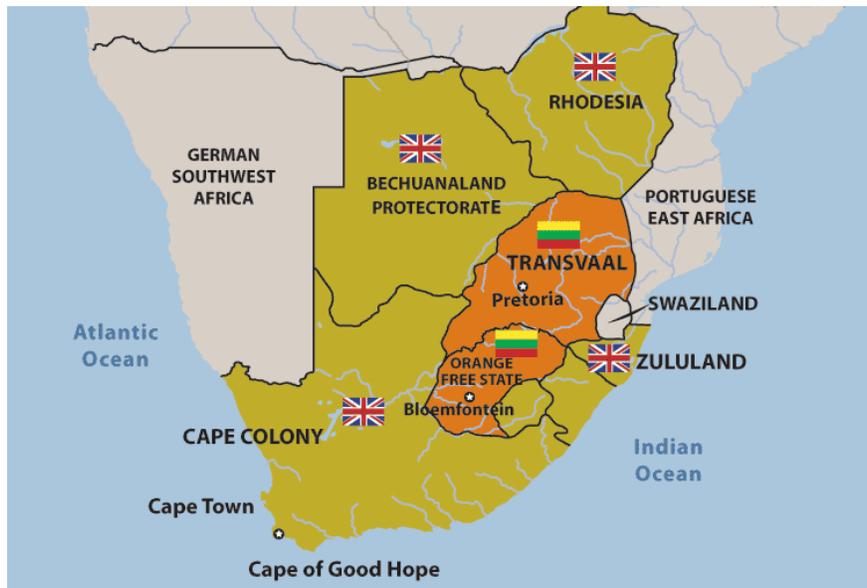


CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR

Researched and Written by: Capt (N) (Ret'd) M. Braham
Edited by: Trevor Clayton

Introduction: This paper will provide an overview of the Second Boer War – its causes, timeline, and consequences, with particular emphasis on the Canadian participation.

The Second Boer War was fought from October 11, 1899 until May 31, 1902 between the British Empire and the Dutch-speaking Boer inhabitants of the two independent Boer republics: the South African Republic (Transvaal Republic) and the Orange Free State. It ended with the Empire's annexation of the region, ultimately forming the Union of South Africa as part of the Commonwealth. The conflict is commonly referred to as The Second Boer War but is also known as the South African War. Together with the earlier First Boer War (December 1880 to March 1881), in which Canada had no part, this period is known as the Boer Wars.¹



Source: http://www.civilization.ca/cwm/exhibitions/boer/boerwarmap-lrg_e.shtml

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Boer_War

CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR

Origins of the War: The origins of the war were complex, resulting from over a century of conflict between the Boers and the British Empire. During the Napoleonic Wars, a British expedition landed in the Cape Colony and defeated the defending Dutch forces at the Battle of Blaauwberg. After the wars, the British formally acquired the colony, and encouraged immigration by British settlers. Over subsequent decades, many Boers who were dissatisfied with aspects of the British administration elected to migrate away from British rule in what became known as the Great Trek. The migration initially was along the eastern coast towards Natal, yet after Natal was annexed in 1843 it continued north towards the interior where two independent Boer republics (the Orange Free State, and the South African Republic - also called the Transvaal) were established. The British recognised the two Boer Republics in 1852 and 1854, but the annexation of the Transvaal by Britain in 1877 led to the First Boer War. After British defeats, most heavily at the Battle of Majuba, Transvaal independence was restored subject to certain conditions, but relations were uneasy.

In 1871, diamonds were discovered at Kimberley, prompting a diamond rush and a massive influx of foreigners to the borders of the Orange Free State. When gold was discovered soon after in the South African Republic in 1886, fresh waves of *uitlanders* (foreigners), mainly from Britain, came to the Boer region in search of employment and fortune. Gold made the Transvaal the richest and potentially the most powerful nation in southern Africa, but it also resulted in the number of *uitlanders* in Transvaal eventually exceeding the number of Boers. British expansionism (led notably by Cecil Rhodes), as well as disputes over *uitlander* political and economic rights resulted in the failed Jameson Raid of 1895. This raid led by (and named after) Dr Leander Starr Jameson, the Administrator in Southern Rhodesia of the Chartered Company, was intended to encourage an uprising of the *uitlanders* in Johannesburg; however Transvaal government forces surrounded the column and captured Jameson's men before they could reach Johannesburg. The raid was a turning point that ended hope for a negotiated solution.²

