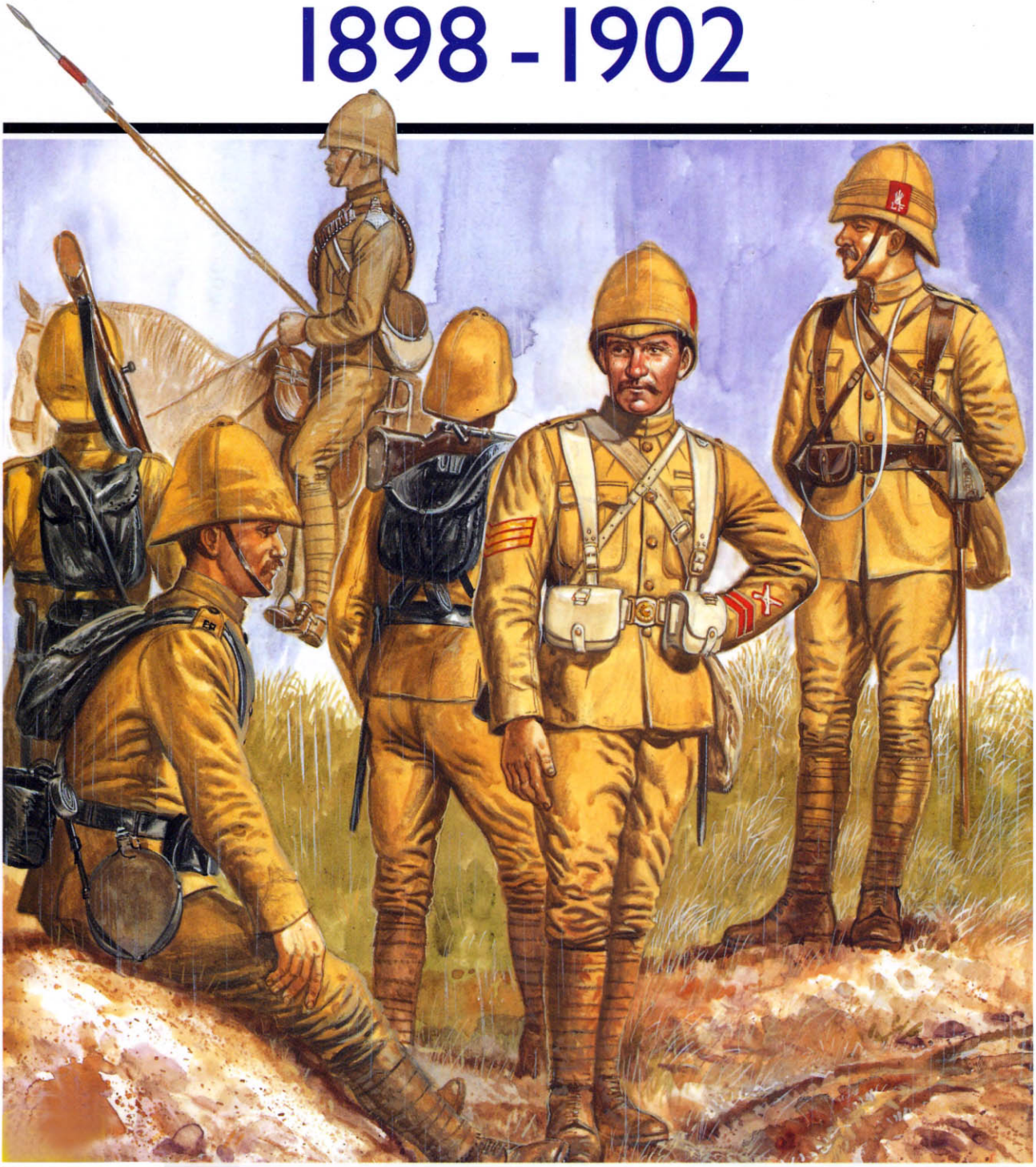
OSPREY MILITARY

MEN-AT-ARMS SERIES 303

BOER WARS (2) 1898 - 1902



IAN KNIGHT GERRY EMBLETON

SERIES EDITOR: LEE JOHNSON

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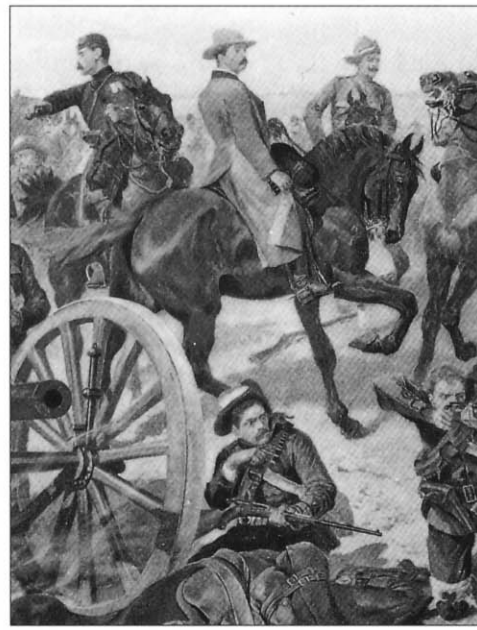

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Author's Note

Throughout this work I have opted to spell African place names according to the modern orthographic conventions of the languages in which they were named, rather than the more familiar Anglicised versions. This is purely for the sake of consistency. Thus I have used Spioenkop and Mafikeng rather than Spion Kop and Mafeking. Over the years many people have helped me with my researches into South African campaigns; particular thanks in this case are due to S.B. Bourquin, Gilbert Torlage, Michael Barthorp and Philip Haythornthwaite.

Publisher's Note

Readers may wish to study this title in conjunction with the following Osprey publications:

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MAA 212 *Queen Victoria's Enemies (1) Southern Africa*
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THE BOER WARS (2) 1898-1902

INTRODUCTION

'Cape to Cairo'

By the middle of the 1890s the South African Republic (Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek) – the Transvaal – had largely won its 60-year struggle to impose its authority and self-proclaimed boundaries over the black population. Any satisfaction it may have felt in that regard, however, was shortly to be overshadowed by an intensification of that other perennial Boer struggle – against the dominance of the British.

Following the 1881 Transvaal War Britain had abandoned its administration of the Transvaal, retaining claim only to 'suzerainty' – a vague and ill-defined right of umbrella authority, which in practice it chose not to exercise. Transvaal affairs might have continued without British interference indefinitely had gold not been discovered in extraordinary quantities at the Witwatersrand in 1886. The subsequent gold rush led to a flood of foreign prospectors – known to the Boers as *uitlanders* (outsiders) – and to the birth of the boom-town of Johannesburg. It also intensified the economic rivalry which underpinned Boer–British relations in the last years of the 19th century.

The 1890s were the decade of the mining magnate in South Africa. Cecil Rhodes, who had made his fortune in diamonds at Kimberley, was prime minister of the Cape, and dreamed of extending a corridor of

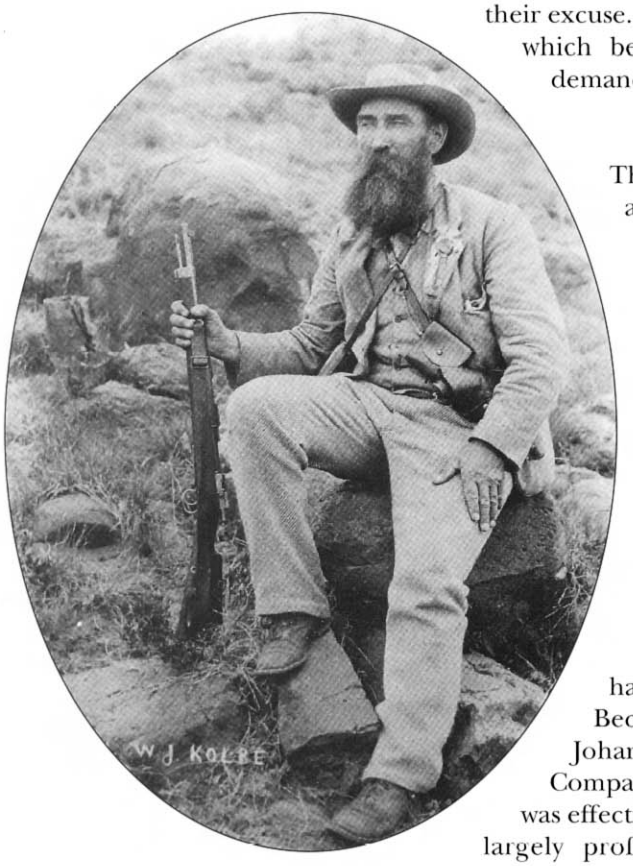
A stirring and decidedly romanticised view of Jameson's stand at Doornkop on 2 January 1896.

uninterrupted British influence from 'the Cape to Cairo'. For Rhodes and his capitalist clique it was particularly frustrating that gold should be discovered in the introverted and undeveloped Transvaal, which was singularly resistant to British influence. In 1890 Rhodes' British South Africa Company had occupied Mashonaland, part of modern Zimbabwe to the north of the Transvaal, in the hope that it might contain similar riches, and to block Boer expansion in that direction. This private-enterprise colonialism was completed when Rhodes took the rest of Zimbabwe by defeating the Ndebele in 1893. Shortly afterwards, Bechuanaland – the Transvaal's western neighbour, snatched by the British from under the noses of the Boers in 1886 – was handed over to Rhodes' Company to administer.

Thus British commercial interests crowded the Transvaal on two sides. Nevertheless, the Transvaal itself, ruled by the hard-line republican and former *Voortrekker* Paul Kruger, who had been elected president in the aftermath of the Majuba campaign, remained firmly opposed to British interests. Kruger was afraid that the influx of foreign workers and capital would overwhelm the Boers in their own country. His policy towards the mining magnates – nicknamed the 'gold bugs' – was obstructive. The *uitlanders* themselves were refused the vote, yet were still expected to pay heavy taxes on their profits and were subject to military service under the commando system.

Frustrated, and given confidence by their military successes in Zimbabwe, Rhodes and the 'gold bugs' planned to overthrow Kruger's regime in a military coup, using the grievances of the *uitlanders* as their excuse. Rhodes' supporters set up a 'Reform Committee', which became a mouthpiece for the *uitlanders*' rowdy demands.

The lack of military pretension which characterised the Boer forces is summed up in this study of the Free State general W.J. Kolbe. His dress is typical of Boers in the field; his rank is suggested by nothing more than his revolver and field glasses. His other weapon is a Mauser carbine. Note the OFS rosette in his lapel, and his coloured puggree. (Bryan Maggs Collection)



The Jameson Raid

The plan was to overthrow Kruger's government by a simultaneous revolt within the Rand, organised by the Reform Committee with guns supplied by the mining magnates, and armed intervention from outside. Rhodes' lieutenant, Dr Leandar Starr Jameson, was trusted with raising an armed force on the Transvaal borders; from there he was to strike at Johannesburg, where the *uitlanders* would rise to greet him. Learning nothing from the stubborn adherence to the libertarian ideals and sense of racial superiority which had characterised Afrikaner history since the beginning of the century, the conspirators fully expected Kruger's government to collapse under this pressure.

Jameson's force mustered at Pitsani, a dusty hamlet just across the border in the Company's Bechuanaland territory, about 170 miles west of Johannesburg. Most of his men were drawn from the Company's Mashonaland Mounted Police (MMP), which was effectively Rhodes' private army. Jameson's officers were largely professionals, like-minded adventurers who held

dormant commissions in the British army. Nevertheless, the number of volunteers from the MMP failed to meet the target, and Jameson established a second post at the town of Mafikeng, a few miles south of Pitsani. Mafikeng was in the Cape Colony; when Britain had abandoned control of Bechuanaland, the government-raised Bechuanaland Border Police (BBP) had been disbanded at Mafikeng, and Jameson found that many of them were then unemployed, looking for adventure, and prepared to join him.

The date of the coup was set for the end of December 1895. By that time Jameson had raised 372 men from the MMP and 122 former members of the BBP, all of whom were issued new Lee-Metford magazine rifles. They were supported by eight Maxim machine-guns, two 7-pdr field guns, and one 12-pdr.

The Reform Committee was supposed to strike the first blow but, to the conspirators' confusion, they failed to do so. Rhodes deliberately left a final decision regarding the enterprise to Jameson, and Jameson opted to march anyway. He hoped the sudden arrival of his troops in Johannesburg would force the *uitlanders'* hand.

Jameson's two columns set off from Pitsani and Mafikeng on 29 December 1895, and joined up a few miles into Transvaal territory. The raid had been planned meticulously, with secret food depots and fresh horses arranged by sympathisers along the route, but attempts to keep the expedition secret had been unsuccessful. No sooner had they crossed the border than the Transvaal government called out the commando from Lichtenburg, a town to the south of Jameson's route, to intercept the raiders. Jameson moved quickly, however, and slipped past the commando, pushing on towards Johannesburg with the Boers in pursuit, while another Boer force mustered outside the town to block his path.

The first skirmish took place before dawn on New Year's Day 1896 – and marked a turning point in Jameson's luck. A hidden supply depot had been discovered by the Boers, and the food and fresh horses were missing. The 'City of Gold' was now in sight, but Jameson's men were tired and hungry, and disillusioned by the lack of support from the *uitlanders*.

Typical Boers on commando; probably Free State burghers, photographed after May 1900. The majority are carrying Mausers. Note the variety of bandoliers. (Bryan Maggs Collection)

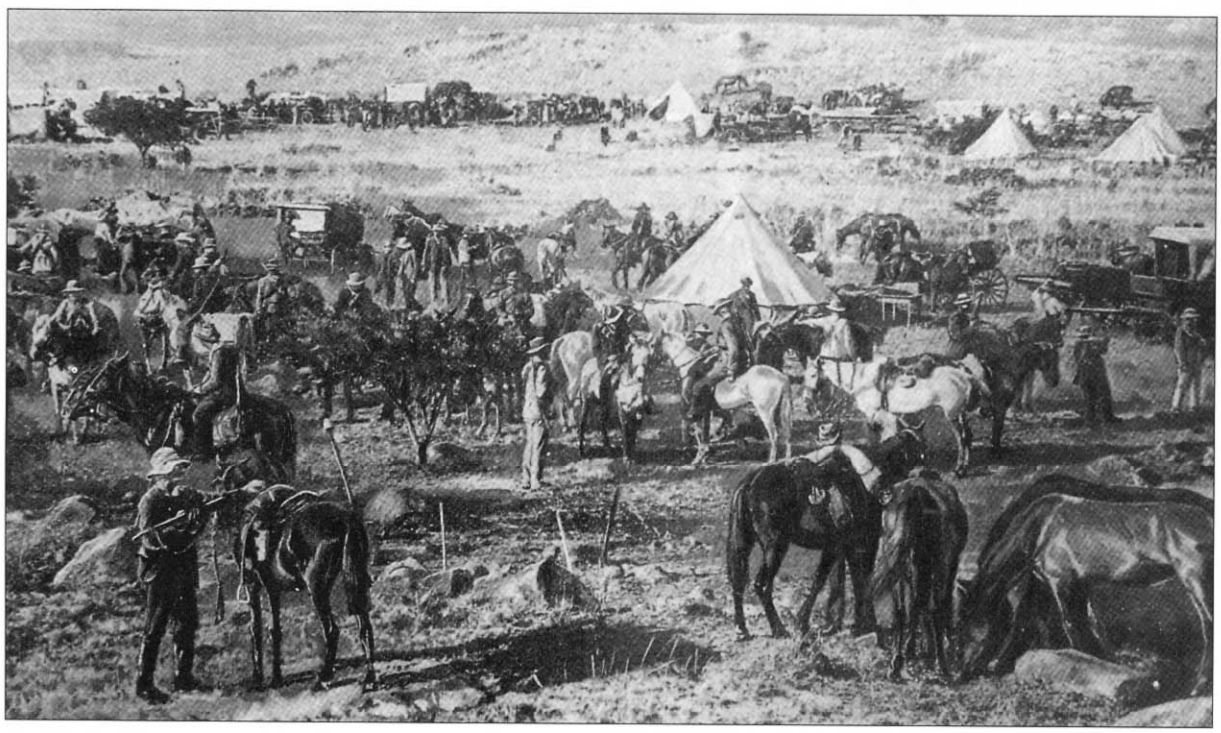
That afternoon the raiders approached the town of Krugersdorp, outside Johannesburg, only to find a commando entrenched across their path. A fire-fight ensued, with little apparent effect, and Jameson's men tried to slip away south, around the Boer left flank. During the night, however, the Boers shifted their position, and daylight saw the way ahead still barred. The raiders were finally brought to a halt at a kopje called Doornkop. A gallant charge by some of the MMP broke up in the face of accurate Boer rifle fire, and after half an hour of brisk firing Jameson's artillery began to run out of ammunition. The Boers brought up a battery of Staatsartillerie, who began firing at close range, and it soon became apparent that the raiders' position was hopeless. To his intense frustration, Jameson had no choice but to surrender.

