

THE BOER WAR: ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE

THE INFLUENCE OF THE BOER WAR ON AUSTRALIAN COMMANDERS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR DM Horner

The great nineteenth century Prussian general, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, 'The Elder', once declared that no operations plan survives contact with the enemy. But no one has suggested—least of all Moltke—that an army or a commander contemplating a military operation should have no plan. The same can be said about previous experience of war. A new war is likely to have such a different shape and character from the previous one that previous experience might be found to be of no value, or indeed, even misleading. Army commanders are often accused of preparing for the past war rather than the future one. But no one has suggested that previous wartime experience is not valuable in an army about to embark on a new war.

The Nature of the Australian Army

Despite this note of caution, there are a number of reasons why it might be worthwhile examining the influence of the Boer War on Australian commanders in the First World War. The first of these concerns the citizen nature of the Australian Army. The Australian Army, known then as the Commonwealth Military Forces, came into existence in March 1901 following Federation two months earlier. It was formed out of the forces of each colony and, like those forces, consisted primarily of part-time soldiers. This approach to defence was confirmed in the Defence Act 1903, which stipulated that Australia would have no permanent army and that the part-time militia forces that formed the bulk of the army could not serve outside of Australia. The only full-time soldiers would be the gunners manning the forts at the capital cities and major ports, the engineering and technical staff who looked after the forts, and a small cadre of training staff for the militia. The largest formations in the militia were the brigades located in each state, and the brigade and battalion commanders were almost always militia officers. As a result of this policy, on the outbreak of the First World War Australia had to raise a special force for service overseas—the Australian Imperial Force, or AIF—and the officers of this force were mainly drawn from the militia.

By contrast with Australia, Britain had a large regular army whose officers had had many years of operational service and extensive peacetime training. British officers had served not only in the Boer War but also elsewhere in Africa, such as West Africa and the Sudan. Almost all the British officers serving in India had had some form of operational experience, generally on the North-West Frontier. The officers of the AIF were very inexperienced and it is therefore reasonable to ask to what extent this inexperience was alleviated by the service of some of them in the Boer War.

It is curious that the Australian official historian of the First World War, Charles Bean, generally disregarded the influence of the Boer War on the 1st AIF. His references to the Boer War relate primarily to its demonstration of aspects of the Australian character, rather than to its contribution to the development of military expertise. In *Anzac to Amiens*, for example, Bean wrote:

It is true that Australians had served in the Sudan and South Africa—and these were impelled by some of the same motives that were to stir them in 1914, excitement in adventure, determination to stand by the old country in crisis. But despite the very stout showing at Eland's River and elsewhere, those really serious tests were regarded by Australians, and by such as the outside world as were interested, as something of a picnic.¹

Bean might have down played the influence of the Boer War for several reasons. Only 16,000 Australians served in the Boer War as against over 330,000 in the First World War. Furthermore, as the First World War saw the development of military techniques far beyond those employed in South Africa, at first glance, there seemed little that could have been learned in South Africa that could apply in the First World War. One suspects also that Bean did not look at the military value of the Boer War experience because it did not fit with his image of the Australian soldier of the First World War. If the Boer War experience was found to be valuable, then it implied that soldiering was a demanding technical profession that needed as much experience and training as possible. This notion was at variance with the view that citizen soldiers—called from sheep station and country store—could match it in battle with the more professional armies of Europe. Bill Gammage has argued that two opposite lessons were drawn from the Boer War depending on the prior beliefs of those who drew them: 'Those who thought natural ability sufficient to make a good defence force provided for a voluntary defence system in the First Commonwealth Defence Acts ... [while] Advocates of training began urging the expansion of Australia's defence forces'.²

Australian Nationalism

The second reason for examining the influence of the Boer War relates to the development of an appreciation of Australia as a separate nation. Australian soldiers might have gone to South Africa as part of separate colonial forces, but when they arrived they discovered that they had much in common with each other. Furthermore, the British higher command encouraged this approach. For example, when infantry units from Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania arrived at Cape Town on 26 November 1899, the local British commander formed them into a single unit known as the Australian Regiment.³ They were later joined by a New South Wales contingent. The commander of the Australian Regiment was Colonel JC Hoad, a Victorian permanent soldier, who later became Chief of the General Staff and an advocate of a nationalist approach to Australian defence. It is true that there was much bickering between the state components of this force, particularly between Hoad and the commander of the New South Welshmen, Captain JG Legge, and the Australian Regiment was eventually broken up. But the seeds for the formation of later national forces were planted. A history of the regiment, published before Federation, was called *Australians in War*.⁴

The achievement of 300 Australian Bushmen from four colonies at the defence of Elands River in August 1900 emphasised the value of the Australians fighting together. Later a major serving with the Victorian Bushmen wrote to the Defence Minister in that state that the Boer General De Wet was their 'main trouble, but if the Colonial Troops were put together we would soon have him'.⁵

After Federation the new Commonwealth of Australia sent eight battalions of Commonwealth forces to South Africa. They were known as the Australian Commonwealth Horse. All but two of the battalions arrived too late to see any action.

