Europeans in an exploitative arrangement that differed little from slavery. Over time, the Khoisan, their European overseers and the imported slaves assimilated, with the offspring of these unions forming the basis for today's Coloured population.



### ***Trekboers***

Later governors encouraged immigration, and in the early 1700s independent farmers called *trekboers* began to push north and east. Inevitably, the Khoisan started literally losing ground, in addition to being pressed by difficult circumstances into service for the colonists

By the second half of the 18th century, the colonists - mainly of Dutch, German and French Huguenot stock - had begun to lose their sense of identification with Europe.

### **The Afrikaner nation was emerging.**

As a result of developments in Europe the British took the Cape over from the Dutch in 1795. Seven years later the colony was returned to the Dutch government, only to come under British rule again in 1806, recaptured because of the alliance between Holland and Napoleon. The initial somewhat cautious regulations aimed at easing the conditions under which Khoi servants were employed, caused discontent and even open rebellion among the colony's white inhabitants. At the same time, British military strength began to tell in the conflict with the Khoisan.

Meanwhile the colonists continued to expand into the rugged hinterlands of the north and east. Many began to take up a semi-nomadic pastoralist lifestyle, in some ways not far removed from that of the native inhabitants they displaced. In addition to its herds, a family might have a wagon, a tent, a Bible, and a few guns. As they became more settled, they would build a mud-walled cottage, frequently located, by choice, several days' travel from the nearest European. These were the first of the *Trekboers* (wandering farmers, later shortened to *Boers*) - completely independent of official controls, extraordinarily self-sufficient, and isolated. Their harsh lifestyle produced individualists who were well acquainted with the land. Like many pioneers with Christian backgrounds, the burghers attempted to live their lives based on teachings from the Bible.

As the 18th century drew to a close Dutch mercantile power began to fade and the British moved in to fill the vacuum. They seized the Cape in 1795 to prevent it from

falling into rival French hands, then briefly relinquished it to the Dutch (1803) before finally achieving recognition of their sovereignty over the area in 1815.

At the tip of the continent the British found an established colony of 25,000 slaves, 20,000 white colonists, 15,000 Khoisan, and 1,000 freed black slaves. Power resided solely with a white élite in Cape Town, and differentiation on the basis of race was deeply entrenched. Outside Cape Town and the immediate hinterland there were isolated black and white pastoralists.

Like the Dutch before them, the British initially had little interest in the Cape Colony, other than as a strategically located port. As one of their first tasks they tried to resolve a troublesome border dispute between the Boers and the Khosan on the colony's eastern frontier. In 1820 the British authorities persuaded about 5,000 middle-class British immigrants (most of them "in trade") to leave England behind and settle on tracts of land between the feuding groups, with the aim of providing a buffer zone. The plan was singularly unsuccessful. Within three years, almost half of these 1820 Settlers had retreated to the towns, notably Grahamstown and Port Elizabeth, to pursue the jobs they had held in Britain.

While doing nothing to resolve the border dispute, this influx of settlers solidified the British presence in the area thus fracturing the relative unity of white South Africa. Where the Boers and their ideas had previously gone largely unchallenged, European Southern Africa now had two language groups and two cultures. A pattern soon emerged whereby English-speakers became highly urbanised and dominated politics, trade, finance, mining, and manufacturing, while the largely uneducated Boers were relegated to their farms.

The gap between the British settlers and the Boers further widened with the abolition of slavery in 1833, a move that the Boers generally regarded as against the God-given ordering of the races. Yet the British settlers' conservatism and sense of racial superiority stopped any radical social reforms, and in 1841 the authorities passed a Masters and Servants Ordinance, which perpetuated white control. Meanwhile, British numbers increased rapidly in Cape Town, in the area east of the Cape Colony (present-day Eastern Cape Province), in Natal and, after the discovery of gold and diamonds, in parts of the Transvaal, mainly around present-day Gauteng.

The British began to settle in Natal, but minor conflicts followed. The British - fearing repercussions in the Cape Colony - annexed Natal, where a small British settlement called Port Natal (later Durban) had already been established. On the highveld, however, two Boer republics were formed: the central Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal or ZAR - Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek) to its north.