To all appearances the raid had been a fiasco. The raiders lost 16 men killed and 56 wounded, while the Boers lost just one man. The *uitlanders*, seemingly so vociferous before, had refused to risk their lucrative mining interests, and not one man had taken up a rifle to support Jameson.

Confrontation

The Jameson Raid was a major step on the road to Anglo-Boer confrontation. The raiders were eventually released into British custody, but the incident marked a turning point in Rhodes' career, and he was forced to resign as prime minister of the Cape. Kruger's government had been shocked by the audacity of the move, and promptly began reorganising its armed forces and importing modern weapons from Europe. Anglo-Boer mistrust was further heightened when a new British high commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner, arrived in the Cape. Milner was an ardent supporter of the forward policy, and believed that British rule in the Transvaal was not only desirable but inevitable.

A Boer laager in the field. This picture dates from the guerrilla war – it shows Commandant P.H. Kritzinger's commando during his raid into the Cape Colony at the beginning of 1901 – but it is a scene which typifies Boer military experience for much of the 19th century.



Foreign volunteers: Italians under Captain Ricciardi, and Frenchmen, under Lt Gallopaud. A number of these men are wearing khaki uniforms. Note the obvious presence of black servants.

The other Boer republic, the Orange Free State, while not directly involved in the quarrel, agreed to support the Transvaal in the event of an armed confrontation. Kruger refused to budge on the *uitlander* issue and, despite the fact that the British government in London was ambivalent about a military confrontation, Milner began to work towards an open rift. In June 1899 Milner and Kruger met at Bloemfontein, the Free State capital, but their respective positions were so entrenched that negotiations collapsed. By September the *uitlanders* were fleeing Johannesburg in train-loads. British troops were marched up to vulnerable towns on the borders of Natal and the Cape, while reservists were mustered in Britain, in an obvious show of strength. In an attempt to seize the initiative before British reinforcements could arrive, Kruger issued an ultimatum demanding that British troops be withdrawn from the Transvaal borders. The British would not comply, and on 11 October 1899 the Anglo-Boer War – known variously as the Second Boer War or the *Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (the 'Second War of Freedom') – began.

The Anglo-Boer War would prove the greatest British military commitment since the Napoleonic Wars. In the nature of such campaigns, it was confidently expected to be 'over by Christmas', but it was to drag on with increasing bitterness for three years, and would require the participation of every regular British infantry and cavalry regiment except one (the 15th Hussars), as well as unprecedented support from the overseas colonies. In the end it was won by a scorched-earth policy, which devastated the veld and caused most hardship among the civilian population, both black and white.

BOER FORCES, 1899

The Jameson Raid came as something of a shock to the Transvaal government, who were forced to recognise both the British threat and that their own forces were scarcely adequate to meet it. Neither republic boasted a strong professional army; the only regular troops were small

bodies of policemen and artillerists. From about 1894 both republics had raised small uniformed volunteer units, and these had seen action in some of the wars against black Africans, but they had been disbanded at the beginning of 1899. The commando system remained the true heart of the Boer military system, therefore, and the Boers in 1899 were, as they had always been, a citizen militia.

Every Boer man between the ages of 16 and 60 was legally required to serve if the government called him up, and to bring with him his own horse and supplies. Commandos were based on local administrative districts in peacetime: each *wyk*, or ward, provided a contingent commanded by a *veld-kornet* (field-cornet – equivalent to a captain). As many as six wards grouped together to form a district commando, under the leadership of a commandant, whose rank was roughly equivalent to a colonel.

In 1899 there were 21 commandos in the Transvaal and 18 in the Free State, and they varied considerably in size, from as low as 200 men to over 1,000. The main characteristics of the commando system were individuality, flexibility, and a lack of discipline which astonished the British. Commandants were elected by the men in the ranks, often as much as a result of their peacetime political influence or popularity as their military prowess. Although failure to serve was an offence, commandants had almost no other legal powers with which to control their men, and they exercised their authority by strength of personality alone. Individual burghers were quite entitled to opt out of battle-plans if they considered them foolish, or to disobey orders – even in battle, and prolonged periods of leave were accepted as a necessity since many of the men had left families to fend for themselves on their farms. Larger armies were commanded by generals, who were elected in the OFS but appointed in the Transvaal; the Transvaal alone had a full-time commandant-general, who in 1899 was Piet Joubert, a hero of the Majuba campaign.

Nevertheless, subtle changes had been made to the Boer fighting system by 1899. The high veld was no longer the African wilderness it had been even a generation before; the vast herds of game which had been a feature of both the Transvaal and the OFS into the 1870s had largely been shot out as the land was marked out for farms. Few Boers lived entirely by hunting; indeed, there had been a small but significant movement towards urbanisation, the result of a more settled lifestyle and the mining boom. The semi-nomadic life of the old Trek-Boers had become a thing of the past in all but the most remote border regions. Although many Boers who fought in 1899 were indeed rural farmers, many were urbanised and cosmopolitan in their

Officers of the German Volunteer Corps, photographed outside Ladysmith, November 1899. This corps obtained a stock of khaki uniforms, and several are in evidence here. The officer seated centre front (Lt von Zeleski) seems to be wearing a coloured sash, presumably of Transvaal colours, over his right shoulder. On the right is Dr Elsberger, distinguished by a red cross arm-band.

outlook, and the image of the hard-riding, dead-shot frontier farmer, accustomed to living out in all weathers for weeks on end on a handful of coffee beans and a few strips of *biltong* (sun-dried meat) has, perhaps, been overstressed. Nevertheless, on the whole the Boers remained part of a culture which stressed the virtues of individualism, self dependence, of the outdoor life and a practical knowledge of firearms; in these respects they were far more suited to the coming fight than their British counterparts.

A group of Boers photographed outside Ladysmith, 1899. The man in uniform in the front row is a Staatsartillerie NCO. He is wearing the 1896 pattern tunic: dark blue with sky blue cuffs, with black braiding across the chest and gold shoulder cords and collar piping. This same tunic was worn by officers, but with stars on the collar indicating rank. The man back row right is wearing a gunner's tunic with a black velvet collar. Both carry Mauser carbines, while the NCO has field glasses and a revolver.

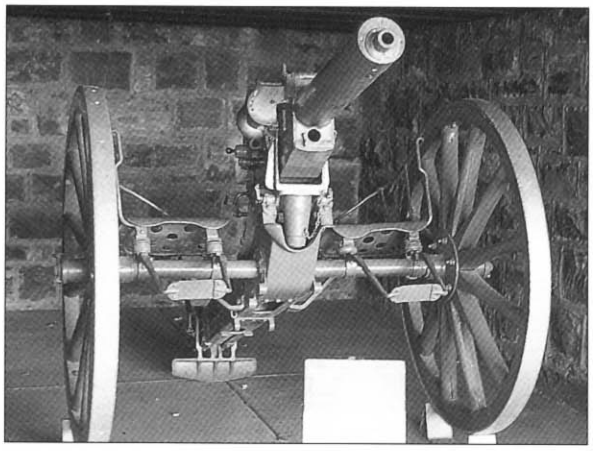
Weapons and Uniforms

From 1881 until the mid-1890s the single most popular weapon among the Boers was the single shot .450 Martini-Henry, usually, ironically, of British manufacture. By the late 1880s, however, the introduction of magazine rifles – the .303 Lee-Metford among the British, for example – had rendered the Martini-Henry obsolete. Following the Jameson Raid, the Transvaal had made a serious attempt to improve its stock of weapons. Small numbers of magazine weapons were bought from a variety of overseas manufacturers, including the British Lee-Metford, the Austrian Mannlicher, the Steyr-Guedes and even the American Winchester, although the type eventually imported in the greatest quantity was the German 7mm Mauser M1896. By the outbreak of war the Transvaal had imported 37,000 Mausers and the OFS 13,000. These weapons were issued to the commandos on mobilisation, although they never entirely displaced earlier types in the field.

The Mauser had a maximum range of 2,000 yards, fired smokeless powder, and held five rounds in its magazine. It could be loaded quickly from clips, a significantly faster operation than that required for the British Lee-Metford or Lee-Enfield, which had a greater magazine capacity – ten rounds – but had to be loaded one round at a time.

The Boers carried their ammunition in bandoliers, the most popular of which was made of leather and had 12 small pouches, protected by flaps to prevent rounds falling out, with each pouch holding one clip – a total of 60 rounds altogether. Other bandoliers were not uncommon, however, including some made of canvas webbing, or the old style with loops for 50 individual rounds. Some Boers even carried spare ammunition in the pockets of specially designed waistcoats.

As befits such an individualistic army, the Boers wore little in the way of uniforms but they were not entirely oblivious to the need to demonstrate their allegiances. Most Boers fought in their everyday clothes: for

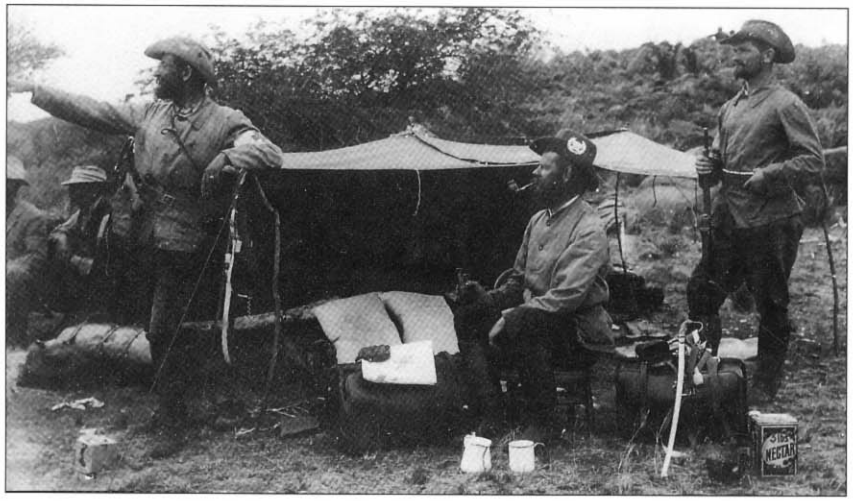


A surviving example of a Maxim-Nordenfeldt quick-firing 'pom-pom' gun. The ZAR Staatsartillerie had several of these weapons; the British also used them later. (Fort Schanskop Museum, Pretoria)

farmers this usually consisted of a dark-coloured jacket, and perhaps corduroy trousers, with the ubiquitous broad-brimmed hat. Shoes were often home-made leather *veld-skoenen*, although riding boots were not unknown. In the early stages of the war, the urban origins of many Boers were reflected in their smarter town clothes, including jackets of a more stylish cut and straw hats. Most Boers also carried water bottles and pocket knives. They went on campaign with their ox-wagons, which served their transport needs, carrying tents, bedding and supplies. The Boer military machine would not have functioned without the services of thousands of *agterryers* (after-riders), the black African servants whom the Boers took into the field with them, and who drove wagons, led spare horses, hunted, cooked and dug entrenchments.

Despite their generally non-military appearance, the Boers marked their combatant status with a variety of badges. Some attempt was made to issue metal badges bearing the OFS and Transvaal coat-of-arms, and these were sometimes worn on the turned-up brim of the hat. Generally, a hat with the right brim turned up was thought to indicate Boer sympathies, while British troops and their supporters turned up the left brim – although there were almost as many exceptions to this rule as examples. Coloured cockades, worn on the hat, in the lapel, or as a puggree, were common; the OFS's colours were yellow-red-white-blue and the Transvaal's green-red-white-blue. Coloured puggrees were generally popular, but although orange was an obvious choice among OFS commandos, and green or blue among the Transvaal burghers, there was little uniformity. Different colours were adopted at random, as a mark of different commandos or even different squadrons within a commando. White was recognised as the colour of a 'Cape rebel' (an Afrikaner subject of the British Cape Colony who sided with the Boers), although it was also used by some British, and, indeed, other Boer units. Red was not a popular colour, however, as this was a traditional badge of troops raised in South Africa by the British.

Major Friederich Albrecht and officers of the Free State Artillery in the field. All are wearing plain khaki-coloured tunics and darker trousers, with Free State badges on their hats. The man on the left is a medical officer, identified by his red cross arm-band.



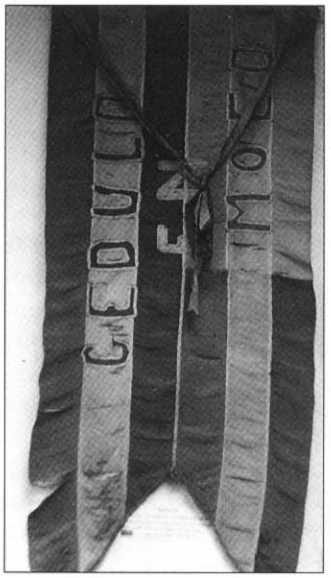
No uniforms were officially recognised for commandants (other than for the commandant-general, who wore a version of the Staatsartillerie dress uniform), although a number chose to sport coloured sashes, at least when being photographed in the early part of the war. There is little evidence that they were worn into action, however. Similarly, a few commandants who designed

their own fancy uniforms do not seem to have worn them into battle. Most commandants carried field-glasses and revolvers in addition to their rifles – but so did many ordinary burghers. Given the egalitarian nature of the Boer army, ostentatious displays of rank were generally frowned upon, and in any case most commandants were well known to the men under their command.

In addition to the true Boers, there were many of foreign descent who fought in the Boer ranks. Not all the *uitlanders* were British, and many supported the Boer cause. They formed small volunteer groups – often known, romantically, as 'corps' or 'brigades', although these titles belied their actual numbers. There were volunteer corps of Irishmen, Americans, Frenchmen, Italians, German, and Dutch. In addition, at the outbreak of war, numbers of foreigners entered South Africa with the intention of fighting for the Boer cause; they were usually fighting for liberty, anti-imperialism or adventure.