As tensions escalated from the local to national level, there were political manoeuvrings and lengthy negotiations to reach a compromise ostensibly to

² W.S. Churchill, *The History of the English Speaking Peoples, Vol 4*, Dodd, Mead & Co, 1958, p.375

CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR

deal with the issue of "*uitlander* rights" but truthfully over control of the gold mining industry and the British desire to incorporate the Transvaal and the Orange Free State into a federation under British control. Given the number of British *uitlanders* already resident in the Transvaal and the ongoing inflow, the Boers recognised that the franchise policy demanded by the British would inevitably result in the loss of independence of the South African Republic. Negotiations failed, and in September 1899 the British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain sent an ultimatum to the Boers, demanding full equality for those *uitlanders* resident in the Transvaal. President Kruger, seeing no other option than war, issued his own ultimatum, giving the British 48 hours to withdraw their troops from the border of the Transvaal, failing which the Transvaal, allied with the Orange Free State, would declare war against the British. The rejection of the ultimatum followed and war was declared.

The Second Boer War: The war had three distinct phases. First, the numerically and tactically superior Boers mounted pre-emptive strikes into British-held territory in Natal and the Cape Colony, besieging the British garrisons of Ladysmith, Mafeking and Kimberley. The Boers then won a series of victories at Colenso, Magersfontein and Spionkop against a failed British counteroffensive to relieve the three sieges.

Second, after the introduction of greatly increased British troop numbers under the command of Lord Roberts³, another (this time successful) British offensive was launched in 1900 to relieve the sieges. After Natal and the Cape Colony were secure, the British were able to invade the Transvaal and capture its capital, Pretoria, in June 1900.



Lord Kitchener

Finally, in March 1900, the Boers engaged in a protracted hard-fought guerrilla war against the British forces, which began the third phase of the war. It lasted a further two years, during which the Boers raided targets such as British troop columns, telegraph sites, railways and storage depots.

³ Field Marshal Montgomery credits much of Roberts' success to his chief of staff, General Kitchener, a first-class organiser; and, to a brilliant railway engineer, Colonel Girouard (a Canadian).

CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR

In an effort to cut off supplies to the raiders, the British, now under the leadership of Lord Kitchener, responded with a scorched earth policy of destroying Boer farms and moving civilians into concentration camps.

The British expected the campaign to be over within months, and gradually the protracted war became less popular, especially after revelations about the conditions in the camps. The Boer forces finally surrendered on Saturday May 31, 1902, with 54 of the 60 delegates from the Transvaal and Orange Free State voting to accept the terms of the peace treaty known as the Treaty of Vereeniging. The two republics were absorbed into the British Empire, with the promise of limited self-government in the future. This came about shortly, and led to the establishment of the Union of South Africa.

Canadian Participation: In a climate of Imperial enthusiasm fostered by the impending Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, a Colonial Conference in 1897 tabled plans for an Imperial military alliance. This was strongly rejected by Canadian Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier who viewed such a proposal as a threat to Canadian autonomy. As a result, the Conference was able to agree only on a policy of closer co-operation between the War Office and the defence departments of the self-governing colonies.⁴

This question came to a head two years later when the Second Boer War broke out. Initially, Prime Minister Laurier remained reluctant to commit Canadian assistance unless it was seen as necessary for Canada's defence.

Despite Laurier's reluctance and an unwillingness on the part of Quebecers to participate in Imperial ventures, there was a growing demand from English Canadians for Canada to demonstrate solidarity with Britain by sending troops to South Africa. Both the Governor General, Lord Minto, and the General Officer Commanding the Militia, General Hutton, joined the clamour supporting Canadian involvement.