By the mid-1800s the tiny refreshment post at the Cape of Good Hope had become white settlement stretching over virtually all of what today is South Africa. In some areas the indigenous Bantu-speakers maintained their independence, most notably in the northern Natal territories which were still unmistakably the kingdom of the Zulu. However, almost all were eventually to lose the struggle against white overlordship - British or Boer. One territory that was to retain independence was the mountain area where King Moshoeshoe had forged the Basotho nation by offering refuge to tribes fleeing from the whites. He clashed with the ZAR Free Staters and asked Britain to annex Basotholand, which it did in 1868. Known today as Lesotho, this country is entirely surrounded by South Africa, but has never been a part of it.

Meanwhile, the Boers had started to grow increasingly dissatisfied with British rule in the Cape Colony. The British proclamation of the equality of the races particularly angered them. Beginning in 1835, several groups of Boers, together with the black servants, decided to trek off into the interior in search of greater independence. North and east of the Orange River (which formed the Cape Colony's frontier.) These Boers or *Voortrekkers* ("Pioneers") found vast tracts of apparently uninhabited grazing lands. They had, it seemed, entered their promised land, with space enough for their cattle to graze and their culture of anti-urban independence to flourish. Little did they know that what they found - deserted pasture lands, disorganised bands of refugees, and tales of brutality from the clearance of the native people rather than representing the normal state of affairs.

With the exception of the more powerful Ndebele (people of modern *Zimbabwe*) the Voortrekkers encountered little resistance among the scattered peoples of the plains. Their weakened condition also solidified the Boers' belief that European occupation meant the coming of civilisation to a savage land. However, the mountains where King Moshoeshoe had started to forge the Basotho nation that would later become



Lesotho and the wooded valleys of Zululand proved a more difficult proposition. Here the Boers met strong resistance, and their incursions set off a series of skirmishes, squabbles, and flimsy treaties that would litter the next 50 years of increasing white domination.

## The Great Trek



The *Great Trek* first halted at Thaba Nchu, near present-day Bloemfontein, where the trekkers established a republic. Following disagreements among their leadership, the various Voortrekker groups split apart. While some headed north, most crossed the Drakensberg into Natal with the idea of establishing a republic. Since the Zulus controlled this territory, the Voortrekker leader Piet Retief paid a visit to Zulu King Dingaan.



### *The Battle of Blood River*

The Zulus, accusing the Boers of conspiring to overthrow the Zulu state, captured Retief. After receiving the specified cattle ransom, they sent an army to decimate Retief's settlement, killing 280 Boers and 250 black servants. At the Battle of Itala, a Boer army's attempt at revenge failed miserably. However, on 16 December 1838, at the Ncome River in Natal the Boers suffered injuries, they killed several thousand Zulus at very little cost to Boer lives. The bloodshed reportedly caused the Ncome's waters to run red, thus the clash is historically known as the *Battle of Blood River*.

## Diamonds and British consolidation

The Boers continued to search for land and freedom, ultimately establishing themselves in various Boer Republics, e.g. the Transvaal or South African Republic and the Orange Free State. For a while it seemed that these republics would develop into stable states, despite having thinly-spread populations of fiercely independent Boers, no industry, and minimal agriculture. The discovery in 1869 of diamonds near Kimberley turned the Boers' world on its head. The first diamonds came from land belonging to the Griqua, but to which both the Transvaal and Orange Free State laid claim. Britain quickly stepped in and resolved the issue by annexing the area for itself.