The Boers had ambivalent feelings towards these volunteer corps. For most burghers, the war was a practical necessity, a struggle to defend their lands from British aggression, and they were suspicious of the exotic motives claimed by the foreign volunteers. Kruger summed up the attitude when he commented that the Boers did not need or ask for foreign help, but the volunteers were nonetheless welcome to fight if they wanted to. They were not paid, but did receive government weapons and equipment.

Many of the foreign volunteers had military experience in their own country, and they often found the Boer attitude to war exasperating. Some corps – particularly the Scandinavian, German and Dutch groups – made a serious attempt to present a military appearance, and uniformed themselves with light khaki or sand-coloured jackets, trousers and hats; apart from occasional coloured puggrees, cockades and Mauser equipment, they looked little different to the volunteer units raised by the British. The showing of these units was mixed, but some – notably the Scandinavians, Germans and Dutch – impressed both friends and enemy alike with their efficiency and European-style discipline.



The flag of the Harrismith commando, made by ladies of the town, and based on the Free State colours (orange, red, white and blue). Photographs suggest that many commandos took such flags to war, but used them as headquarters markers, and did not carry them in action. The motto reads 'Patience and Courage'. (Queen's Regiment Museum, Canterbury)

Boer Regulars

The OFS and Transvaal forces both included small regular contingents of artillery and policemen. The largest of these was the Transvaal Staatsartillerie. This had first been formed as the 'Batterie Dingaan' in the 1870s; it had been disbanded by the British following the annexation of 1877, but had been re-formed in 1882 as part of a combined artillery and police unit. As such it took part in several of the African wars of the 1880s and 1890s, but the Jameson Raid had indicated that its numbers were inadequate, so it was reorganised and separated from the police, and by 1899 it consisted of some 650 personnel, including a telegraph section. The guns were varied: the heaviest were four 150mm Creusot siege guns ('Long Toms') – which the British mistakenly believed could not be moved from their emplacements in forts built around Pretoria - and four 120mm Krupp howitzers. The remainder were 75mm field guns manufactured by Krupp, Creusot or Maxim-Nordenfeldt, 65mm Krupp mountain guns, and 1-pdr quick-firing Maxim-Nordenfeldt 'pom-poms'. The unit also possessed about 30 Maxim machine-guns, mounted on various carriages.

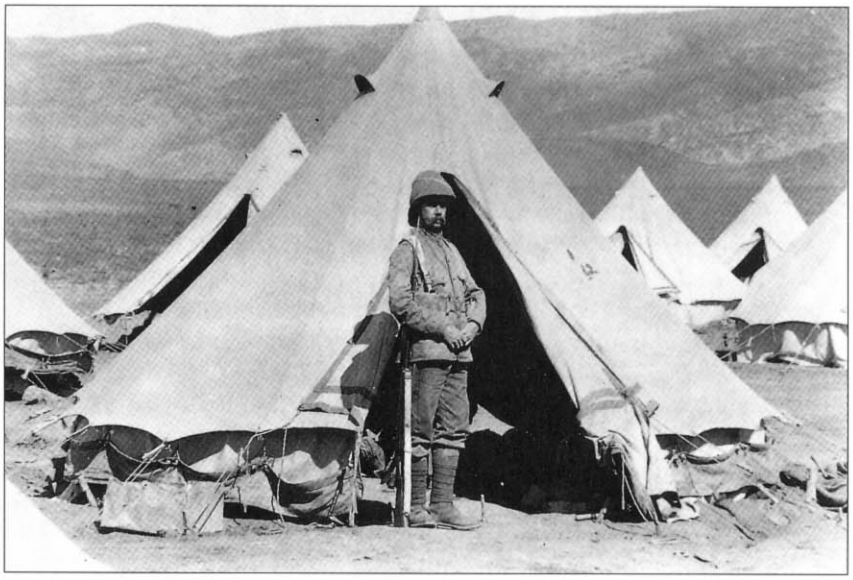
The Transvaal Staatsartillerie boasted an impressive dress uniform. In 1890 a dark blue single-breasted tunic, based on an Austrian pattern and piped sky blue, had been adopted for ORs, together with an Austrian-style cap. Officers wore a dark blue braided patrol jacket. This was replaced in 1896 with a more ornate uniform of Dutch influence, although some of the earlier uniforms remained in issue until as late as 1899. The new uniform was a very dark blue, with three rows of buttons down the front, black hussar-style braiding and black collar and shoulder cords. The cuffs were pointed and sky blue, the collar was piped sky blue, and the dark blue trousers had a sky blue stripe down the outside. On the eve of the war the style of cuffs was changed: the new cuffs were rounded and dark blue with sky blue piping.

Officers wore a more elaborate version of the men's tunic, with gold piping on the collar, gold shoulder cords and gold collars for staff officers. Rank was denoted by up to three silver stars on the collar. All ranks wore incongruous fur busbies, sabretaches and swords.

By the mid-1890s a field service dress had been approved. It consisted of a sand-coloured or khaki tunic and trousers, with blue shoulder straps, collar and piping. This, together with a plainer version without piping, was standard dress in the field in the early part of the Anglo-Boer War; the Austrian cap was seldom worn, and was replaced with a slouch hat, turned up on the right side and fastened with a badge with the letters 'SA' or 'A' (for Staatsartillerie or Artillerie). Shortly before the war a khaki uniform with black braid on the collar, cuffs and shoulder cords was authorised for officers. In fact, all ranks seem to have taken to the field in a mixture of orders of dress: full-dress tunics worn with undress or civilian trousers; service dress; or, quite often, civilian dress. The standard weapon was the Mauser rifle for all ranks – with corresponding bandolier, while officers and NCOs were issued with revolvers.

The Free State Artillery was considerably smaller than its Transvaal counterpart – just 400 men, including reservists, in 1899. It had been established in 1857, but had been revitalised from 1880, when a former Prussian NCO, Friederich Albrecht, had been appointed to the command. Under Albrecht's supervision, the Free State Artillery adopted a Prussian-style dress uniform – a dark blue tunic with black facings and orange piping. Head-gear was a Prussian-style Pickelhaube with a ball top or, in review order, an orange and white plume. Trousers were black with a narrow orange stripe. Unlike the Transvaal artillery, the Free Staters do not appear to have worn their dress uniforms in action; instead they wore a single-breasted khaki tunic with orange shoulder straps, black collar and black piping, including a loop on the cuffs. Hats were of the ubiquitous slouch variety, often worn with a metal badge of the OFS's coat-of-arms. Officers seem to have worn plain civilian-style khaki uniforms. The OFS artillery possessed the usual mixture of weapon types, chiefly obsolete 75mm Krupp field guns and Armstrong 9-pdrs.

As with the artillery, the Transvaal possessed a much larger police force than the OFS. At the outbreak of war the 'ZARPs' (the *Zuid Afrikaanse Rijdende Politie* – South African Mounted Police) numbered just over 1,500 men, 800 of whom were based in Johannesburg. Their dress uniform was dark blue with a blue cap or white sun-helmet for dress occasions. This was not generally worn in the field, however; there a plain blue patrol jacket, fastened by hooks and eyes and with flat black



The British soldier on campaign in South Africa. Unidentified private in khaki service dress and Slade-Wallace equipment, in front of a typical bell-tent, which both sides used in abundance. In the British army the bell tent could house up to 15 men. (Bryan Maggs Collection)

braiding down the front and around the cuff, was the usual substitute, together with the slouch hat. Trousers were khaki-coloured riding breeches. Many ZARPs fought in the early stages of the war in khaki civilian-style uniforms. Until 1899 they were armed with Martini-Henrys, but they were issued with Mausers on the outbreak of hostilities. The Free State police, who numbered just 150 of all ranks in 1899, including mounted and foot policemen, wore a similar uniform, but with breast pockets on their undress tunics and Free State badges on their hats.

In keeping with the unprofessional nature of their fighting forces, the Boer republics possessed no integrated and sophisticated medical services. Although both republics maintained nominal medical staff, the most effective units in the field were nine ambulances, manned by foreign volunteers, and in most cases paid for by overseas Red Cross societies. In the field the Red Cross symbol was used to distinguish them from combatants.

At the end of the war British intelligence sources concluded that the total Boer forces they had faced had numbered some 90,000 men, including Cape rebels. This figure was probably overestimated, and it failed to take account of the shifting nature of Boer service. Not all men required to join the commandos did so, support among the Afrikaner community in the Cape was patchy, and at any given time a large proportion of the Boer forces were absent on one pretext or another. More realistic estimates suggest that there were never more than 40,000 Boers in the field at any given time.

Side, back and front of a British officer's foreign service helmet, without cover. This example belonged to Captain C.R.C. Ellis of the Cameronians, who was wounded at Spioenkop. It shows signs of shrapnel damage and blood stains. Note the large flash of regimental tartan – a typical unit identification early in the war. (Peter Jordan Collection)

THE BRITISH ARMY IN 1899

ORs foreign service helmet with khaki cover and regimental flash of the Somerset Light Infantry (white embroidery on red background). This example belonged to a Lance Corporal Mabey, and suggests one reason why flashes became less conspicuous as the war progressed – note the bullet-hole. (Taunton Museum)

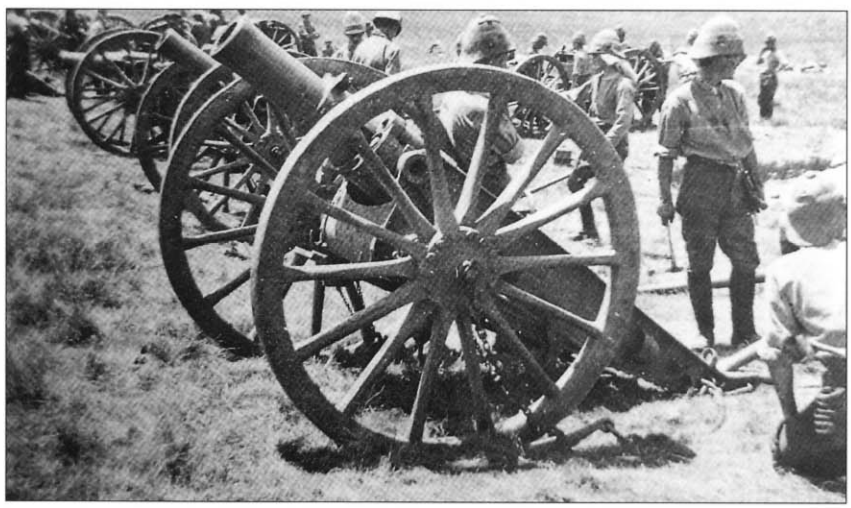
The British army in 1899 was the most powerful professional army in the world. The regular army alone totalled 106,000 men serving with the colours and a further 78,000 reservists; and this was without volunteer and militia units, and before the so-called 'white colonies' – the settler communities in Canada, Australia and New Zealand – made their unprecedented contribution to the mother country's war effort.

The backbone of the British army was the infantry battalion – eight companies of nominally 100 men and a headquarters. Until 1881 many regiments consisted of just one battalion, but in that year the old practice of identifying battalions by numbers was discarded, and the battalions were linked together to form regiments of two or more battalions, identified by a territorial title. In 1899 the average regiment therefore consisted of two service battalions, two militia battalions and a volunteer battalion. The latter generally remained at home, but were used to supply the service battalions with replacements. The average cavalry regiment consisted of about 650 men, divided into four squadrons, each of two troops. A standard artillery battery consisted of six guns, with 12-pdr breach-loading field guns being usual for the horse artillery, and the heavier 15-pdr by field artillery batteries. The 15-pdr could project a shrapnel shell that would explode in the air and shower the target area with lead balls to a range of 4,000 yards and high-explosive shell rather further. However, this was still out-ranged by some of the guns possessed by the Boers. There were also a number of siege batteries, equipped with 5in howitzers.

Uniforms

To the disappointment of many Boers who remembered stories of the Majuba campaign, the British had long since abandoned scarlet uniforms in the field, and the light, dust-colour known as khaki had been adopted as campaign dress in 1897. It had long been popular in India, and was worn exclusively in both the North-West Frontier campaign of 1897 and in the Sudan, 1897-99.

Unidentified battery of British 5in howitzers in the field. (Bryan Maggs Collection)



For all arms of service, field dress consisted of a loose khaki jacket and trousers, puttees (khaki for infantry and cavalry; the RA initially wore blue, but abandoned them for khaki in the early months of the war) and a white cork foreign service helmet covered with a khaki cover. Most regiments retained the puggree – a band of cotton cloth wrapped around the middle of the

helmet, designed to keep the helmet cool – under a plain cover, while some regiments' covers included a folded representation of a puggree. Cloth neck-covers were authorised for wear in South Africa, but although photographs suggest they were popular with some battalions, they were not widely worn. Officers provided their own helmets, often of khaki cloth and worn without a cover. The Wolseley-style helmet, which was flatter and had a wider brim, was fashionable with some regiments – and individuals, particularly among staff and general officers.

Highland Scottish units wore khaki frocks with a distinctive rounded skirt, and retained their regimental tartan kilts, sporrans, hose and spats. A khaki apron was issued to make the front of the kilt less conspicuous; it worked well enough when the men were advancing, but it was useless when they were lying down, as it did not cover the back of the kilt.

Lowland Scots regiments began the war in tartan trews, but soon abandoned these in favour of ordinary khaki trousers. In the early stages, troops fought in a light-coloured, lightweight khaki drill cloth: this had been designed for service in North Africa and India, and proved both uncomfortable and impractical in South Africa. It was too thin to keep out the chill of the African nights, particularly on the high veld, where the temperature often dropped below freezing on a clear winter's night, and the colour was too reflective to afford much camouflage protection. As the war progressed it was steadily replaced with a heavy khaki serge material, which was darker in colour.

Service dress made it almost impossible to distinguish either rank or unit. Officers wore rank badges on their shoulder straps, and went into the war wearing Sam Browne belts and carrying swords and revolvers. Brown leather Stohwasser gaiters, which fastened by a spiral strap, were often preferred to boots or puttees. However, these distinctions were noticeable enough for the Boers to identify and pick off the officers, even at a distance, and by the beginning of 1900 most had abandoned their Sam Brownes in favour of OR equipment, and they carried rifles rather than swords. Privately purchased helmets began to give way to the less conspicuous OR type. Similarly, most units had started the war with ostentatious identification flashes on the side of their helmets. For infantry this usually consisted of a piece of cloth cut from the shoulder strap of the scarlet home service frock, and which had some sort of reg-

Mounted infantry of the 1st Leicesters during Yule's retreat from Dundee in October 1899. The men are wearing greatcoats. Note the carbines carried in short MI buckets, with slings around the right arm.

imental title embroidered in white. Although most regiments opted for a small oblong patch, some preferred large squares, diamonds or even large patches based on the shape of the complete shoulder-strap. Some regiments preferred a piece of their traditional facing colour. Highland regiments generally adopted a piece of regimental tartan, while rifle regiments wore green flashes. The RA wore oblong patches divided vertically red and blue, the Royal Engineers yellow, and the medical services maroon. It soon became clear, however, that conspicuous flashes merely drew enemy fire, and as the war progressed they were often replaced with more discreet variants, or abandoned altogether. Those regiments which prized particular cockades among their regimental distinctions – the scarlet of the Coldstream Guards and Black Watch, for example, and the white of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders – retained them in the field, but usually only among their officers.