⁴ George F. Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers*, The MacMillan Company, 1960, p.278

CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR

After contentious debate in the House of Commons, the Government agreed, on October 13, 1899 to, "...equip a certain number of volunteers, not to exceed 1,000 men, and to provide for their transportation to South Africa."⁵

The Canadian Contribution: Men were enlisted for six months with a provision for extension to one year. They were volunteers from militia units and were formed into an autonomous Canadian unit designated the 2nd (Special Service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, under the command of LCol W.D. Otter, a Permanent Force officer. This largely untrained force sailed from Quebec on October 30, 1899.

Having taken this first step, Canada offered a second contingent that consisted of two battalions of Mounted Rifles (one was subsequently renamed the Royal Canadian Dragoons) commanded by LCol F.L. Lessard and L.W. Herchmer respectively. Each battalion had an establishment of 371 all ranks and was supported by a brigade of field artillery with a strength of 539 all ranks under the command of LCol C.W. Drury.

Unlike the first contingent, the second was comprised primarily of trained soldiers from the permanent Cavalry School and from the North West Mounted Police.

In addition to these government-sponsored contingents, further Canadian sources contributed. Lord Strathcona raised at his own expense a 537-man unit of mounted rifles that became known as the Lord Strathcona's Horse.

Twelve squadrons of the South African Constabulary were also enlisted in Canada for three year's service in South Africa.

As the war dragged on, a Canadian offer to provide troops at British expense was gratefully accepted. These included a regiment of mounted rifles (the 2nd C.M.R), a Field Hospital Company, and twelve nursing sisters of the recently formed Canadian Nursing Service. Subsequently, another contingent of 2,000 men organised into four regiments of mounted rifles (the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th C.M.R.) was raised and sent to South Africa but did not arrive in Cape Town until after the conclusion of hostilities.

⁵ Ibid, p.279

CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR

Canadian Operations: The first contingent under LCol Otter arrived in Cape Town on Nov. 29, 1899 and spent the next two months undergoing training toward a reasonable state of combat readiness.



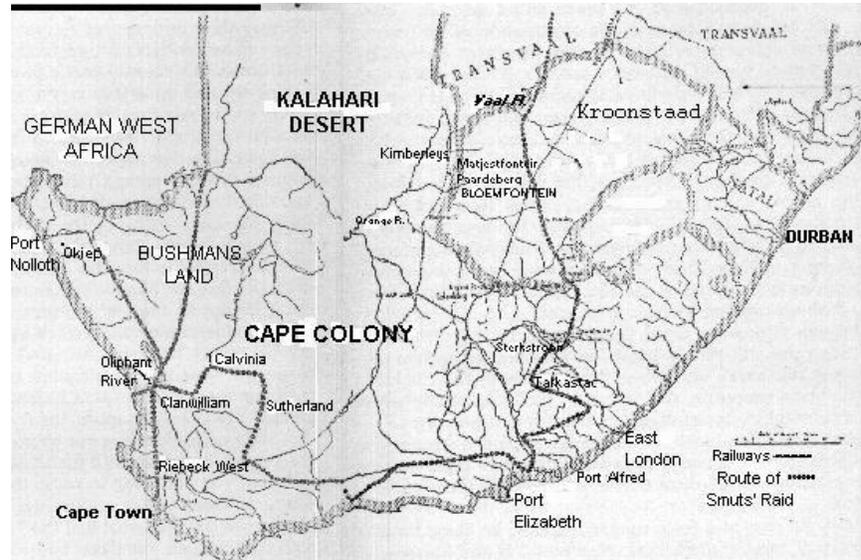
On Feb. 12, 1900, the battalion was attached to the British 19th Brigade, commanded by MGen Horace Smith-Dorrien, in whose army the 1st Canadian Division was to fight at Ypres in 1915. The Brigade fought a ten day battle at Paardeberg against a tough Boer resistance led by **LCol William Otter** Piet Cronje. The Canadians acquitted themselves well in the first overseas engagement ever fought by Canadian troops as an autonomous national unit. They suffered 130 casualties, including 34 who were killed or who died of their wounds.

Following Paardeberg, the Royal Canadian Regiment participated in the capture of Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State, as well as a number of other minor brushes with the enemy. During one of the latter, LCol Otter was wounded and was replaced by LCol L. Buchan.