***Zulu workers at the Kimberley Mine***

The discovery of the Kimberley diamond-mines unleashed a flood of European and black labourers into the area. Towns sprang up in which the inhabitants ignored the "proper" separation of whites and blacks, and the Boers, understandably angry that

their impoverished republics had missed out on the economic benefits of the mines, protested bitterly

The Cape Colony was granted representative legislature in 1853 and self-government followed in 1872. Between these two dates a dramatic new element was introduced to the economic, and consequently political, balance - the discovery of diamonds and subsequent establishment of Kimberley. For the first time it became evident that there was wealth for the taking in the subcontinent. Rival claims by the Orange Free State, the ZAR and Nicholas Waterboer, chief of the West Griquas - a community of mixed race - were defeated and the area was incorporated into the Cape Colony in 1880. As British territory, it was a perfect proving ground for the young Cecil John Rhodes, one of the many thousands to be attracted by the diggings, and one who made his fortune there.

The colony had taken tentative steps towards political equality among the races. The franchise was based on economic qualifications, non-racial in theory but excluding the vast majority of African and coloured people in practice. Among those who did

qualify many became politically active across colour lines. The promise existed of progress towards full political inclusion of the population.

The Colony of Natal, however, was developing along somewhat different lines, the size of the Zulu nation assuming threatening proportions to the colonists. Reserves were created under traditional African law for refugees from Zulu might; outside those reserves British law held sway. As almost all blacks were deemed to fall under the rule of the chiefs in the reserves, almost none had any chance of political rights outside their borders.

Economically, Natal had the advantage of being ideal for the cultivation of sugar cane. The consequent labour requirements led to the importation of indentured labourers from India, many of whom - in spite of discrimination - remained in the country after their contracts had expired: the forebears of today's significant and influential Indian population.

### **Anglo-Zulu War**



The late 19th century was an era of aggressive colonial expansion, and the Zulus were bound to come under pressure. But they were not to prove easy pickings. Anglo-Zulu War was fought in 1879. The war is notable for several particularly bloody battles;

Under their king Cetshwayo, the Zulus delivered resounding proof in 1879 that the British army was not invincible and defeated it at the Battle of Yorke's Drift.

However, The British finally broke the military power of the Zulu nation and ended its independence by defeating its main army at the Battle of Ulundi. and going on to burn the Zulu capital, Ulundi.

Britain achieved a temporary expansion of its southern African rule in the politically unstable north, where the unpopularity of President T.F. Burgers opened the way for Britain to annex the Transvaal in 1877. Although the Boers protested this unwarranted

and unnecessary annexation, they took no immediate action. Things quickly got worse as the British began to collect taxes in a haphazard way.

## First Boer War



What is referred to as the First Boer War commenced when the Transvaal formally declared independence from the United Kingdom. The first shots were fired on 16<sup>th</sup> December by Transvaal Boers at Potchefstroom. From 22 December 1880 to 6 January 1881, British army garrisons all over the Transvaal became besieged.

The Boers decided they had had enough and sent England a declaration of independence. Although the British government was concerned by this turn of events, they were sure that the Boers could be brought around with the application of military force. To this end, they charged Major-General Sir George Pomperoy-Colley as the head of all military forces in the Transvaal to bring the Boers under control. General Colley was a good officer, but had no respect for the Boers as a military force. It was a mistake that would cost the British the Transvaal, and cost Colley his life.

Although General Colley only had around 1,500 men in his command it was deemed sufficient. The Boers had no organized military force, but they did have a complex militia system, which divided the men into groups known as commandos. Although these men were not professional soldiers, they had spent the whole of their lives stalking game across Africa and were experts at stealth and crack shots with their rifles.

During each of the three major battles of the short war, the Boer Commandos literally took the British army to pieces. In each battle, the British had superior numbers, but found themselves ambushed, surrounded, and without any adequate response to the stealthy Boer marksmen.

The standard British infantry weapon was the single shot breech loading rifle with a long sword bayonet. Gunners of the Royal Artillery wore bright blue jackets. This

enabled the Boer marksmen to easily snipe at British troops from a distance. The Boers, on the other hand, were civilian militia and each man wore what he wished, usually everyday dark-gray, neutral-colored or earthtone khaki farming clothes. The Boers avoided close combat (they carried no bayonets) He carried bur drew on years of experience of fighting frontier skirmishes, the Boers relied more on unconventional tactics - mobility, stealth, marksmanship and initiative while the British emphasized the traditional military values of command, discipline, formation and synchronized firepower.