BELOW **Stuck in the mud: throughout the war British movements were hampered by their transport system. Here a wagon has come off the road. This photo dates from the Natal campaign, and shows troops – unusually, on this front – wearing neck-covers with their helmets. (S.B. Bourquin)**

BOTTOM **The Empire's might: men of the 2nd (Queen's) Regiment – part of Buller's 1st Army Corps – about to embark on a train after their arrival at Durban docks. Note the conspicuous helmet flashes. (Bryan**

Weapons

The latter half of the Victorian era had seen important changes in infantry arms and equipment. The bolt-action Lee-Metford rifle, which carried ten .303 rounds in a magazine, had been introduced in 1888, and, although still in service, was being replaced at the outbreak of war by an improved version, the Lee-Enfield. This was sighted up to over 2,000 yards, but its most effective battle-range was between 500 and 800 yards. Cavalry carried a carbine version, and a sword; both lancer regiments and the front rank of dragoon regiments also carried 9ft bamboo lances with steel tips and red and white pennons. Infantry equipment was the ingrated Slade-Wallace

Natal troops - mostly Carbineers and Mounted Police (in helmets) - under the command of Brigadier-General J.G. Dartnell, photographed during the siege of Ladysmith. (Bryan Maggs Collection)

system, which carried 100 rounds of ammunition in leather pouches on either side of the waist-belt clasp, as well as a greatcoat, mess-tin, haversack and water-bottle. Equipment straps were of buff leather for line regiments and black for rifles, but it was common practice to dull them with dyes made from tea, coffee, tree bark, or mud. Cavalry carried 50 rounds in brown leather bandoliers.

By the 1890s the cumbersome hand-cranked machine-guns of the 1870s – the Gatling, Gardner and Nordenfeldt – had been replaced by the awesome Maxim gun. Sighted up to 2000 yards, this was fed by belts containing 250 rounds and could spray out bullets at a rate of 600 a minute. The Maxim had proved its effectiveness in both the North-West Frontier and Sudan campaigns, but it had made little impact on tactical theory, and was largely regarded as an infantry support weapon. Each infantry battalion and cavalry regiment, therefore, included a Maxim section – two guns, sometimes mounted on tripods, but more usually on a horse-drawn carriage.

The colonial campaigning of the 1870s and 1880s had also demonstrated the effectiveness of mounted infantry units. These had been raised on an *ad hoc* basis, with men who could ride being taken out of their battalions and lumped together in improvised squadrons. However, in 1888 permanent schools of mounted infantry were set up, and each battalion was required to submit 32 men for training. When operating as part of a larger force – a brigade or division – these detachments could be combined to form companies. Although these mounted units were small in 1899, and largely undervalued, they were destined to become the dominant troop type of the war.

Medical Services

If weapon types had improved immeasurably over the previous decades, so too had the army's medical services. Each man carried a field dressing – a wad of sterilised gauze and a bandage. The job of bearing stretchers had been taken out of the hands of the regimental bandsmen, and was instead performed by Royal Army Medical Corps personnel, who could give treatment. Casualties were removed from the field and taken to field dressing stations, where their injuries were assessed and the worst

treated. They were then sent down the line to mobile field hospitals attached to the columns, and then to stationary hospitals established on the lines of communication.

Although certain types of injuries – such as head or abdominal wounds – were still highly dangerous, improvements in surgical technique, in anaesthetics and in the understanding of hygiene meant that the recovery rate was impressive. The fatality rate among the 22,000 soldiers treated for wounds in the Anglo-Boer War was just 2 per cent – a figure that would have staggered veterans of the Crimean War just 40 years before.

In addition to the regular RAMC personnel, the army received the services of a number of volunteer civilian surgeons and nurses. Among the volunteer stretcher-bearer companies was one provided by the Indian community in Natal, and among its ranks was one Mohandes K. Gandhi, then a young lawyer working in Natal.

South African Units

At the start of the war the British colonies in Natal boasted a number of small professional volunteer units which had been raised among the settler communities for their own defence. These, notably the Cape Mounted Rifles, the Natal Carbineers and the Natal Mounted Police, practised a more disciplined variation of Boer fighting techniques. In 1881 British policy had been to avoid using such units against the Boers for fear of the animosity it might provoke in the civilian community. However, such niceties proved impractical in 1899, and the colonial volunteer units were fully committed to the British cause.

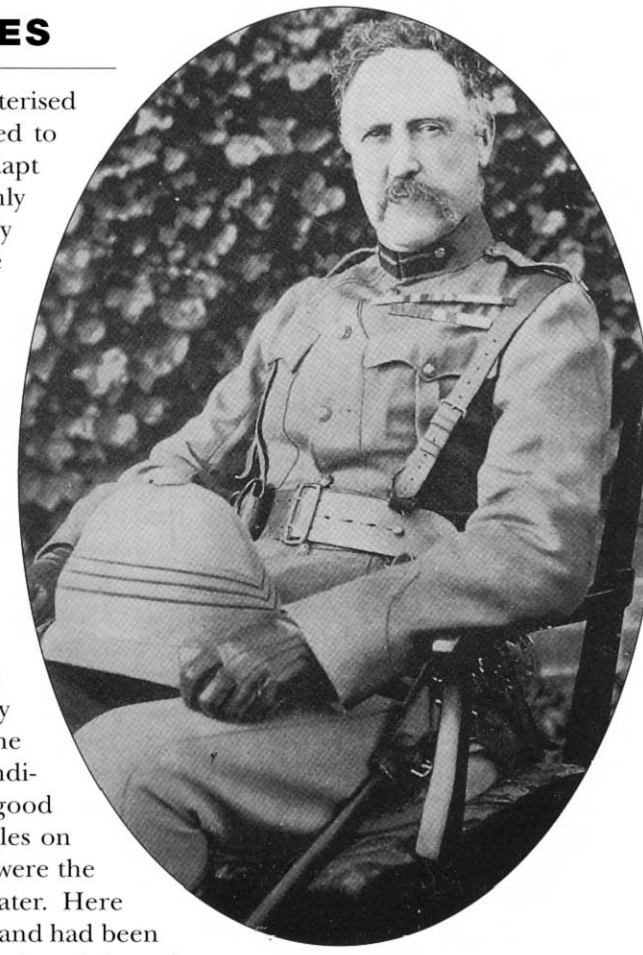
In addition, a number of volunteer units were quickly raised among the *uitlanders* who fled the Transvaal when the war began. The most notable of these were the Imperial Light Horse, South African Light Horse, Bethune's Horse and Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry. All were essentially mounted infantry, who wore khaki uniforms with slouch hats, often sporting distinctive cockades or badges. This type of unit was to proliferate as the war went on.

Officers of the Lancashire Fusiliers, photographed during the Spioenkop campaign, January 1900. Even by this stage, several have discarded Sam Browne belts in favour of Slade-Wallace pouches, and rifles instead of swords. They still retain their conspicuous helmet flashes, however. (S.B. Bourquin Collection)

TACTICAL DIFFERENCES

The British army in 1899 has often been characterised as conservative in outlook, hide-bound, wedded to formal parade-ground tactics and unable to adapt to local conditions and circumstances. This is only partly true: in fact it was the most consistently successful army of its day, and its failures in the early stages of the war were due to the very real challenges it faced.

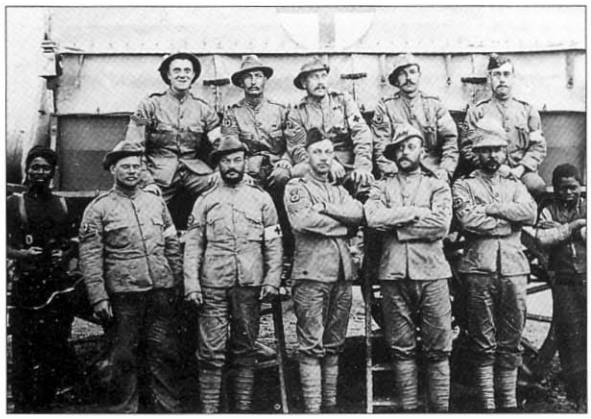
The 1890s were a period of change brought about by improvements in weapon technology. The strict adherence to close-quarter fighting methods, of advancing in column and attacking in line, which had served the British army well since the Napoleonic Wars, were recognised as largely obsolete by the 1870s; hence more flexible formations and open-order fighting had been adopted. Nevertheless, the army's extraordinary range of experience in the field had taught confusing and often contradictory lessons, because of the huge differences in the tactics and capabilities of its enemies. The individual initiative, flexibility, field-craft and good marksmanship which were needed to win battles on the North-West Frontier in 1897, for example, were the antithesis of the Sudan experience, a year later. Here battles had been fought in a featureless terrain, and had been won by concentrated firepower and tight formations (where formations had been too open, they had proved vulnerable to the ferocious Mahdist shock-charge). In 1899 most British officers looked upon the Boers as back-veld yokels who would quail before a line of British bayonets. Thus, although open-order formations were standard for attacks against an enemy armed with firearms, there was a prevailing opinion that the war would be won by the psychological effect of the inexorable advance. Indeed, commanders were urged to prevent their men from taking cover during the last 500 yards of an attack, for fear of losing momentum, and being unable to urge them on again. Some officers still believed in keeping the men under tight control, and although the troops were encouraged to make use of cover, kneeling or even lying down under fire, they were not permitted to allow this to interrupt their advance or break their formations.



Major-General Neville Lyttleton, in typical general officer's uniform. Note the gorget patch on the collar (scarlet with gold loop and button) and the 'Wolseley' pattern helmet.

Volley fire was still preferred to individual marksmanship, because of the effect it was believed to have on the enemy's morale, and because it wasted less ammunition. The favourite tactic remained the artillery barrage followed by an infantry assault in open – but not extended – line, with alternate companies providing fire support. When close to the enemy, the infantry expected to fire a volley, then charge with the bayonet.

Furthermore, although the devastation wrought by the high rate of fire made possible by magazine rifles had been noted in the Sudan, the implications of warfare when both sides were so heavily armed had not



NCOs of the 4th Bearer Company, photographed at Spearman's camp during the Spioenkop operations, January 1900. (S.B. Bourquin)

been fully appreciated. The almost universal use of smokeless powder also meant that this high rate of accurate fire could be produced without giving away the firing party's whereabouts. Given the Boers' initiatives early in the war, and their preference for fighting from defensive positions, British troops were almost always compelled to make attacks in the open in the teeth of such fire. The difficulties which faced them under such circumstances foreshadowed the problems of a later generation of commanders on the Western Front.

This same phenomenon accentuated the poor topographical knowledge with which the British began the war, since Boer fire kept scouts well away from them without revealing their positions. Nor could the British hope to match Boer mobility: the Boers lived off the land, and, possessing no infantry, moved at the pace of their horses and wagons. Throughout the war the British never really succeeded in freeing themselves from the burden of their cumbersome supply-trains, and until the end of the war they advanced at the snail's pace of their infantry. In a vast, largely open country, most of it without tracks and some of it still unmapped, this was a serious disadvantage, and initially regular British cavalry units failed to provide the support required of them. Most went into the war imbued with the rather grim romance of the *arme blanche* – the shock charge with sword or lance; only slowly did they adapt to the scouting and mounted infantry role which the war demanded of them. Poor food, harsh climate and over-work caused a terrible mortality rate among their splendid chargers, and casualties among horses reached almost obscene proportions as new mounted units were raised and put into the field too quickly.

Artillery theory at the time recommended that guns be deployed *en masse*, although a scarcity of resources – and the British army began the war with too few guns – meant that the usual tactical unit remained the six-gun battery. Communications had not progressed so far as to permit indirect fire, and all artillery fire was therefore controlled by direct observation. In the age of smokeless powder, this made them rather more vulnerable to concealed rifle fire than they might otherwise have been, especially as the guns did not have shields to protect the crews. The art of the creeping barrage in support of an infantry attack had to be learned in the field, the hard way.

In addition to these distinct practical disadvantages, the British were hampered by a mentality fostered by 40 years of colonial warfare. Campaigns had usually been undertaken with too few men and resources, and commanders were used to relying on their individual capabilities. A trained staff corps was a new phenomenon, and there was no infrastructure to ensure that large bodies of troops worked well together. This became all too apparent in the early stages of the war, where brigade commanders were slow to adapt to the demands of working within divisions, and divisional commanders within corps. This was further exaggerated by long-standing rivalries between the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Wolseley, and his 'African ring', and the 'India ring' of Lord Roberts, who tended to be dismissive of each other's

Field Marshal Lord Roberts in the field, 1900.

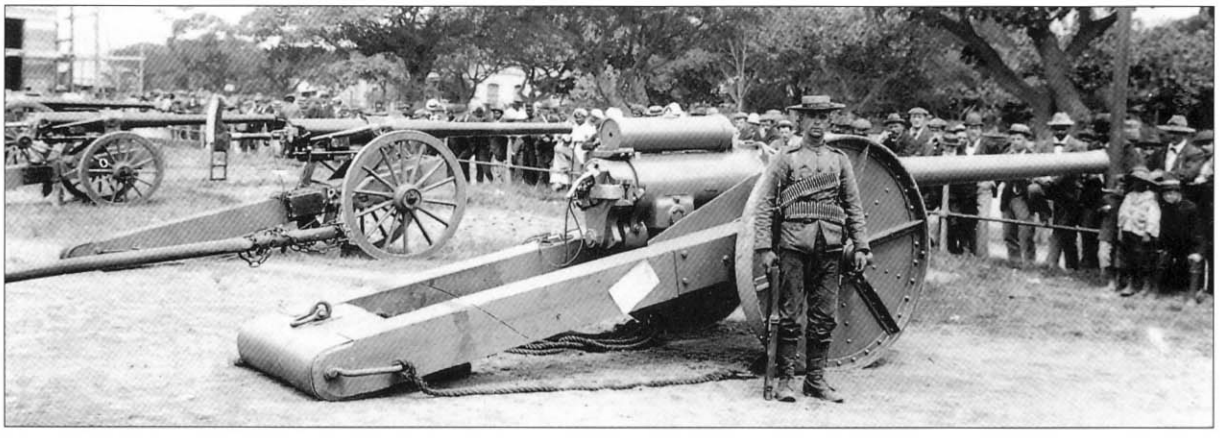
experience. The apparent failings of individual commanders should be assessed in this light.

By contrast, the Boers' greatest weakness was their individuality. Although the armies which invaded the British colonies in October 1899 were the largest ever fielded by the republics, there was no great unity of purpose. A broad strategy had been agreed, but it proved impossible to control the actions of individual commandants, and the differences of opinion within the senior ranks meant that the Boer advance was overcome with a creeping inertia.

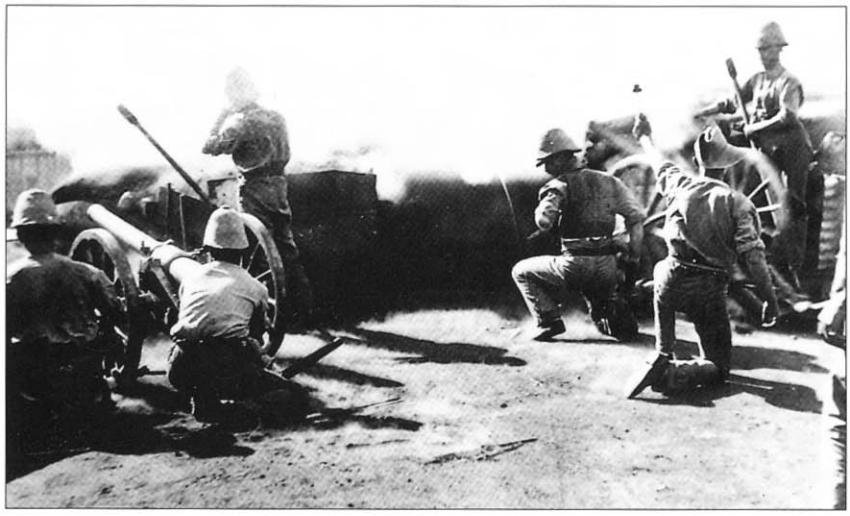
The Boer army remained a collection of individuals who were mobile, flexible and self-reliant, but who could not always work well together either. Ordinary burghers remained reluctant to mount costly frontal attacks – an attitude which dated back to the time when unnecessary heroism often meant women and children being left to fend for themselves on the veld. They had a good tactical sense and excellent field-craft, but having secured an objective they preferred to nestle in behind rocks or breastworks and shoot the British down as they attacked them. If the British got too close, they saw no shame in retreat, and they generally avoided hand-to-hand combat. The regular units proved more adept at sustaining the sort of casualties which close-quarter fighting required. Unlike the British, Boer artillerists preferred to use their guns individually, masking them behind natural features and moving them when they were discovered. Although this diluted their firepower, it gave them a flexibility which could be devastating.