If the Boer War encouraged many members of the colonial forces to think of themselves as Australians they were also forced to confront their relationship with Britain. On the one hand it was stirring and satisfying to become part of the Imperial Army. The colonial forces became an integral part of the Imperial Army while many special service officers filled staff positions in that army. On the other hand at times there was irritation at their treatment by the British. After the shameful episode at Wilmansrust, the Melbourne *Punch* attributed much of the blame to British officers who were 'no more fit to handle a body of irregulars than a mule is fit to command eagles'.⁶

Several officers who served in the Boer War shaped views among both regular and militia officers in Australia during the following decade. A key officer was Major-General Sir Edward Hutton, General Officer Commanding the Commonwealth Military Forces from 1902 to 1904. A British regular officer, Hutton, considered himself to be something of an expert on colonial forces, having been commandant of the New South Wales forces and commander of the Canadian Militia in the 1890s. In South Africa he commanded a brigade of mounted riflemen

which included Australian, New Zealand, Canadian and British units. He became an enthusiast for colonial citizen soldiers, and in Australia worked to prepare an army that could be sent overseas in support of the Empire.⁷ His proteges were William Bridges, Harry Chauvel and Brudenell White, described by some historians as the 'Imperialists'. The Imperialists were seen to be in competition with the 'Australianists', led by Major-General Hoad and Lieutenant-Colonel Legge, both of whom (as noted earlier) had served in the Australian Regiment. They favoured the formation of an Australian Army that could be used only in the defence of Australia. Ironically, Hoad and Legge were antipathetic towards each other. Many of the policies of the Imperialists and the Australianists could exist together, and during the First World War Imperialists like White and Chauvel displayed some of the strongly nationalist attitudes usually associated with the Australianists. While Hutton and Hoad had probably formed their views about these issues before the Boer War, the war undoubtedly influenced their thinking about them.

The issue of the relationship between Australian forces operating within a larger British or Imperial force was important in the First World War and even more important in the Second World War. Indeed the problems of managing a coalition of forces with disparate sizes and influence are still with us today in East Timor, only in this case Australia is the larger force. It is, therefore, worthwhile to attempt to discern the extent to which the Boer War experience influenced the attitudes of Australian commanders to coalition warfare in the First World War.

The Extent of Boer War Experience

The First World War began only 13 years after the end of the Boer War and, in general terms, anybody who served in the Boer War would have been at least in his mid 30s in the First World War. This meant that most of the AIF's brigadiers could have served in the Boer War. There were, of course, exceptions: Brigadier-General Henry Gordon Bennett, who commanded the 3rd Infantry Brigade from December 1916 to the end of the war, was born in April 1887 and was therefore too young to have served in South Africa.

There is no evidence that the first senior command appointments of the AIF were made on the basis of Boer War experience. The commander of the AIF, Major-General William Bridges, had served in the Boer War but was, in any case, the logical choice for the command. A permanent officer, he had attended gunnery courses in the United Kingdom, had been the first Chief of the General Staff, had served at the War Office in London, had been the first commandant of Australia's Royal Military College, and at the outbreak of war was the Army's Inspector-General. But only two of the first five brigadier-level commanders to be appointed had Boer War service.

It has been suggested that the shape of the AIF was determined partly by Bridges' Boer War experience. At the outbreak of the Boer War the British Government had requested the colonies to send units of 125 men that could then be fitted into larger British units. As a result few Australian officers received command experience at regimental level. As noted earlier, Hoad commanded the Australian Regiment for some months before it was disbanded. The colonies deployed regiment-sized force; colonial officers commanded these but did not command at higher levels. (The colonies deployed seven contingents with strengths of more than 500 men.⁸) The commanders of the Australian Commonwealth Horse battalions received little active service experience, as most battalions did not see action.

