

THE BOER WAR: ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE

INTRODUCTION

**Lieutenant-General Frank Hickling
Chief of Army**

Given that 1999 marks the centenary of the beginning of the conflict, the Boer War was an obvious topic for this year's conference. But there are a number of other reasons for holding a conference on that war in this year: The war coincided with the move to federation in the Australian colonies. It saw the first use of Commonwealth troops in military operations. In the wider context of Empire, the war had an impact on the way Britain and the dominions interacted. The Empire's foreign and domestic policies, especially Imperial defence policy, reflected the consequences of the South African experience throughout the critical years that preceded the First World War. All of these weighty political issues would be appropriate conference topics in their own right.

But there is another reason to revisit a war that occurred 100 years ago. I mentioned that the Boer War was the first conflict involving the newly formed Australian Army. It was during the course of the war that the Army was formed; and we now celebrate the Army's birthday on March 1st each year, beginning in 1901.

Who could have imagined that the first operations of this new army would so closely resemble the operations being conducted by it as it nears its centenary? The patrols mounted through largely depopulated areas of the South African veldt, with only brief or fleeting encounters with an armed and dangerous enemy to heighten the tension, bear some similarities to the patrols being conducted right now along the East Timor border. Perhaps we will discover some useful insights for our forces with INTERFET as we re-examine the operations of our troops in their first war.

The war that broke out in South Africa 100 years ago between the British Empire and the Boer Republics was to have ramifications far beyond the expectations of those who precipitated it. There is no deep insight in this observation as it is true for all wars. War is, after all, the final resort of a failure in the political process. Regrettably, when a military solution is tried, the situation has usually deteriorated to the point where both sides have lost control. Without control, a favourable outcome cannot be guaranteed. So it was for both protagonists in this conflict.

Yet the Boer War seems to have escaped the detailed academic analysis that usually followed other wars this century; and therefore we have not had a chance to study the full consequences of resorting to a military solution. It is true that the events in Europe 14 years later overshadowed or obscured the political and military significance of this, the largest of Britain's colonial wars. But to understand much that happened in Europe in the lead up to 1914, especially in Britain and in the British Army, it is necessary to look back to the South African campaign. Obviously, the war had serious and unpleasant consequences for the Boer Republics as well, but the detail of its impact on both sides has not been fully established and is not well understood.

The British Empire did not emerge from the war unchanged. The ineptitude and incompetence that characterised the conduct of the war, especially the early phases, undermined public confidence in the Army and the Government. The shortcomings of an army designed for one specific purpose, policing an Empire, were painfully exposed by the unexpected intensity of modern conflict. Perhaps there is a lesson here for governments and strategists today.

The British Government was forced to adopt radical measures to overcome its military shortcomings in prosecuting the war. Such measures were not without cost, however, and the dilemma for the British was that as the new strategy began to succeed militarily, the damage to Britain's international standing increased considerably. The dilemma was how to conduct successful military operations against an enemy engaged in unconventional warfare without breaching the rules of war. It could be argued that this has been the dilemma that many armies have had to face this century; as we are witnessing in Chechnya today. This is not a trend that is likely to disappear with the new millennium.

The Boer War changed the relationship between the various elements making up the Empire. The Colonial Office had less relevance to colonial and Dominion governments whose citizens had participated in the war under their own identities. The conduct and outcome of the war affected the very perception of Empire, and of the role of the British Government in the Imperial system. The British proposal for a system of Imperial defence experienced a very lukewarm reception in Dominion Houses of Parliament. Agitation for more Dominion control over defence assets grew: the ongoing argument over the control of the ships of the Australia station is but one example.

In some ways, the impact of the Boer War on inter-empire relationships was a harbinger of the dramatic impact of the First World War, and it signalled the end, in Britain's former colonies, of blind faith in the efficacy of the whole concept of Imperial defence.

For Australians, the Boer War appears to have been, at least initially, something of a distraction from a number of domestic political and economic issues. The significance of the Boer War in Australian history is probably enhanced by its coincidence with the moves to federation. Although defence issues were raised in the federation debate, they received only relatively minor coverage. The war itself does not appear to have featured in the arguments—although I recognise that Craig Wilcox's research may disprove this assertion.

However, it is the way both the population and the colonial authorities responded to the outbreak of the war and to the British request for assistance that, to me, provides a link with the federation issue. In many ways, the response to the war was as complex and diverse as the range of reactions to the federation idea.

During this conference, you will hear details of the wide range of domestic responses to the outbreak of the war. There was not the outpouring of Imperial patriotism that seemed to characterise the reaction to the outbreak of the First World War. Even the colonial governments were cautious in their initial responses. Many other citizens, especially those with deeply held suspicions of the British Empire, were opposed to participating in a war against other colonists.

These negative responses were balanced by a rising popular sentiment that would not tolerate any perceived affront to the Empire or its status as the pre-eminent political structure in the world. It may have been this domestic support for the Empire that prompted the colonial military authorities to offer troops for service in the war even before its formal outbreak.

The offer was for a combined contingent of 2000, comprising men from all the colonies to be sent as a single force. This proposal was a major departure from previous colonial offerings, in that it represented a national contingent that was intended to retain its national identity; an issue that continued to bedevil relations between British and Australian commanders for another half century.

The Imperial authorities rejected this offer as they wished to use colonial forces to reinforce British units. There was an impasse until the pressures of the campaign, especially early British setbacks, prompted the colonial political authorities to make individual offers of support. The concept of a national force would have to await the advent of federation but this attempt to raise and dispatch a national force two years before federation, is still a significant event; and it is one that presaged Australia's approach to providing forces for both World Wars.

If that first faltering example of independent Australian action is insufficient evidence to prove the importance of the war in Australia's political and military history, the formation and dispatch of the Australian Commonwealth Horse in the last year of the war is irrefutable justification. The military record of this first Commonwealth unit was unspectacular; but its real significance was less its achievement than the political milestone its creation and use represented. The new nation had formed its first national institution and used it to achieve a national objective. Our representation and leadership of INTERFET in East Timor is but the latest example of the use of the Australian Defence Force in the pursuit of national political objectives.

This linkage between the new Commonwealth Government and the newly formed Australian Army is a theme that Army intends to reinforce as the centenary approaches. The popular image of the Army is of an organisation that appears when the world goes to war and disappears when peace is restored. That myth is not only fanciful but far too often in the past has led to the deployment of poorly trained forces. We have paid for that folly in blood!

An army is only as good as its training, its equipment and its leadership. The early results of the British Army in the Boer War illustrate that truism perfectly; and, by contrast, the work of our people in East Timor illuminates the obverse of that coin. We must lay to rest forever the notion that some magic solution, or 'silver bullet', exists that will somehow obviate the need for the hard, costly work of equipping, training and leading troops in war.

In contemporary military circles, it is common to encounter the belief that the revolution in military affairs is a late twentieth century phenomenon. However, even a cursory examination of most periods of military history would reveal changes that were radical departures from the usual conduct of warfare in that time. This, to me, suggests that military affairs are in a state of constant revolution.

The case can surely be made that in the Second Boer War the British Army was forced to change many of its cherished practices and procedures in order to secure the defeat of a militarily insignificant enemy. New tactics and the use of new technologies had a direct impact on the course of the war and clearly warned those in the military profession that things had changed. Whether any army, including the British, learned from this experience is a question I hope will be answered in part by the papers at this conference.