THE CONVENTIONAL WAR

Despite the tension which preceded the outbreak of hostilities, Britain had scarcely 10,000 troops in South Africa when the war began. This was obviously insufficient to meet the Boer threat, and the 1st Army Corps – a total of 47,000 men, including 33 infantry battalions, seven cavalry regiments and 19 batteries – was mobilised in Britain. While the 1st Army Corps was in training, 10,000 men were rushed to South Africa under the command of Sir George White. Even with these reinforcements, the



The 4.7in guns (foreground) and 12-pdrs landed at Durban by HMS *Terrible*. The sailor wears khaki jacket and trousers, and a khaki cover over his straw hat. Equipment straps are brown leather, and ammunition bandoliers canvas webbing. (Bryan Maggs Collection)



British were understrength, and Royal Naval landing parties were put ashore at both Cape Town and Durban. The Navy helped offset the British shortage of artillery by landing a number of 12in and 4.7in guns on carriages improvised by Captain Percy Scott.

With Majuba very much in mind, the Boers opted for an offensive strategy, hoping to strike quickly into the British colonies and inflict sufficient heavy reverses to bring the British to the negotiating table before the resources of their wider empire could be mobilised. In the west they advanced and surrounded Kimberley – where Cecil Rhodes himself had the misfortune to be trapped within the Boer cordon; further north they attacked Mafikeng, which commanded the road to Zimbabwe. In the south a further strike was made into the Cape Colony, in an attempt to encourage Cape Boers to rise to the republics' support. By far the greatest thrust, however, was made into Natal. Here the main Transvaal forces, supported by commandos from the Free State, poured across the Laing's Nek pass, past the grim bulk of Majuba, and started on the road to Durban. Most of the Transvaal's artillery was with this column, although detachments had been sent to Mafikeng and Kimberley; the OFS artillery was attached to the Kimberley forces. The British commander in South Africa, General Penn-Symons, assembled 4,500 British troops at the northern Natal town of Dundee to block the Boer advance. On 20 October the Boers occupied Talana Hill, outside the town, and Penn-Symons drew his men up and rushed the hill in style. The Boers were driven off, but the British suffered heavily from a heavy and accurate Boer fire as they scrambled up the rocky slopes; Penn-Symons himself was mortally wounded. The next day, with the Boers still in the vicinity, Penn-Symons' successor, Major-General Yule, decided Dundee was indefensible, and he made preparations to retire.

British 2.5in guns in action at Kimberley during the siege. (Bryan Maggs Collection)

The Wolf – the most famous of the guns improvised by the British garrison during the siege of Mafikeng. This shows the damage after The Wolf burst in action. (Bryan Maggs Collection)

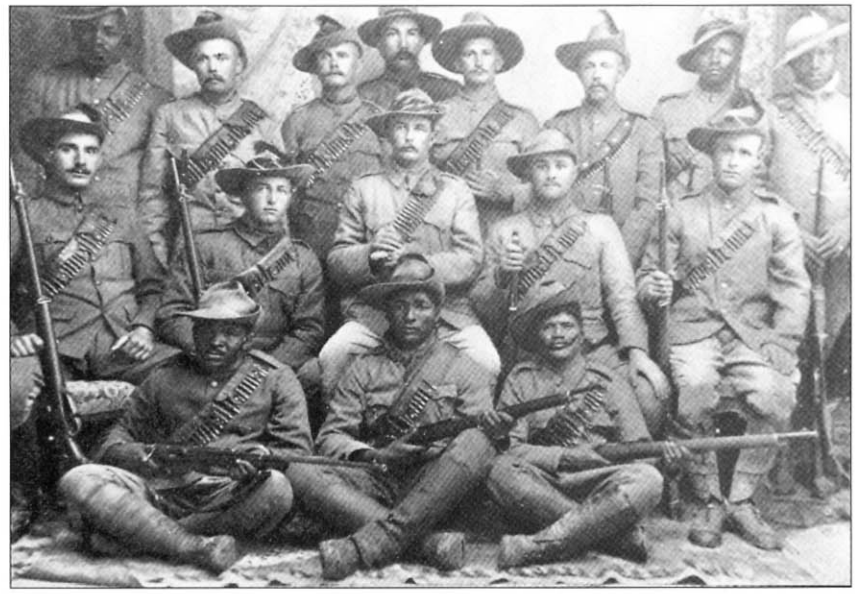
The Siege of Ladysmith

The Dundee garrison retired on Ladysmith, in central Natal. Ladysmith was the 'Aldershot of South Africa', the home of the main British garrison in Natal. Strategically it was not well placed, lying north of the significant barrier of the Thukela River; when White's contingent arrived, his first inclination was to abandon Ladysmith in favour of a better line nearer the port at Durban.

White felt that Penn-Symons' stand at Dundee had compromised such a plan, however, and he moved north to Ladysmith, arriving just before the action at Talana. As the Dundee garrison fell back, White made a foray to prevent the Boers from cutting it off, and caught the Free State commandos at Elandslaagte station on 21 October. In almost text-book style, White's troops – veterans of the North-West Frontier – drove the Boers from one kopje to another, and finished them off with a grim lancer charge.

Yet White did not follow up his victory, preferring instead to concentrate his forces. Piet Joubert's Transvaal commandos promptly took advantage of this delay, and advanced rapidly to seize a circle of hills surrounding Ladysmith. White tried to break out of the trap, and on the night of 29/30 October he mounted a bold attack on Boer positions at Pepworth Hill and Nicholson's Nek. Unfortunately the plan badly miscarried; the darkness added to the confusion, and daylight found the attacking British badly exposed to the fire from Boers securely concealed on the hills. The British attack collapsed, and White's men fell back on Ladysmith. White now found his 13,000 troops, their 2,500 servants and 5,400 civilians were surrounded in a little town of tin-roofed bungalows, at the mercy of heavy Boer artillery which shelled them with impunity from the surrounding heights.

The 1st Army Corps was, meanwhile, heading for South Africa, commanded by General Sir Redvers Buller, a big, bulldog of a man with a famously gruff manner who had won the VC in the Zulu War and was widely regarded by a jingoistic British public as a hero who could do no wrong. When Buller had left the UK, he had shared the popular belief that the quickest way to win the war was to strike up through the interior from the Cape, following the line of the railway, first to the Free State capital of Bloemfontein, then to Pretoria. He arrived in South Africa just in time to hear of White's investment at Ladysmith, however, and opted instead to split his force. Leaving the smaller part under Lord Methuen to try to relieve Kimberley, he despatched the remainder to Natal.



A White Man's War? Colonel Scobell and members of the Cape Mounted Rifles. Note the African 'intelligence staff', front row. The British, in particular, made extensive use of armed scouts during the war.

The British Counter-Attack

November 1899 saw something of a lull. The Boer assaults lost their impetus and frittered away their resources in the long and ultimately pointless sieges. With White bottled up in Ladysmith, Natal was acutely vulnerable to an attack on Durban, which might have denied the British the great advantage of their world-wide maritime transport network. To the disgust of younger, more adventurous, leaders, however, the cautious and

conservative Joubert refused to seize the opportunity, and the younger commandants had to be content with a minor raid into Natal.

The respite gave the British time to organise their forces, and by the end of November, as Buller's troops began to disembark at Durban, Methuen was ready to go on the advance in the west. He had 10,000 men at his disposal, and pushed up through the arid wastes of the northern Cape, following the railway line. On 23 and 24 November he won two minor actions at Belmont and Graspan respectively, while the Boers fell back on the line of the Modder River, which blocked the road to Kimberley.

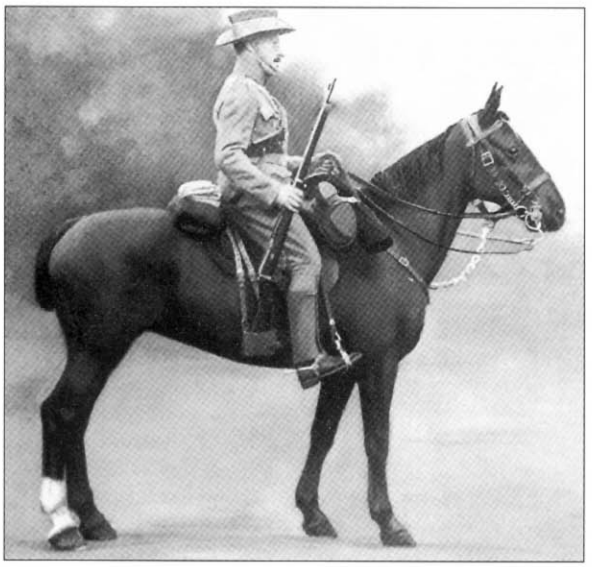
The Modder was a good natural defensive position, meandering through largely open and featureless country, and the Boers, under General Piet Cronje, secured themselves in slit trenches along the banks, so that any British advance would have to be made across miles of flat open country. On 28 November Methuen attacked the Modder, with predictable results: his assaults became pinned down under a hail of rifle and pom-pom fire. The fighting had reached a stalemate by nightfall, but the Boers abandoned their positions under cover of darkness. They took up a new position a few miles away, along a low ridge known as Magersfontein. Methuen spent a fortnight regrouping, then prepared to attack Magersfontein.

'Black Week'

The second week of December saw a resumption of fighting on all the main fronts, with a ferocity unprecedented in the war. In the event, circumstances contrived to deliver three defeats to the British in quick succession, a string of disasters so shocking that they were known collectively as 'Black Week'.

The first occurred in the eastern sector of the Northern Cape, where Free State Boers had been threatening the strategically important Stormberg Junction. On 10/11 December General Gatacre took 3,000 troops out in a daring night march to clear the Boers away, but the darkness, imperfect maps, and imprecise orders combined to confuse Gatacre's command completely. Dawn the following morning found the British forces widely scattered and at the mercy of the Boers, who killed and wounded nearly 150 and took 600 prisoner.

A sergeant of the Imperial Yeomanry. Note the short mounted infantry rifle-bucket. This uniform is typical of Yeomanry, CIV and Colonial units, and, indeed, of almost all mounted British units from 1900.



The very next day Methuen himself suffered a serious reverse at Magersfontein. Realising that the Magersfontein ridge was a strong position, Methuen had been reluctant to mount a frontal assault in the daylight, and so had planned a careful night attack. In the event the plan miscarried, and dawn caught the leading brigades still in close formation, fatally exposed to Boer fire. The attack collapsed in confusion, and Methuen lost 950 killed and wounded – compared to less than 300 casualties amongst the Boers; this time the Boers stayed in their trenches. The defeat was all the more humiliating because it had fallen most heavily on the Highland and

EARLY BOERS, 1899

1: Corporal, Transvaal Staatsartillerie

2: Officer, Transvaal Staatsartillerie

3: Burgher

4: Officer, foreign volunteers

5: Officer, foreign contingent

6: Examples of Boer forces

EARLY BOERS, 1899/1990

1: Urban Boer, 1899

2: German volunteer doctor, 1899

3: Volunteer, 'Chicago Irish-American Corps', Blake's Irish Brigade

4: Gunner, Transvaal Staatsartillerie

5: African *agyterryer*


EARLY BRITISH, 1899/1900
1: Private, King's Royal Rifle Corps
2: Private, 5th Lancers
3: Infantry sergeant
4: Officer, Lancashire Fusiliers
1
2
3
4


BRITISH UNIFORMS, WESTERN THEATRE, 1899/1900
1: Private, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders
2: Officer, Highland Light Infantry
3: Private, Grenadier Guards
1
2
3

D

BRITISH TROOPS, 1900

1: Trooper, Rimington's Scouts

2: Staff officer

3: Private, Royal Canadian Regiment

BOER AND BRITISH FORCES, 1900

1 and 2: Boer Burgher and Z.A.R.P.

3: Officer, City Imperial Volunteers

4: Troopers, Natal Carbineers


LATE WAR DRESS, C.1901
1: British infantry officer
2: Boer 'bitter-ender'
3: 'Bitter-ender'
1
2
3

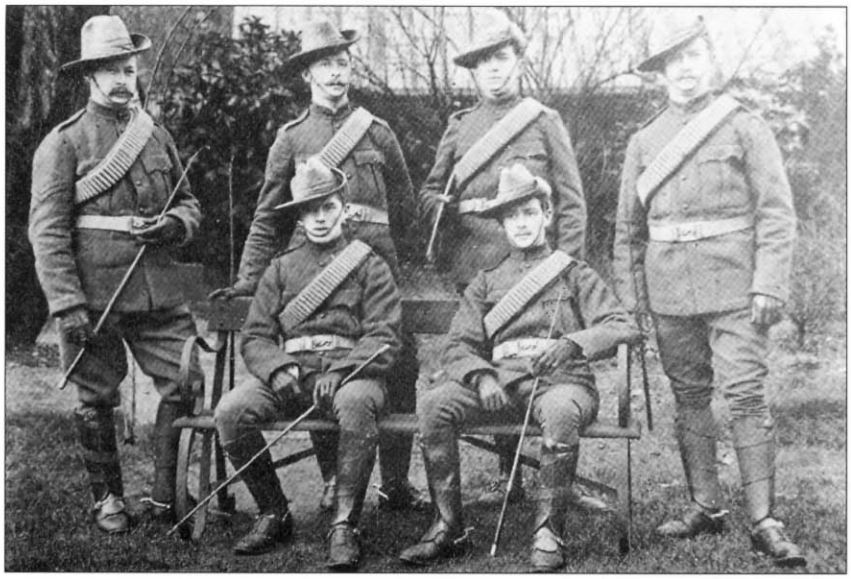
G


LATE BRITISH UNIFORMS,
1901/1902 WITH RICE BLOCKHOUSE
1: African scout
2: Infantry private
3: Private, 17th Lancers
4: Regular mounted infantry
1
2
3
4

Guards brigades, who enjoyed a high reputation within the British army.

The news of Stormberg and Magersfontein reached Buller in Natal at a critical time. The Boers had taken up a strong defensive position along a line of hills on the north bank of the Thukela River, which blocked any British advance on Ladysmith. The British advance would inevitably take them across open, undulating country where they would be exposed to the full weight of Boer fire. Buller was reluctant to take such a risk, but while he pondered his options, the news of Stormberg and Magersfontein forced his hand. With the need to restore British prestige paramount, he opted for a frontal assault on the village of Colenso, which commanded the main route to Ladysmith. Buller had about 18,000 troops available. The Boer commander, Louis Botha, had less than 7,000 in the hills opposite, but Buller's men had only recently arrived in South Africa, and the brigade commanders were not used to working together. Buller planned to assault the Thukela line early on the morning of 15 December with two infantry brigades, with two more in support. In the event, his artillery drew ahead of their supports and took up an exposed position closer to the Boer line than had been planned. They immediately came under a heavy fire. The leading brigade on the left became confused by the topography of the river, advanced in close order into a loop in the Thukela and was brought to a halt by a withering frontal and enfilading fire. Buller, seeing the danger to the artillery, devoted his attention to extricating them, and failed to make the best use of his reserves. Disheartened, he called off the assault after an hour, before it had hardly begun, thereby compelling his gunners to abandon ten out of 12 guns to the Boers.