It has been said of the British that “their bravery was matched by their stupidity”, and that they were rather arrogant in the face of what they considered to be a handful of rustic Dutch farmers who could soon be brought to heel by well disciplined regulars. They were certainly in for a shock when it came to putting the spit and polish of their traditional approach into practice on the plains of South Africa against an army of Boer guerrillas who didn’t fight by “the rules”.



*The Battle of Majuba Hill. General Colley stands in the middle to the left. The British troops fire over the edge of the hill, down at the hidden Boer riflemen*

The conflict ended almost as soon as it began with a crushing Boer victory at Battle of Majuba Hill on 27 February 1881. However, despite this crushing military defeat for the British the war ended with a negotiated settlement, with the Transvaal being granted partial independence. Some Boers were unhappy about this and a few years later that they were granted complete independence.

It would only be about 18 years before war broke out again, and this time, the British were better prepared to deal with the Boer’s military tactics. Paul Kruger, one of the leaders of the uprising, became President of the South African Republic – Transvaal (*Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*, or ZAR) in 1883. Meanwhile, the British, who viewed their defeat at Majuba as an aberration, forged ahead with their desire to federate the

Southern African colonies and republics. They saw this as the best way to come to terms with the fact of a white Afrikaner President.

### **Discovery of gold – Kruger & the *uitlanders***

Two years later, when gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand, (a low, sedimentary range of hills which runs in an east-west direction through South Africa) Kruger presided over a financial turnaround of spectacular proportions. However he was also faced with a serious threat to Afrikaner independence as huge numbers of newcomers, mostly British, descended on the gold fields. Without urgent action, these people (the *uitlanders*) would soon qualify for the vote. The response was to create stringent franchise qualifications, an action which, with its 14-year residence stipulation, would at least postpone the difficulty. The situation peaked in 1899 when the British demanded voting rights for the 60,000 foreign whites on the goldfields. The British now used the same rallying cry that had been used by the Americans. The *uitlanders* had been denied the vote and the British declared “no taxation without representation”. Of course this was an excuse to further their own interests - to obtain control of the lucrative gold and diamond mines.

*\*uitlanders is Afrikaans for 'foreigner', and was the name given to foreign migrant workers during the initial exploitation of the Witwatersrand gold fields in the Transvaal.*

Meanwhile in the Cape Cecil Rhodes had become Prime Minister. His overriding vision of a federation of British-controlled states in southern Africa was well served by the growing discontent of the *uitlanders* and the exasperation of the mining magnates. His first attempt at a takeover, however, came to an ignominious end when his plan to have Leander Starr Jameson lead a raid into Johannesburg in response to a planned *uitlander* uprising failed. The uprising did not happen; Jameson rode into the Transvaal and was forced to surrender. Rhodes resigned.

Failure though it may have been, the Jameson Raid had a polarising effect. Afrikaners in the Cape and the Orange Free State, though disapproving of Kruger in many ways, became more sympathetic to his anti-British stance. The Orange Free State, under President M.T. Steyn, formed a military alliance with the Transvaal. In Britain,

Rhodes and Jameson were popular heroes. Pressure built on Kruger and the Anglo-Boer/South African War began in October 1899. Up to half a million British soldiers squared up against some 65,000 Boers. Black South Africans were pulled into the conflict on both sides.

### **The Second Boer War (1899 - 1902)**

The war most commonly referred to as ‘the Boer War’ is in effect the Second Boer War. It was fought between the British Empire and the two independent Boer republics, the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal Republic), founded by settlers known as *Voortrekkers* who had made the Great Trek from the Cape Colony.

The Boer War of 1899-1902 was Britain’s last Imperial War. It is sometimes referred to as the “last of the Gentleman’s wars” or the “forgotten war”, overshadowed as it was to be by the First World War. It was to pitch the forces of Imperialism against those of Nationalism, resulting in a three and half year bitter struggle that was to change the face of Southern Africa.