At the outbreak of the First World War the Australian Government offered a contingent of 20,000 men for service overseas. The British Government accepted but suggested that the contingent consist of two infantry brigades, one of light horse and a field artillery brigade (regiment). This force could easily be fragmented and distributed among larger British formations as had happened to the Australian colonial contingents in South Africa. According to Bridges' biographer, Bridges was resolved not to allow this to occur again.⁹ On Bridges' recommendation, the Australian Government proposed sending a complete division, three brigades of artillery and a light horse brigade. As Charles Bean put it: The stand thus taken by the far-sighted sardonic soldier-statesman was the first and greatest step towards settling the character ... of a national Australian army ... In the stand which he had made General Bridges was actuated by pure Australian nationalism'.¹⁰

Within six months of the beginning of the war the AIF had been deployed to Egypt and had been expanded to four infantry brigades, three light horse brigades and a divisional artillery. Of these eight brigadier-level commands, officers with Boer War experience held only three. These were Sinclair-MacLagan, Chauvel and Rynie. Sinclair-MacLagan was a British regular officer on loan to Australia and had served as an infantryman in the advance from Natal into Transvaal. He commanded the AIF's 3rd Infantry Brigade. Chauvel was an Australian regular officer with extensive mounted rifle experience in the Boer War; he commanded the 1st Light Horse Brigade. Rynie was a militia officer also with considerable mounted rifle experience in the Boer War; he commanded the 2nd Light Horse Brigade. The other commanders, without Boer War experience, were all militiamen: McLaurin (1st Brigade), McCay (2nd Brigade), Monash (4th Brigade), Hughes (3rd Light Horse Brigade), and Hobbs (artillery).

Boer War veterans were well represented, however, in the senior staff appointments of the 1st Australian Division. The two senior staff officers, Lieutenant-Colonel Brudenell White and Colonel Victor Sellheim, had Boer War experience, but were probably selected because of their senior positions at Army Headquarters. Nonetheless, of the 15 officers on the 1st Division Headquarters (not counting the ADCs and those of lieutenant rank), 12 had served in the Boer War. The heads of the supporting units—the artillery, engineers, signallers and divisional train—were all Boer War veterans (although not in their specialty) except for the commander of the artillery.

By the end of the First World War the AIF had expanded to five infantry divisions, and Australians also formed a large part of two light horse divisions. During the war the Australians were commanded directly by a total of 20 officers of major-general rank or higher. Six of these officers were regular British imperial officers. Birdwood commanded the Anzac Corps, the 1st Anzac Corps and the Australian Corps, and had administrative command of the whole AIF. Godley commanded the New Zealand and Australian Division and the 2nd Anzac Corps. Walker commanded the 1st Australian Division, Smyth, the 2nd, HV Cox, the 4th, and Hodgson, the Imperial (later the Australian) Mounted Division. Four of these six officers had served in the Boer War and Cox had other active service. Another officer, Chaytor, who commanded the Anzac Mounted Division, was a New Zealander; he had served in the Boer War.

That leaves 13 Australian officers who reached the rank of major-general during the war. Of these, nine served in the Boer War. Also, of the 13 generals, six were regulars (or at least could be counted as regulars), all of whom had served in the Boer War.¹¹ Thus almost 70 per cent of the Australian generals had fought in the Boer War.

It is a different story with the brigadiers. A total of 76 brigadiers commanded or served with the Australians.¹² Of these, 15 were British or Imperial officers, one was a New Zealander and another was a South African. But of the 15 listed as Imperial officers, four (Sinclair-MacLagan, Glasfurd, Davies and Anderson) were in Australia at the outbreak of war, enlisted in the AIF and were on the AIF promotions list. Of the remaining 59 Australian brigadiers, only 23, or 37 per cent, had served in the Boer War. Interestingly, of the 59 Australians, 16 were permanent soldiers and of these, eight served in the Boer War. On the face of it, then, the Boer War had a limited influence on the Australian commanders at brigadier level with greater influence being found at higher levels. In attempting to discern the degree of this influence it might be best to consider it under a number of headings or categories.