Colenso cost Buller 900 men killed or wounded (the majority were wounded) and was the crowning humiliation of 'Black Week'. In fact, it had hardly affected the strategic situation in Natal, but such was the



TOP **Before: six brothers named Westley of the 62nd Company, Imperial Yeomanry, are photographed in the smart khaki serge uniforms, Stohwasser gaiters, and webbing bandoliers with which many Yeomanry companies were issued prior to departing to South Africa...**
ABOVE **After: a month or two in the veld soon gave a more war-worn appearance, making many such units difficult to distinguish from the Boers. The 53rd Company, Imperial Yeomanry. This company suffered heavily at the action at Tweefontein on Christmas Day 1900.**

The battle of Spioenkop. Although this picture is clearly posed, it does suggest something of the close-quarter fire-fights on the boulder-strewn summit which characterised the battle. (Transvaal Archives Depot)

outcry among politicians and the Press at home that Buller was sent a fresh division as reinforcements, and a new overall commander, Lord Roberts, was despatched to South Africa.

On the whole, the Boers failed to follow up their victories, but they did step up the pressure on Ladysmith, launching an attack on British positions outside the town which was narrowly repulsed on 6 January 1900. Buller, well aware that he could not dawdle before the Thukela Heights indefinitely, waited for the arrival of his reinforcements and then made a second attempt to break through.

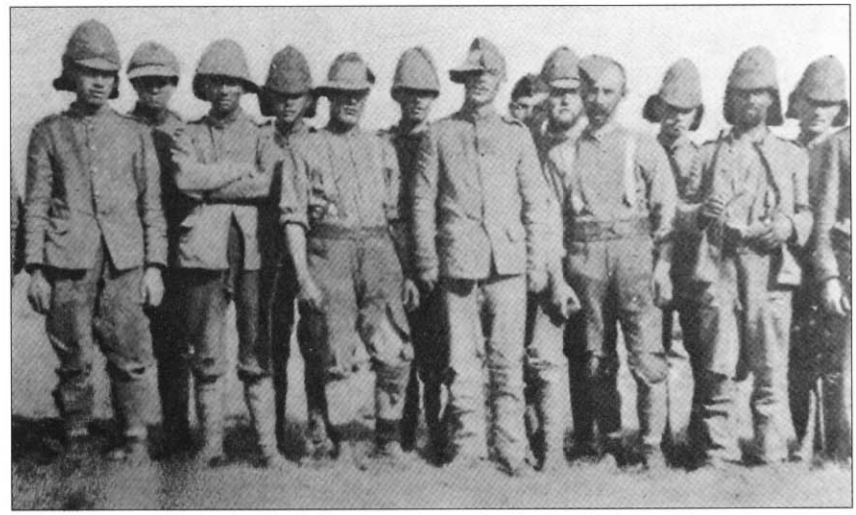
Spioenkop

For this he resorted to his original plan. Fifteen miles upstream from Colenso, there was an alternative crossing point on the Thukela, and Buller resolved to try to outflank the Boer line at this point. Buller's troops began an assault on the Boer positions on 19 January, but soon became pinned down on the rocky hillsides under heavy fire from above. On the spur of the moment, one of Buller's divisional commanders, General Warren, suggested that the key to the Boer position was a whale-backed ridge in the centre of their line, known as 'Look-out Hill' – Spioenkop. On the night of 23/24 January 1,900 British troops scaled the slopes and drove off a Boer piquet on the summit. At dawn the next morning, however, the British line proved to be badly sited, exposed to both Boer artillery fire and determined infantry assault. During a day of bungling and confusion, the troops clung to the summit while Warren and Buller failed to mount effective supporting attacks. By nightfall British casualties were so heavy that the commander on Spioenkop decided to withdraw. The attack had cost the British 300 dead, 1,000 wounded and 200 captured, to end up precisely where they had started. A few days later Buller mounted an attack on the Boer position a few miles to the east, at Vaalkraanz, but abandoned the attack in the face of resolute Boer resistance.

The Western Front

While Buller struggled to overcome his very real difficulties before Ladysmith, Lord Roberts brought a fresh energy to the war on the western front, and gave the British their first major victory of the campaign. By early February Roberts had amassed nearly 37,000 men. The Boers were still in position at the Magersfontein ridge, but rather than confront them directly, Roberts planned to outflank them, striking out to his right, hoping to surprise the Boers by abandoning the line of the railway. He was right: he began his move on 12 February, and despite some opposition, his cavalry circled wide of the main Boer line and entered Kimberley on 15 February, relieving it after 124 days of siege, which had cost the lives of 35 soldiers and five civilians. Roberts' main force followed in the cavalry's wake. Their line was very extended, and vulnerable to Boer counter-attack (on the same day that Kimberley was relieved, Christiaan De Wet caught a supply train crossing the Riet River and captured or destroyed 1,600 draught oxen) but the threat it posed

to Cronje at Magersfontein was obvious. Cronje decided to abandon his position, and retired east towards Bloemfontein. He was encumbered by a long wagon train and by several hundred non-combatants, and his route took him right across Roberts' line of advance. Brought to bay by British cavalry, he laagered his wagons at Paardeberg on the Modder River, and deployed his men along the banks. The British were desperate to break up his force – the largest Boer concentration on the western front – and on 17/18 February, while Roberts was absent sick, his chief-of-staff, Lord Kitchener, launched a direct assault. The attack was badly co-ordinated, however, and broke up in the face of heavy casualties, but it did at least surround Cronje and prevent further retreat. Cronje finally realised the hopelessness of his position, and surrendered his command of over 4,000 men on 27 February – the anniversary of Majuba.



Tommy in rags: since most soldiers preferred to pose for photographs looking their best, images such as this – which show the effects of life in the veld on uniforms – are rare, although the wear and tear itself was common enough.

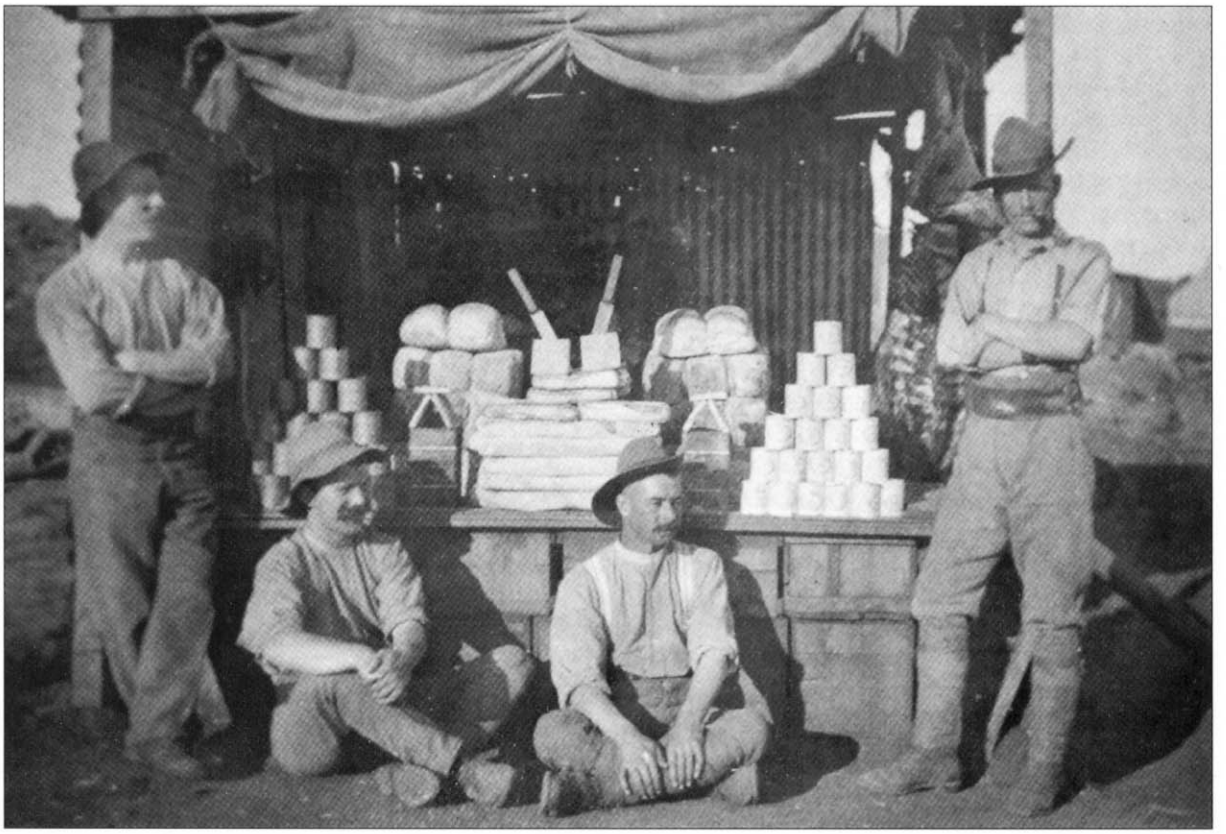
The Relief of Ladysmith

By this time the tide had also turned in Natal. Buller had returned to the Colenso road. On the extreme right of the old battlefield were a series of ridges and broken kopjes that were separated from the main Boer position by the Thukela River. In the first battle, Buller had made no more than a diversionary attack against them, but on 14 February he began a series of intense assaults. By now his troops were working well together, and the hills were taken after a series of open-order attacks closely supported by artillery fire. By 18 February the British had cleared the ground up to the river, and were preparing to cross at a point where it flowed through a narrow gorge. On the other side of the Thukela the ground rose up in a series of hills, each well-entrenched by the Boers – Wynne's Hill, Hart's Hill, Pieter's Hill and Railway Hill.

Buller began his attack on 22 February, his troops advancing up out of the Thukela valley in the wake of an effective creeping barrage. The Boer resistance was stubborn, and several attacks were pinned down, but this time Buller was resolute, and outflanked the main Boer positions. On the same day that Cronje surrendered at Paardeberg, the Boer line cracked, and they suddenly abandoned their positions. Buller was content to let them go, and on 28 February the first British cavalry reached the beleaguered garrison.

The siege of Ladysmith had lasted 118 days and cost over 200 men killed in action; 600 soldiers and civilians had died of disease. Buller's losses were twice that number, yet the entire Natal campaign had probably cost the lives of 400 or 500 Boers.

The British successes of February 1900 undoubtedly marked a turning point in the war. The Boer invasions of British territory had been



A particularly well-stocked kitchen belonging to the 1st South Lancs Regt. Such luxuries were possible only at fixed garrisons. This battalion was stationed on the hills overlooking Vryheid, a republican stronghold in northern Natal. (Keith Reeves Collection)

steadily repulsed, and the British were poised to go onto the offensive and to take the war into the Boer republics. In the west Roberts pressed on towards Bloemfontein, the Free State capital. The Boers attempted to stand at Poplar Grove, but they had temporarily lost heart. On 13 March Roberts' troops entered Bloemfontein.

To the British it seemed that the war was all but over; that there remained only the capture of the Transvaal capital, Pretoria, to ensure a complete Boer collapse. For seven weeks Roberts lingered in Bloemfontein, reorganising his transport system and accumulating supplies. The enforced wait had an unfortunate consequence for his troops, who were afflicted by an outbreak of typhoid which at times reached almost Crimean levels of suffering. The Boers took advantage of the lull to regroup, and at the end of March de Wet mounted a lightning attack which caught a British wagon convoy off guard at Sannah's Post in the Free State. The British lost 170 killed and wounded and de Wet took 400 prisoners. It was the first hint that, far from being over, the war was about to enter a new phase.

On 16 May Mafikeng was relieved. The little garrison had held out for 217 days, though it was only severely tested in the last few days before the relief, when the Boers mounted a last desperate – and unsuccessful – attempt to take it. The siege had caught the imagination of the British public, and Mafikeng achieved an emotional importance out of all proportion to its strategic significance; its relief was greeted with immense celebration in Britain, and the garrison commander, Lt-Col. Baden-Powell, became a public hero.

By this time Roberts had begun his march on Pretoria. After desultory fighting he took Johannesburg on 30 May, and on 2 June Kruger and the Transvaal government abandoned Pretoria. Three days later Roberts entered the city in triumph. Buller, meanwhile, had been advancing cautiously but steadily up through Natal, suppressing Boer resistance in the Drakensberg passes. On 12 June he crossed into the Transvaal, and the next day Roberts' troops fought the last battles with Boers retreating east of Johannesburg, towards the Mozambique border. On all fronts it seemed that the British were triumphant.

THE BRITISH ARMY, 1900-1901

The series of defeats in 'Black Week' had sent shock-waves around the Empire, and resulted in an extraordinary outpouring of patriotic sentiment. To make good some of the losses at the front, the government approved the raising of volunteer units. The City of London offered to finance a unit 1,000 strong – known as the City Imperial Volunteers – and their numbers exceeded 5,000 before the war was over.

A number of wealthy individuals raised smaller units on their own initiative, such as Paget's Horse or Lovat's Scouts, which were raised by Lord Lovat from among the ghillies of the great Highland estates.

By far the greatest contribution came from the British Yeomanry regiments, however. Since the county Yeomanry had been raised as a local defence force, they could not be sent overseas, but a new unit, the Imperial Yeomanry, was raised, which drew its recruits from the existing Yeomanry units, augmented by reservists and volunteers. The Imperial Yeomanry were organised in battalions, each consisting of four companies and a machine-gun section, a total of 526 men. Each company's recruiting area coincided with a county Yeomanry district, so that Imperial Yeomanry companies retained something of their parent unit's local nature.

The first detachment of Imperial Yeomanry, 9,000 strong, arrived in South Africa between January and April 1900. They had been enlisted for one year's service, and many returned home during 1901; a second batch, 17,000 strong, was raised to replace them. Many of those with previous training had joined the first detachment, and the 'New Yeomanry' suffered a serious lack in this regard. Training was supposed to be given in the field, but this was of such a cursory nature that the second detachment proved less effective, and the wastage of horses was high. In addition, the disgrace of 'Black Week' prompted the self-governing 'white colonies' of Canada, Australia and New Zealand to offer their support. To the disgust of the Boers, who

A bivouac on the veld. An officer of the Yeomanry snatching a few moments sleep during the guerrilla war. (Bryan Maggs Collection)

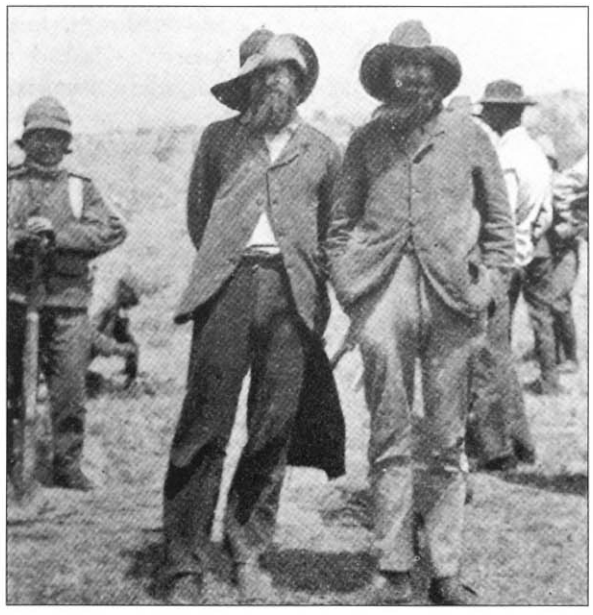
could not understand why settlers like themselves should rally to the cause of imperialism, over 7,300 Canadians, 16,632 Australians and 6,343 New Zealanders volunteered for service. Colonial support was motivated by a genuine sympathy for the plight of the *uitlanders*, and by a desire to prove their self-sufficiency to the mother-country. The Canadian contingent included the 2nd (Special Service) Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment – an infantry unit which found itself in action at Paardeberg within weeks of its arrival, and an artillery unit.