#### ***Boer guerrillas***

The Boers, mainly Dutch peasant farmers, challenged the might of the British Army and exposed many of its fundamental failings. This was not a war fought against “savages” with nothing more than leather hide shields and spears, but a war fought with the most sophisticated of modern weapons and a citizen army of remarkably stoic and brave men who refused to be bowed.

### **Australia in the War**

Throughout the whole of Australia in every little country town and most large suburban areas, you will find war memorials erected to the men who died in all the major conflicts in which Australia has engaged, especially the two world wars, but also in most cases all of the other arenas where our men fought and died.

Some of these memorials are dedicated to the men who fought in the Boer War which was the first major conflict in which Australian soldiers fought. Initially, when the

war started in 1899, Australia was a group of separate states, still jealously fighting and arguing with each other for various reasons. By the time the War finished in 1902, Federation had come about, and we were the proud nation of Australia, the world's newest country. For the most part state differences were put aside as we set out to showcase our independence to the rest of the world.

Even before hostilities broke out, Queensland, NSW and Victoria. had offered to supply troops to fight for England. Late in September when it was clear that war was inevitable, the military commandants of the various colonies met in Melbourne and agreed that Australia should send a joint contingent of 2,500 men, more than half of them mounted. When war broke out Australian patriotic enthusiasm was overwhelming. Moved by a desire to do their bit for the 'old country' and a longing for adventure thousands of young men volunteered for service.

Each State formed its own Military Force and offered their services. The British War Office was extremely scornful of the proffered help, believing the fledgling Australian Volunteer Regiments to be far inferior to their own professional, well disciplined fighting forces which they believed to be second to none in the world; The offer of the Colonials was rejected. However, the British Parliament, grateful for the support of the members of her Empire in a war which was proving extremely unpopular in Europe, especially amongst the Germans and the French, decided to go against the advice of the War Office and accept the help. They did not take all the volunteers, limiting themselves to just a few hundred. During the course of the war, which was to last much longer than first thought, they were extremely pleased to revise these figures and accept a much greater number of recruits. Altogether, some fifty Australian Units from all States were to see active service during the Second Boer War.

To go back to the time several months before the War in Transvaal began, we will follow the NSW Lancers as they journey forth to London in June 1899. They had previously been to London during Queen Victoria's jubilee, and were invited back to undergo more training with the British Troops. The Lancers were a militia group and as such were paid very little by the army, and even had to provide their own horse and saddle, being given only their uniform by the Army. This uniform looked quite



handsome with its high necked jackets tightly buttoned over trim figures, a sash



across the left shoulder, highly polished boots and riding jodhpurs. The whole was topped by the khaki felt slouch hat with a cock's feather proudly fastened to the side of the up-turned brim. This hat, which was to become forevermore the symbol of the Australian soldier, was being worn uniformly now for the first time. A cavalry sword hung jauntily at their side, completing a memorable picture.

As it happened the Lancers had been ready to leave London for Australia when war broke out and instead of going home as ordered to by the NSW Govt. they virtually 'jumped ship' when it stopped off at Cape Town for supplies, and presented themselves to the British Army, ready to do battle - the first of the Colonial troops to arrive in South Africa. A detachment was horsed and equipped and sent to join Lieutenant General Lord Methuen's force which had been sent to relieve the besieged diamond town of Kimberley. Just one month after the commencement of the war, they arrived in Cape Town.

### **“Banjo” Paterson, war correspondent.**

The Australians had one of their very own writers and poets as a war correspondent. - AB, better known as 'Banjo' Paterson. (among the British correspondents were Winston Churchill and Rudyard Kipling.) Paterson went out with the first of the volunteers... He wrote for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the stories he sent back of the brave Australian boys and their fighting prowess made for very popular reading. It was well that he did so, for although the war was well reported in the newspapers, it was from a British point of view. Because all the Aussie soldiers were fighting under British command, the individual units of fighting men were not mentioned in the regular reports and the Australian population as a whole was unaware of exactly what their men were doing.