Higher Direction and Administration

The first category concerns the higher direction and administration of the AIF. The first commander of the AIF was Major-General Bridges and, as has been noted, he was instrumental in ensuring that the AIF went overseas as a complete division rather than as separate brigades. Bridges arrived in South Africa in December 1899 as a special service officer for service 'for instructional purposes' with the Imperial forces there. At that time Major Bridges was a highly trained artillery officer, having spent two years on gunnery courses in Britain followed by a long period at the School of Gunnery at North Head. Bridges served in South Africa until April 1900 when he became ill and was sent to England for convalescence

the following month. He was on operations for a little over three months, serving primarily as an artillery staff officer in Lieutenant-General John French's cavalry division. At first he was a member of the divisional artillery staff and later with one of the brigades. While it is hard to quantify, this would have been invaluable experience for an Australian regular officer who would otherwise have had little opportunity to see large forces in the field, let alone on operations, in view of his later command of the 1st Australian Division, it is significant that Bridges was on the headquarters of a division in South Africa. This experience gave Bridges a degree of credibility as the commander of the 1st Division that he might not have otherwise had, especially when dealing with British regular officers in Egypt.

In South Africa, Bridges was also able to meet many people, such as General Sir Ian Hamilton, who were later to figure prominently in the First World War. While it is claimed that in South Africa Bridges 'made observations which determined his attitude towards Australian expeditionary forces in future wars', this is partly speculation based on his later decisions concerning the AIF.¹³ It should be noted, however, that in his command of the AIF in late 1914 and early 1915 Bridges was quite content for Imperial commanders to take over much of the administration of his force, and this had a deleterious effect on the force's administration. In South Africa he had served on the headquarters of forces that included Australians but had not served directly with Australian units.

When Bridges was mortally wounded at Gallipoli he was succeeded, in due course, as commander of the AIF by Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood, the commander of the Australian and New Zealand Corps. Birdwood remained commander of the AIF until the end of the war and commander of the corps until May 1918. An officer of the British-Indian Army, Birdwood had extensive operational experience including over two years in South Africa. Between December 1899 and August 1900 he served with General Buller's army advancing from Natal into the Transvaal, but after recovering from a wound joined the staff of General Lord Kitchener. Within a few months Kitchener succeeded Field Marshal Lord Roberts as commander-in-chief in South Africa. As Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Birdwood had the task of meeting the fresh contingents arriving from Australia and making 'sure that they were started off on their enterprises well equipped and in good heart'. He generally kept in touch with the needs of the mounted units. In his autobiography Birdwood wrote:

I have always felt that my close contact with these excellent fellows laid the foundation of my very happy relations with the Australian and New Zealand troops throughout the War of 1914-18. Indeed, it was because he realised how well we had got on together in South Africa that Lord Kitchener selected me to command the combined Australian and New Zealand Army Corps in 1914.¹⁴

Birdwood genuinely believed that he had a close rapport with Australians and this influenced his method of command of them throughout the First World War. But he was supported for almost the entire period of his command by Brudenell White who was GSO1 of the 1st Australian Division until he became Brigadier General Staff of the Anzac Corps during the Gallipoli campaign. White was the driving force behind the administration of the AIF and also the brains behind the tactical handling of the Anzac Corps.

White had only limited service in South Africa. As a young permanent army lieutenant, he arrived in South Africa in February 1902 with the Queenslanders of the First Battalion of the Australian Commonwealth Horse, which served with De Lisle's Australian Brigade in a sweep through Transvaal towards Bechuanaland. When peace was announced on 31 May 1902 he wrote in his diary that they were glad, 'but I would have liked to see a little more fighting'.¹⁵ One of his biographers wrote:

Brudenell learned many things from this Boer War chapter of his life, adding them to his growing fund of military knowledge. He learnt some very succinct lessons in the command of troops in difficult circumstances, and gained an understanding of the character of Australians as soldiers; it was information that was to stand him in good stead during the Great War that lay ahead of him and something that General Birdwood was to absorb from him in those later wartime years.¹⁶

In a letter home White described the advance towards Bechuanaland in which the British commander deployed 20 columns each of about 1000 men in an extended line of 80 kilometres, so clearly he had taken the opportunity to appreciate large scale operations.¹⁷

Three other influential figures in the administration of the AIF were Brigadier-Generals Victor Sellheim, Thomas Griffiths and Thomas Dodds. All were regular officers, although Griffiths was really a military clerk rather than a field soldier (he had been secretary of the Military Board). Sellheim was the chief administrative staff officer of the 1st Australian Division and later became commandant of the AIF administrative headquarters in Egypt and London. In Egypt he really took hold of the AIF's administration when Bridges' arrangements had left it in absolute chaos.¹⁸ Griffiths, who had been Assistant Adjutant General of the AIF, succeeded him as commandant. Dodds was Adjutant General at Army Headquarters and then Deputy Adjutant General of the AIF in 1917-18. He was a great proponent of the 'Australianisation' of the AIF by appointing Australian officers to the senior command positions.¹⁹

Both Sellheim and Dodds served in South Africa. Sellheim was a temporary major and served in British battalions and then was adjutant of the Queensland Mounted Infantry in the advance to Pretoria. For a while he was the chief staff officer of a mounted unit commanded by Major Chauvel. Dodds was adjutant of the 5th (Queensland Imperial Bushmen) contingent. When his force was attacked and almost overwhelmed by a superior force of Boers he rallied the surviving Queenslanders and held on until help arrived. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and was mentioned in despatches.