For the most part, however, the Colonial units were mounted; the Canadians were drawn largely from existing militia units, while the Australian and New Zealand units were created especially for the purpose, since existing volunteer corps were liable only for home defence. In all, some 57 Australian units were raised, most by state, since the Australian states were independent of one another. (A united Australian army only came into being when Australia was federated in 1901,) A national unit, the Australian Commonwealth Horse, arrived in South Africa towards the end of the war.

Almost all of the new arrivals, British and Colonials, were dressed in similar uniforms – dark khaki serge with slouch hats, and bandoliers. The only distinguishing marks were badges, cockades or, occasionally, coloured puggrees. Moreover, they represented the changing face of the war, a shift away from an infantry war towards a growing reliance on mounted infantrymen who could, in theory, match the Boers' mobility and firepower. In some cases, this proved to be the case: many of the first Yeomanry detachments soon adapted themselves to conditions in the field; and some Colonial units, filled with men who were no less used to the saddle and the rifle than the Boers, were extremely effective. Nonetheless, the fact remained that most British mounted units,

No. 5 Wing of the Transvaal National Scouts, commanded by General A.P. Cronje (right foreground); the scouts were Boers who sided with the British towards the end of the war. They were particularly despised by the 'bitter-enders' who remained in the field.

including regular MI, could not match the Boers for horsemanship, marksmanship, survival in the veld and endurance, and in action their firepower was diluted by the practice of deploying one man in four as a horse-holder. Among the Boers, horses were trained to stand their ground, and every man fought. The British army adapted itself to conditions in the field as 1900 wore on. Even among the infantry, uniforms were becoming more practical. Khaki serge had replaced khaki drill, unit distinctions were less conspicuous, and officers had abandoned their impractical swords, and were usually armed and dressed like their men. When helmets were lost or discarded, they were increasingly replaced with slouch hats, and by 1901 many replacement drafts sent from home were being issued with slouch hats as standard. Indeed, when some units had been in the field for a few months, their war-worn appearance was hardly distinguishable from that of the Boers.



'Bitter-enders', captured in the Transvaal in 1901.

In battle, extended formations were becoming the norm, and the men were taught to attack by rushing from cover to cover under artillery and small-arms support. The Slade-Wallace equipment pouches proved unsuitable under such circumstances, and some infantry battalions adopted either the cavalry-style leather bandolier or a light-khaki canvas webbing bandolier. Highland regiments generally retained their kilts, but adopted slouch hats and short puttees instead of spats. Many of these changes were also reflected among the regular cavalry, who were at last adopting a more practical mounted infantry role. At the end of 1900 this shift in function was recognised: lances, swords and carbines were withdrawn from cavalry regiments, and replaced with Lee-Enfield rifles.

As the war progressed, there was a proliferation of local volunteer units, either raised among fresh volunteers from the existing colonies, from *uitlanders* in the occupied republics, or by refining existing units. Some Boers even fought for the British. After the fall of Pretoria and Bloemfontein, many burghers felt that defeat was inevitable, and they signed pledges not to take up arms against the British. These men were despised as 'hands-uppers' by those who stayed in the field, and who were known as 'bitter-enders'.

In September 1901 the British raised two units from former Boer commandos, who were apparently motivated by a desire to bring the war to a speedy conclusion. Those from the former Free State (which the British had renamed the Orange River Colony after the fall of Bloemfontein) were known as the Orange River Volunteers, and those from the Transvaal as the National Scouts. These two units raised the spectre of a civil war among the Afrikaner population, and they were despised by the 'bitter-enders'.

The Guerrilla War

The end of the conventional war is sometimes assumed to mark the beginning of the end of the Anglo-Boer War, but this impression is profoundly misleading; the war had two more years to run. If many of the

older, slower, most conservative Boer leaders – men like Cronje or Joubert – had died or surrendered, a new, more flexible and resolute generation had risen to take their place. Freed from the need to defend the capitals, men like de Wet, Botha, Viljoen, Herzog and Smuts were able to use what resources they still had to their best advantage, and the Boers became a fast-moving guerrilla army. Their numbers never totalled more than 25,000 men, and they had nearly 150,000 square miles to roam in.

The British held the main towns and the railways – the arteries by which their garrisons were supplied – but it was almost impossible for them to control the countryside; the Boers knew the veld infinitely better.

At first, the guerrilla war had some discernible pattern. Roberts, determined to bring the Free State commandos to bay, attempted to trap them in the Brandwater Basin, against the BaSotholand border, in June and July 1900. Although 4,000 Boers were finally trapped and captured, 1,500 escaped, among them de Wet, who displayed an astonishing ability to twist and turn to avoid capture. This episode, known as the 'First de Wet Hunt', suggested that British co-ordination was still ineffective. De Wet slipped into the Transvaal, running rings around his pursuers, while in the north-eastern Transvaal Botha went onto the defensive, attempting to keep the British back from the Mozambique border, where Kruger still maintained a government in exile.

On 27 August, however, combined troops from Roberts' and Buller's command broke through the cordon at Bergendaal and pushed up to the border at Koomati Poort. Kruger fled before their advance, and left the country on 11 September. He died shortly afterwards in Holland. Even before he had gone, Roberts had proclaimed the Transvaal a British colony once more. The Natal army was formally broken up, and Buller returned to England. Roberts, too, was keen to leave the war, but it was not until the end of November that he felt able to hand over supreme command to Kitchener.

Kitchener's War

Under Kitchener's command the war degenerated into its last bitter phase. Kitchener himself has been blamed for this, and his coldly methodical approach certainly exaggerated the growing shift to a war of attrition. Yet, in truth the war was merely following a logical course set in motion by the outbreak of the guerrilla war. As early as June 1900 Roberts had authorised the burning of farms belonging to Boers known to be still in the field. Unable to catch and destroy them, Roberts was striking at their supply base; Kitchener simply went one stage further by adopting a proper scorched-earth policy. Boer non-combatants – women and children – could not be left unprotected on the veld; they would be rounded up and housed in makeshift refugee camps, known as concentration camps. The camps were crowded and insanitary, food was poor, and the administration inefficient. Disease soon broke out in the camps, and by the end of the war over 26,000 Boer women and children had died in them, leaving a scar on the soul of the Afrikaner nation which to this day has not fully healed.

Initially, the scorched-earth policy was counter-productive, and probably served to prolong the fighting, since it stiffened the resolve of the 'bitter-enders' and relieved them of the need to protect their farms

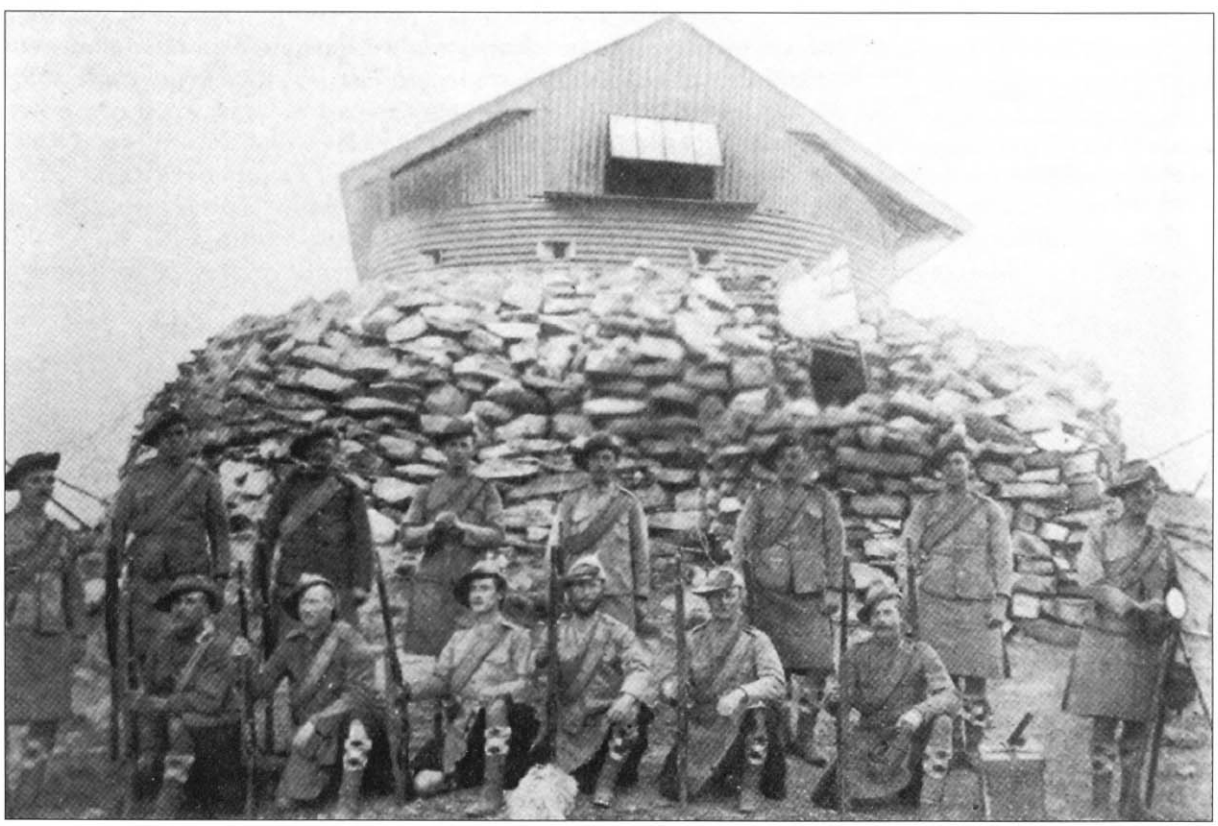
and families. In November and December de Wet slipped out of the Free State and struck into the Cape Colony. The British were no more able to catch him in this, the 'Second de Wet Hunt', than they had been in the first. However, Boer hopes that Afrikaners living in the Cape would rise to join them were disappointed, despite the fact that a commando led by Smuts penetrated as far as the coast in the Western Cape.

The British fixation with de Wet led to a dangerous complacency elsewhere in the country, and on 13 December a British camp was captured at Nooitgedacht, only 40 miles west of Pretoria, and over 600 troops taken prisoner. In January and February of 1901 de Wet once again went onto the offensive, cutting British lines of communication, attacking convoys and destroying railways, in the 'Third de Wet Hunt'. By now, however, the British were developing a strategy of containment.

Blockhouses

The British first began to build blockhouses under Roberts' direction in March 1900, after the capture of Bloemfontein. Roberts' force depended for its supply on the Cape Town–Bloemfontein railway, which was obviously vulnerable to Boer attack. The first blockhouses were solid affairs, two storeys high, and built largely of stone, with a projecting bastion on one corner at ground level, and a machine-gun sited on the upper floor. They were very expensive to build, but very effective, and not one of the stretches of line they guarded was successfully attacked. In the eastern Transvaal, a few less sturdy blockhouses were built with walls of double layers of corrugated iron, packed in between with earth.

A Rice blockhouse with a particularly strong garrison of the 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 1901. Helmets have given way to slouch hats, Slade-Wallace pouches to webbing bandoliers, and spats to short ankle puttees.

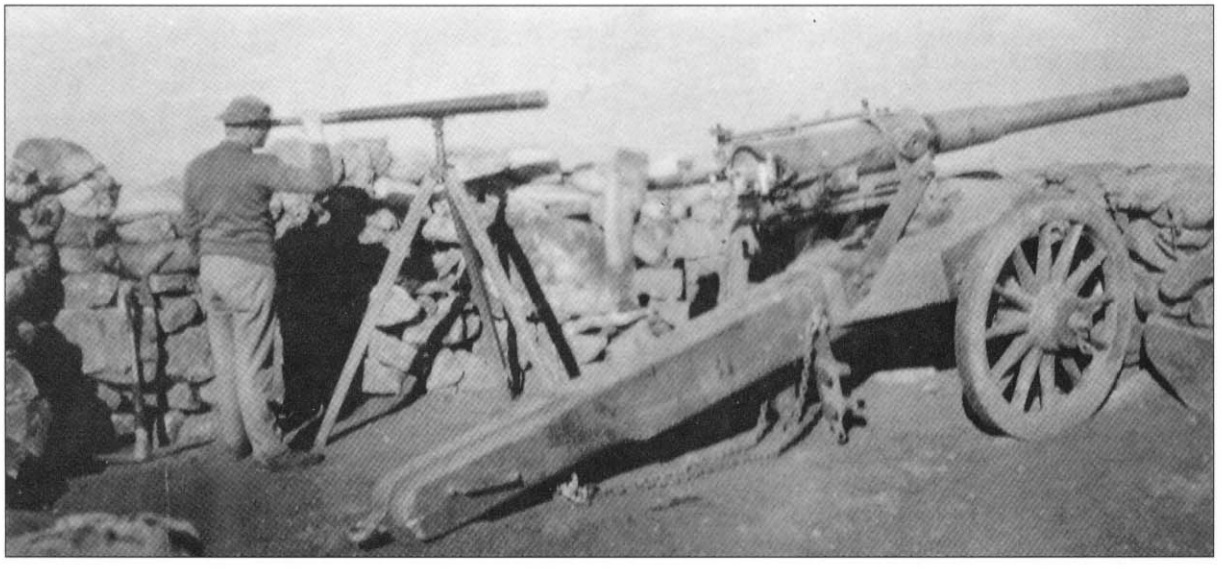


The enduring image of the middle period of the war: a Boer farm in flames.

Once the guerrilla war was underway in earnest, it was decided to build chains of blockhouses, not merely to guard the railways, but to try to hamper Boer movement. Stone blockhouses were impractical in such quantities, so Kitchener instructed an Engineer officer, Major Rice, to perfect a cheap prefabricated version of the corrugated iron blockhouse. Rice's blockhouse retained the idea of the double skin, but was round rather than rectangular, and was loop-holed and protected by an iron roof. Stones were piled up around the outside as further protection. The Rice blockhouse was cheap, and could be erected in less than a day by trained men. The approaches were usually screened by trenches and barbed wire, and where wire connected one blockhouse to another, it was usually festooned with tin cans or booby-traps to make a noise and alert the garrison if anyone tried to cross the line. Black Africans were employed in large numbers to patrol the wire.