Paterson's writings were especially popular - his style, written clearly and with humour, was much admired... He rode with the Lancers on their patrols, knew his

bushmen and knew how to write about them in a way which would appeal to the masses. He had enormous admiration for their bush and riding skills and would write, *'We pushed on through the open veldt, the long grass brushing against the horses' knees and forming a dense carpet under their feet. This is the most wonderful grassed country I have ever seen.'* The sight of the grass was very important to Paterson as he was, first and foremost, a horseman, and like his fellow Aussie soldiers, always put his horse before himself. He was extremely nationalistic about the tough Australian soldiers and compared the British unfavourably to them – both their horses and their soldiers. He wrote:

*'The big English horses and the Scots Greys do not stand up to the conditions anywhere near as well as our Australian horses. Gun horses drop in their harnesses and pistol shots constantly mark the sad end of their misery.'* Linking horse and man, he said, *'The greatest qualities needed for the troops were mobility, dash and intelligence, and in all these qualities the ANZ Regiments, without exception, proved their excellence. The Australians were accustomed all their lives to finding their way in the open, to noticing what was taking place around them, and to relying on themselves at a pinch. The English Tommies were drilled and trained to obey orders and at that point their ideas stopped. The Aussies looked more smart and wide awake than the English.'* He concluded *'Every bushman is worth three soldiers, because they can take care of themselves, as well as fighting.'*

It was through these writings of correspondents such as Paterson and also A.G. Hales, a Western Australian journalist, that the people of Australia learned of the exploits of their soldiers. Hales wrote in a West Australian newspaper what he had learned from a Boer prisoner of war in Bloemfontein Hospital. The prisoner told him that a mounted force of four hundred Boers had attacked a small rise where twenty West Australian Mounted Infantry were positioned. Hiding themselves in the rock-strewn scrub, they carefully picked their targets, aiming with deadly skill and repelling attack after attack, with the loss of only two men... Hales reported that the wounded Boer survivor commented; *'There were four hundred of us, all picked men. We dashed over the gully and charged up the kopje where those twenty men were waiting for us. We were ready to sweep the hill with artillery but our commandant did not wish to kill such brave men, so asked them to surrender, with full honours. They answered us,*

*“Go back and tell your Commandant, Australia is here to stay.” We tried to rush them under the cover of the artillery fire, but they only held their posts with stouter hearts and shot the straighter when the fire was hottest. We could do nothing but sit there and swear at them. They held the hill ’til all their men were safe, and then they made a dash down the other side, carrying their wounded. We did not know the Australians then. We know them now.’* The Boer losses were heavy.

Next day the West Australians were paraded before the brigade commander, Major General R Clements and praised for their gallantry. A brigade order of the day declared, *‘The General Officer commanding wishes to place on record his high appreciation of the courage and determination shown by a party of 20 men of the Western Australians, under Captain Moor. By their determined stand against 300 to 400 men they entirely frustrated the enemy’s attempt to turn the flank of the position.’* It was stories such as these which thrilled the reading public of Australia, as they learned of the first real war in which Australian soldiers were engaged. It was here, long before ANZAC, that the legend of the Australian soldier was born.

## **Australian nurses**



### ***Nurses at the time of the Boer War***

The involvement of Australian women as nurses in war began in 1898 with the formation of the Australian Nursing Service of New South Wales, from which sixty nurses served in The Boer War. In 1900, in her long skirts and stays, Matron Nellie Gould volunteered for the Boer War as superintendent of a contingent of NSW nurses. The service was incorporated into the newly formed Australian Army Nursing Service Reserve

## **Victoria Crosses awarded.**



(left) The first VC ever awarded to an Australian) was to **Neville Reginald Howse**, (later Sir Neville) a G.P. from Orange who enlisted in the New South Wales Army Medical Corps, arriving at East London, Eastern Cape, in February 1900. On 24<sup>th</sup> July

1900, during action at Vredefort, South Africa, Lieutenant Howse, saw a trumpeter fall and went through very heavy cross-fire to rescue him. His horse was soon shot from under him and Howse continued on foot, reached the casualty, dressed his wound then carried him to safety. For this action he was awarded the Victoria Cross; Howse served in the war of 1914-1918, was knighted and went on to serve in the Federal Parliament