In June, the RCR joined the march past Lord Roberts in Pretoria after the fall of the capital city of the Transvaal.

Despite the fall of the two capitals, the war did not end and the Boers conducted a hit-and-run guerilla campaign in which the RCR continued to demonstrate its prowess. In September 1900, after fulfilling the terms of their engagement, the RCR embarked for England where it was received by Queen Victoria. The soldiers then returned to Halifax on December 23, 1900 and on the 31st the Regiment was demobilized.

CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR



Meanwhile, the second contingent was in action. The two Mounted Rifle battalions had taken part in Robert's advance to Pretoria and in operations in the Eastern Transvaal. The 2nd C.M.R. was employed in southwest Transvaal; Lord Strathcona's Horse joined the Natal Field Force under Sir Redvers Buller and engaged the enemy in the southern and eastern districts.

Throughout these campaigns Canadians distinguished themselves for their horsemanship, daring and initiative. Four received the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest military honour, for their service in South Africa. Of the four, three were earned at Leliefontein, where a handful of dismounted Royal Canadian Dragoons and "D" Battery, Royal Canadian Artillery held off an attack by 200 mounted Boers. The three were: Lt. H.Z.C. Cockburn, Lt. R.E.W. Turner, and Sgt. E.J. Holland. The fourth medal was won by Sgt A.H.L Richardson of Lord Strathcona's Horse, who rescued a wounded member of his troop while under heavy enemy fire.

CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR



Canadians in the Field – Source: CWM

Despite the achievements of the Canadians in the field, the administrative support of the troops was wanting. No reinforcement system was implemented, and units were severely reduced in strength by battle casualties and disease without any prospect of replacements. In addition there were a number of equipment deficiencies – the canvas duck uniform proved uncomfortable and chafed the skin; the greatcoat lacked pockets; and the heavy western saddle, while comfortable to the ride, proved too heavy for tired horses.⁶

Conclusion: The dispatch of troops to South Africa opened a flood of protest from Quebec and Henri Bourassa charged the government with jeopardising national autonomy. This in turn prompted howls of imperialistic indignation from English Canada, which accused Quebec for failing to back the common undertaking.

Despite the concerns about the loss of autonomy, these fears were proven unfounded by the Canadian “independence” during the impending Great War. Canadian participation in the Second Boer War proved to be a first step

⁶ Ibid, p.287

CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR

toward independence, self-respect and the recognition of Canadian nationality by the world at large.⁷

Of the 8,300 Canadians who served in South Africa, 267 were killed and are listed in the Books of Remembrance. The Canadian government claimed at the time that this overseas expedition was not a precedent, but history would prove otherwise. The new century would see Canadians serve in two world wars, the Korean War, and dozens of peacekeeping missions.⁸

As a result of Canadian participation in the Boer War, the first significant change in the organization of the militia took place in 1904 with the passage of another *Militia Act*. Sir Frederick Borden, the Minister of the Militia, legislated more funding and more training for the Canadian militia. By this time, Borden had already established a Medical Corps, an Army Service Corps, a Corps of Engineers, and an Ordnance Corps. His long-term goal was to create a Canadian citizen army with greater autonomy from Britain in military matters. Canada would co-operate with the mother country in times of war, but its forces would not be integrated within the imperial military.

These goals and reforms provided a solid framework for mobilisation, but did not give Canada a well-trained military by the time of the First World War.⁹ Despite the lessons learned in South Africa, Canadian soldiers were not fully prepared for the horrors of warfare on the Western Front in 1914-18. As one veteran of both conflicts noted, "*The Boer War was a picnic to this.*"¹⁰

⁷ Ibid. 289

⁸ http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/boer/boerwarhistory_e.shtml

⁹ <http://www.lermuseum.org/ler/mh/boerwar/index.html>

¹⁰ Lawrence James, *The Savage Wars*, St Martins Press, 1985, p.208.

CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR



Boer War Monument, Quebec City

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CANADA AND THE SECOND BOER WAR

Captain (N) (Ret'd) M. Braham, CD



Mike Braham is a graduate of the Royal Military College (1965) and a former naval officer and senior official with DND. He has an abiding interest in military history.