A typical garrison consisted of a junior NCO and six men – a small enough number, but one which nonetheless required the commitment of 50,000 men at the guerrilla war's height. Garrison life was quite safe, since the blockhouse was secure against rifle-fire and few Boers by that stage still had artillery. However, it was immensely tedious. In all, some 8,000 blockhouses were built, covering a total of 3,700 miles. In some places they were just 1,000 yards apart. Although the Boers professed to despise

Naval 12-pdr gun on improvised carriage in emplacements on Lancaster Hill, outside Vryheid, northern Natal. (Keith Reeves Collection)



the blockhouse system – de Wet called it the 'blockhead system' – there is no doubt that it was a significant factor in the war of attrition, and helped to make the veld a smaller place for the roving guerrilla bands.

BOER FORCES, 1900-1902

The changing Boer fortunes in the early part of the war had a significant impact on their forces. Initially they had been able to take advantage of the windfall in material which their victories afforded them: British estimates suggest that 48 British guns were captured by the Boers, and most were pressed into service by them. Nevertheless, the collapse of February 1900 had a serious effect, particularly on the regular forces. The more disciplined foreign volunteer and police units had taken heavy casualties in the set-piece battles, and some of these units ceased to exist as the survivors broke up and joined commando units. Although some of the Free State Artillery survived the defeat at Paardeberg, and individual guns continued to serve with commandos, the Transvaal Staatsartillerie had lost or destroyed most of their guns by the time the guerrilla war broke out, and most of the gunners fought as ordinary commandos, reverting to civilian dress.

Early in the war some burghers had taken to stripping British prisoners or dead of their uniforms, and wearing them, usually as trophies. As the war progressed, however, this became a question of necessity, as burghers still in the field had no means of replacing worn clothing. Many considered this a legitimate act of war, since the British had destroyed their possessions when they burnt the farms. Since the 'bitter-enders' had no resources to guard prisoners, it became common practice to strip British prisoners and set them free. This practice also applied to weapons. With Mauser ammunition increasingly difficult to come by, it became much easier to use captured British Lee-Enfields and to resupply ammunition from captured convoys, or by scouring the site of British camps, where loose rounds, which had fallen out of damaged bandoliers, could usually be found. In 1901 many Mausers were burned, simply because they were no longer useful.

Two officers of the 1st South Lancs, 1901. Uniforms became increasingly practical as the war progressed, and were almost devoid of unit or rank distinctions. The officer on the left wears his collar open; the other has a shirt and tie, and Stohwasser gaiters instead of puttees. (Keith Reeves Collection)

The British reacted harshly when they captured Boers in British uniforms, particularly after a handful of incidents when Boers had passed themselves off as British troops. In 1901 Kitchener ordered all Boers captured in British uniforms to be shot, and many were. Since the alternative was to live in rags, or home-made clothes of leather or animal-skin, many Boers preferred to defy the order, but stripped captured uniforms of British insignia, to avoid being charged as spies. Jan Smuts readily admitted that almost every piece of clothing or equipment worn and carried by his men on his raid into the Cape in September 1901 was British – including the horses.

As the guerrilla war progressed, Boer commandos became smaller, and initially more effective. They averaged perhaps 200 men, led by dynamic young commandants; the old and the half-hearted had gone home, and those who remained were committed and experienced in the techniques of hit-and-run warfare. However, by the end of 1901 the scorched-earth policy was beginning to take effect, and the 'bitter-enders' were suffering real hardship. Food, ammunition and clothing were hard to come by, and those killed and captured were difficult to replace. The last stages of the Boer War became a war of attrition which the Boers could not hope to win.

THE MYTH OF THE 'WHITE MAN'S WAR'

Both sides in the Anglo-Boer War were deeply imbued with the idea that their white skins and Christian beliefs made them superior to the indigenous African population among whom the war was waged. As such, both considered it improper to use black troops against one another, and perpetuated the myth that it was a 'White Man's War'. In fact, it was anything but, and neither side could have sustained itself without enormous support from the black population.

Most obviously, both sides made enormous use of African labour. Both also used Africans as scouts. Although both claimed such men were unarmed, this was clearly not the case, and this pretence dropped away as the war progressed. Baden-Powell was one of the first commanders to openly arm and organise African support, when the Tswana tribesmen, whose town was incorporated into the British perimeter at Mafikeng, were pressed into its defence. Later the British also used thousands of Africans to police the blockhouse lines. Both sides used Africans as messengers: Boer commandos frequently shot blacks carrying messages to the British, while the British sometimes shot Africans whom they suspected of being Boer spies. Indeed, Africans caught by either side in the service of the other could expect harsh treatment

Furthermore, the black civilian population as a whole suffered heavily, caught in the middle of a war which was not of their making. They were pressed into service whenever the combatants saw fit, and usually received only neglect or harsh treatment in return. Baden-Powell, for example, saw nothing wrong in reducing the rations of Mafikeng's black inhabitants and giving them instead to the whites, and driving out those he considered 'surplus' to his defence requirements. During the guerrilla war, both sides destroyed African homesteads if they might have sheltered the enemy. Thousands of black civilians were made homeless refugees. Many African servants of Boer families accompanied their employers into the concentration camps, and their death toll was, if anything, higher.

By the end of the war there were indications that some African groups were not prepared to tolerate this treatment, and there were violent outbreaks in the Zoutpansberg and in Zululand. On the most serious occasion, on 6 May 1902, the abaQulusi, a Zulu royal section living east of Vryheid, retaliated against a Boer commando which had been raiding Zulu homesteads for food for several days. Over 50 were killed.

Despite such incidents, the African population were undoubtedly the true losers of the war. They were excluded from the peace negotiations, and were the only group who emerged from the war without political or economic concession.

THE BITTER END

By the middle of 1901 the British had begun to mount co-ordinated 'drives', sweeping through the country, pushing the Boers towards the barrier of the blockhouse chains. These were still slow by Boer standards, but they gradually whittled down the surviving commando bands. Viljoen and Botha regularly harassed the Delegoa Bay railway in the eastern Transvaal, but when Botha attempted a strike into Zululand, in September 1901, it was easily checked. By the beginning of 1902 the Boers had clearly lost the war of attrition, and in May 1902 they met British representatives at Vereeniging, outside Pretoria, and finally agreed to surrender.

The Boer War had been immensely destructive. Some 8,000 British troops had died in action, and a further 13,000 from disease. Over 4,000 Boers had been killed, in addition to the civilian losses in the camps. The economy of South Africa had been devastated, and the war had cost Britain over £220 million. The legacy of bitterness it provoked affected the history of South Africa until recently. A hardening of Boer attitudes in the post-war years contributed to the philosophy of racial segregation and oppression which characterised the country until the 1990s. It is perhaps fitting that the war had outlasted Queen Victoria, who died in January 1901, for it was both the last of the old wars of Empire and the first of a new, more brutal, and recognisably 20th-century style of warfare.

GLOSSARY

Afrikaner – literally, white African; European settler of South Africa
agterryers – literally, after-riders, African servants who worked for the Boers
BaSotholand – the land of the Sotho adherents of Chief Moshoeshoe
Bechuanaland – the Transvaal's western neighbour
Boer – literally, farmer
commando – Boer armed militia
ghillies – attendants of Highland chiefs
kopje – koppie or small hill
laager– defensive wagon circle
uitlander – literally outsiders, the name the Boers gave to foreign prospectors
Ndebele – name given to groups from the coast who had settled in the interior

THE PLATES

A: EARLY BOERS, 1899

A1: Corporal, Transvaal Staatsartillerie, in typical service dress – undress jacket, hat with 'A' badge and civilian trousers.

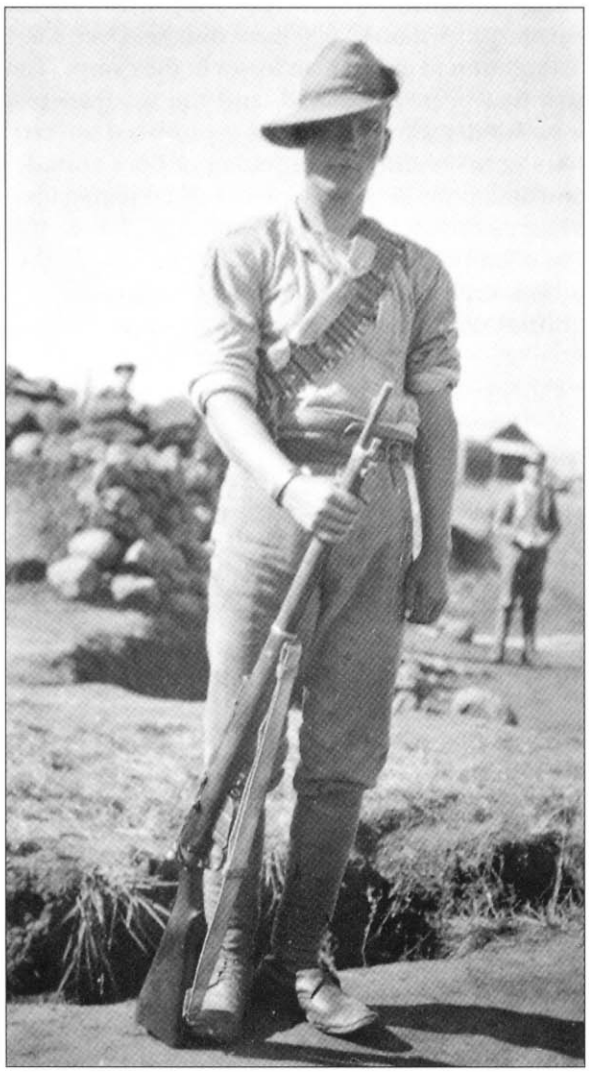
A2: Officer, Transvaal Staatsartillerie, in service dress with greatcoat.

A3: Burgher, wearing typical coloured puggree and cockade.

A4: Officer, foreign volunteers in typical sand-coloured Norfolk jacket, and Transvaal ribbons.

A5: Officer, foreign contingent, wearing automatic Mauser pistol. Many commandos carried flags early in the war: these were not carried into action, but usually marked the commandant's HQ. These are variations on the Transvaal Vierkleur.

A6: The Boer forces included a wide variety of social types, from 'townies' to frontier farmers. Note the different types of bandolier.



B: EARLY BOERS, 1899/1900

B1 and B2: Urban Boer and German volunteer doctor, 1899.

B3: Volunteer, 'Chicago Irish-American Corps', Blake's Irish Brigade. A corps of 58 republicans from Chicago joined Blake's Brigade – which itself numbered less than 200 men - as ambulance drivers. They wore a khaki uniform similar to that of the US Army, initially with a red cross armband.

B4: Gunner, Transvaal Staatsartillerie, in blue undress jacket. Many Staatsartillerie continued to wear their blue uniforms in the field: others wore the sand-coloured service dress, or abandoned uniform completely.

B5: African *agyterryer.* Both sides made extensive use of African labourers and scouts, whilst maintaining the myth of 'the white man's war'.

C: EARLY BRITISH, 1899/1900

C1: Private, King's Royal Rifle Corps. It was common to wear the haversacks between the shoulders, rather than on the hip. Rifle regiments had black Slade-Wallace equipment, rather than the buff of the line regiments. ORs helmets were usually white with a khaki canvas cover.

C2: Private, 5th Lancers. Cavalry regiments arriving from India wore shoulder chains: those from Britain generally did not.

C3: Infantry sergeant. A typical infantry NCO in the light khaki uniform of the early war, and buff Slade-Wallace equipment. As the war progressed, ostentatious gold chevrons were replaced with pale khaki versions. This man has two 'long-service and good conduct' stripes on his left cuff, together with a marksman's badge.

C4: Officer, Lancashire Fusiliers, in the typical campaign dress of the beginning of the war – Sam Browne belt, still with sword, and a large helmet flash. Officers' helmets were generally made with khaki cloth, with puggree, rather than with a cover.

D: BRITISH UNIFORMS, WESTERN THEATRE, 1899/1900

D1: Private, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Highland regiments were issued with khaki kilt-covers, although these were only effective from the front, when the men were lying down, the back of the kilt remained conspicuous.

D2: Officer, Highland Light Infantry. The HLI began the war with trews and cross-hilted Scottish swords: both were soon abandoned. The trews were replaced with khaki trousers. Wolseley helmets, as here, remained popular with officers, however.

D3: Private, Grenadier Guards. Photos of Guards regiments embarking for South Africa show them retaining coloured hackles on their helmets, although ORs may have abandoned them in action. They remained common among officers, however.

E: BRITISH TROOPS, 1900

E1: Trooper, Rimington's Scouts. Rimington's Scouts were one of the most successful of the locally raised mounted

The British infantryman late in the war; a private of the 1st South Lancs, 1901, in bandolier, slouch-hat and 'shirt-sleeve order'. (Keith Reeves)

infantry units. They were known as 'Rimington's Tigers', from the band of leopard-skin worn around their hats. (The Afrikaans word for leopard is *tier*.)

E2: Staff Officer. This is the typical uniform of General and Staff Officers: note the collar flash, leather Stöhwasser gaiters, and Wolseley pattern helmet.

E3: Private, Royal Canadian Regiment. The contribution of Colonial troops to the British war effort was enormous: the RCR were an infantry unit, distinguishable by their maple leaf helmet flash and bandolier equipment.

F: BOER AND BRITISH FORCES, 1900

F1 and F2: Boer burgher, wearing a waistcoat with pockets designed to hold Mauser clips; **and Z.A.R.P.** Like the Staatsartillerie, the Transvaal Police fought in a mixture of uniforms and civilian items.

F3: Officer, City Imperial Volunteers. This uniform was typical of officers of the CIVs and Yeomanry, although the sword - even with khaki hilt-cover - did not survive long in the field, and a few months campaigning led to a more dilapidated look!

F4: Troopers, Natal Carbineers. This uniform was common to most Colonial and British mounted units, with unit differences indicated by hat badges, puggrees or plumes. The combined bandolier and carbine bucket – the 'Royston' equipment – was unique to the Natal units, however.

G: LATE WAR DRESS, c.1901

G1: British infantry officer. Many officers abandoned Sam Brownes and carried rifles, to make them less distinguishable from their men. Slouch hats were increasingly common among all British arms. Compare this figure to figure C4.

G2: Boer 'bitter-ender'. This man has just liberated a British Lee-Enfield rifle; he is already wearing a British tunic (stripped of all insignia, to reduce the risk of being shot if captured), and British equipment.

G3: 'Bitter-ender'. By late in the guerrilla war, many commandos subsisted on what they could loot or capture from the British. This man has a British webbing bandolier: his clothes suggest the wear and tear of life in the open veld.

H: LATE BRITISH UNIFORMS, 1901/1902, WITH RICE BLOCKHOUSE.

H1: African scout. The British made extensive use of African scouts during the guerrilla war: most were armed, and many had a decidedly military appearance.

H2: Infantry private in typically practical dress, late in the war: shirt sleeves, wide brimmed hat, bandolier equipment and darker khaki trousers. Compare to figure C3.

H3: Private, 17th Lancers. Compare to figure C2. Lances and swords were withdrawn and replaced with Lee-Enfield rifles, and helmets gave way to slouch hats. The 17th retained their famous 'Death's Head' badge as a dark blue and white cockade.

H4: Regular mounted infantryman, in late-war khaki, with pale khaki chevrons, and bandolier equipment. Helmet flashes were either very small by this stage or abandoned altogether.

Generals Jan Smuts (centre) and Salomon Maritz (next to him, right) photographed during the raid on O'kiep in the Western Cape in April 1902. Smuts imposed military-style discipline on his men, and this is reflected in their smart appearance; at least two (right) are wearing captured British uniforms, while several have British Sam Browne belts. Note the different coloured puggrees, including the white puggree of the 'Cape rebel'. (Keith Reeves Collection)

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