In all there were six Victoria crosses awarded during the Second Boer War, all for rescuing wounded men under fire. Colonel Sir Howard Vincent, ADC to King Edward VII wrote of the Australian troops in dispatches: *“I have nothing but praise for their gallantry, their conduct, their intelligence, their horsemanship and their skill. Of all the troops they can least be spared. For column work and guerilla warfare they have no equal.”*

### **Phases of the War**

The Boers first mounted pre-emptive strikes into British-held territory in Natal and the Cape Colony, besieging the British garrisons of Ladysmith, Mafeking and Kimberley and going on to win a series of tactical victories at Colenso, Magersfontein and Spionkop against a failed British counteroffensive to relieve the three sieges..

Then, after the introduction of greatly increased British troop numbers under the command of Lord Roberts, another, and this time successful, British offensive was launched in 1900 to relieve the sieges. After Natal and the Cape Colony were secure, the British were able to invade the Transvaal and the republic's capital, Pretoria, was captured in June 1900.



***Boer women and children in a concentration camp***

Beginning in March 1900, the Boers engaged in protracted hard-fought guerrilla warfare against the British forces during which they raided targets such as British troop columns, telegraph sites, railways and

storage depots. In an effort to cut off supplies to the raiders, the British, now under the leadership of Lord Kitchener, responded with a scorched earth policy of destroying Boer farms and moving civilians into concentration camps with poor hygiene and little food. Tens of thousands women and children died of disease and malnutrition. Many historians claim that the death and suffering in these camps is what broke the will of the Boer guerillas. World reaction to these British “anti-insurgency” tactics brought about a major change in British foreign policy. - a change from a “splendid isolation” policy to one that involved looking for allies and improving world relations.



### *Signing the Treaty of Vereeniging*

The Boer forces finally surrendered on Saturday 31 May 1902, with 54 of the 60 delegates from the Transvaal and Orange Free State voting to accept the terms of the peace treaty, known as the Treaty of Vereeniging. The two republics were

absorbed into the British Empire, with the promise of limited self-government in the future. This shortly came about and led to the establishment of the Union of South Africa. The war had a lasting effect on the region and on British domestic politics. The war, known as the last British imperial war, was a long, expensive and disastrous conflict. But then that can be said for all wars! Will we never learn?

The Boer force finally surrendered on 31 May 1902, after almost three long and bloody years the war between Great Britain and the Boer States of South Africa was over. The Boers, having given an unconditional surrender, were allowed to return to their properties, but with the difference being that the British were now their overlords. They returned to the remains of their burnt out farms in Orange Free State and Transvaal, these two States were added to the rest of the British States and the whole became British South Africa, which now stretched from the Cape to the Zambezi.

It was agreed at the Treaty of Vereeniging that the Dutch language would still be used in the schools and courts, and that a Civil Government would rule instead of the previous Military one. Financial help was to be given to those who needed it, and all

the debts of the two new colonies would be paid. Thirty-nine thousand Boers returned home and the lucrative gold and diamond mines re-opened, albeit now in the hands of the British.

British losses were between 6000 to 7000, with a further 14,000 dying from disease. The Boer losses were similar in battle, with an unknown number dying from disease. However by far the worst figures were the 24,000 civilians, mainly women and children who died from disease because of the extreme policies employed by the British in their endeavour to prevent the civilians population from providing their fighting men with food and aid.

Australian casualties were 1,400. However, it was clear that Australia's impact on the conflict would have been far greater had the many individual contingents not been scattered throughout South Africa in small units attached to larger non-Australian forces.

The Australian force had demonstrated great adaptability, resourcefulness and a deadly determination. Mateship, a love of two-up gambling, and some petty pilfering also showed up as national military characteristics! The war had showed that volunteer soldiers who before then (with the exception of smaller wars in New Zealand and the Sudan) merely paraded endlessly and trained for invaders that never came, could survive inhospitable terrain, master new types of warfare and dare to win.

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