
Battler of Onverwacht: 1899 – 1902

The Anglo-Boer War, commonly referred to as the Boer War, erupted in South Africa between the British and Dutch-Afrikaner settlers known as Boers on October 1899 and ending in 1902 (Australian War Memorial, n.d). Desiring freedom and independence away from British rule, the Boers began to settle on new lands north and east of South Africa (Australian War Memorial, n.d). These lands eventually became the Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Throughout the years, their relationship was fragile, and it became even more delicate with the discovery of gold and diamonds in the Boer republics. The British were determined to acquire such wealth in what they perceived as their territory (Australian War Memorial, n.d). Eventually, it resulted in a British raid, known as the Jameson Raid, in 1896 which the Boers perceived as an act of conquest (Australian Government, 2016). As war emerged, the Boers altered their approach and began utilizing guerrilla warfare tactics, in which the British responded by alerting its allies; New Zealand and of course Australia.

Presented with an opportunity to cement the Australian and British relationship, around 16,000 Australians **volunteered** to defend Britain immediately (HistoryNet, 2017). Majority of these volunteers were Queenslanders, including countrymen who easily adapted to the barbaric guerilla warfare of the Boers (Australian Government, 2016). By late 1899 the first Australian troops, along with their horses, travelled to Transvaal, South Africa (Nelson, 2002). As the war dragged on, thousands more Australians joined the fight in what was “often a bloody guerilla warfare” (Australian Government, 2016). Australians at home generally supported the war but quickly became disenchanted once news spread of the numbers of civilian casualties. It soon became known as Australia’s “third-worst conflict in terms of casualties” (Australian Government, 2016). Australian soldiers received high praise due to their adaptability of the harsh fighting conditions, building themselves a reputation of “bravery, toughness and cool-headedness”(Australian Government, 2016). This ultimately became their warrior image and their legacy during the World Wars as well as the many years to follow.

Furthermore, Australians were highly crucial in the Boer War, specifically the 5th Queensland Imperial Bushmen who engaged in battle on the farm Onverwacht in the Bankkop range of hills, 30 kilometers east of Ermelo in 1902 (Smith, 2004). Under the command of Major Frederick Toll and Major Vallentin, the Battle of Onverwacht was the final collision British had with the Boers (National Boer War Memorial Association Inc, 2010). At first, the British and the Queensland Imperial Bushmen suffered a major loss when the Boers unexpectedly crushed one of their mounted columns meant to entrap them at the column along Swaziland (Smith, 2004). However, they responded by striking back with forces which sent the Boers scattered on the Vaal River and further north. Against all odds, the Queensland Imperial Bushmen with the assistance from Hampshire Regiment and the Victorian Mounted Rifles fought and defeated an enemy 3 times the size of their armies. Despite their victory, it became bittersweet as four graves were dug; eleven men of the Queensland Imperial Bushmen were buried together, the second held seven from the Hampshire Regiment, five Boers in the third, and Major Vallentin in the fourth (Smith, 2004). In times of difficult circumstances and extreme adversity, these men took a stand and proudly our Queensland soldiers stood beside them.

The key word throughout my speech is “volunteered”, because these men were not conscripted nor forced to engage in battle, but rather fought on their own free will. The Boer War was their choice, an opportunity they saw to define Australia’s identity, and strengthen relationships that would benefit Australia and its people in the future. Today, we commemorate our fallen soldiers, our heroes. Thanks to them we are not defined by our social status nor our wealth, but rather by our character and the contents of our hearts.

One hundred and fifteen years later, and we tell their stories again to; 1. Remind ourselves what it means to be Australian, 2. To understand the past and 3 to never let their sacrifices on the battlefield drift into the abyss. One hundred and fifteen years to them and their legacy.