Before we leave the higher direction of the AIF, mention should be made of the influence that the South African War had on several senior British officers who commanded Anzac forces in the First World War. Examples are Generals Sir Ian Hamilton, Sir Henry Rawlinson and Sir Herbert Plumer, who commanded Australian and New Zealanders in South Africa and developed a high regard for them.

Infantry Command

The second category for examining the influence of the Boer War concerns operational experience in command of infantry operations. The conduct of First World War infantry operations differed from that in South Africa, although there were many lessons for those wise enough to discern them. The British Army believed that the Boers had been successful because of their marksmanship. In fact, as Thomas Pakenham explained in his detailed study of the war, 'the smokeless, long range, high velocity, small-bore magazine bullet from rifle or machine-gun—plus the trench—had decisively tilted the balance against attack and in favour of defence. The world learnt this lesson the hard way: in the bloody stalemates of the Dardanelles and Flanders'.²⁰ These operations in South Africa included the manoeuvre of infantry battalions against an enemy with well-sited defences. Few Australians were able to experience this sort of fighting as most served in mounted units.

Three key AIF officers, however, had experience of these operations. Alexander Sinclair-MacLagan was the adjutant and then a company commander in the 1st Battalion the Border Regiment. This battalion fought as part of Hart's Irish brigade at the disastrous battle of Colenso during the relief of Ladysmith. He served in South Africa until November 1900, was wounded and awarded the Distinguished Service Order. He served in Australia twice on loan and was appointed commander of the 3rd Infantry Brigade of the AIF. He gained the confidence of Bridges who thought the 3rd Brigade was his best and thus chose it for the initial landing at Gallipoli.²¹ MacLagan's brigade major, Charles Brand, was also a permanent officer with Boer War experience. Bridges' judgement was proved right. By his actions on the first day at Anzac Cove MacLagan may have saved the battle. In 1918 as commander of the 4th Division MacLagan planned the successful battle of Hamel. Brand was a very successful commander of the 4th Brigade for over two years.

It is worth noting that of the four original battalion commanders of the 3rd Brigade that made the initial landing at Gallipoli, only one had served in South Africa. The proportion was the same in the 1st and 2nd Brigades.

John Gellibrand was an Australian who had graduated from Sandhurst and served as a regular British officer until shortly before the First World War. Like MacLagan he commanded an infantry company in the battles leading to the relief of Ladysmith before falling ill. He wrote copious notes analysing the lessons to be drawn from them.²² He was a staff officer on the 1st Division Headquarters at Gallipoli, commanded infantry brigades from 1916 to 1918 and then commanded the 3rd Division.

A similar figure was Duncan Glasfurd, a British officer on loan in Australia at the outbreak of the First World War. He had been adjutant of the 1st Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in the battles of Modder River and Magersfontein, during the relief of Kimberley. One of the really bizarre images of these battles was that of the highlanders lying in their kilts in the open under enemy fire. The backs of their knees were without protection from the sun and, according to one victim, soon blisters were being raised 'as big as the palm of your hand'.²³ Glasfurd was severely wounded in October 1900 and later saw action in British East Africa. Like Gellibrand, at Gallipoli he was a staff officer on the 1st Division Headquarters, succeeding White as GSO1 and commanding a brigade on the Somme until mortally wounded in November 1916.

When the commander of the 1st Brigade was killed two days after the Gallipoli landing, Harold Walker, a British officer who had served in the Boer War, succeeded him. Walker later commanded the 1st Division after Bridges was mortally wounded. James McCay who commanded the 2nd Brigade and John Monash, who commanded the 4th at Gallipoli, had not served in South Africa. McCay was brave but was wounded and relieved in July by a permanent officer (Forsyth) who had not served in South Africa but had served with a cavalry brigade in India. McCay's command of the 5th Division in 1916 was not successful. Monash served as brigade commander throughout the Gallipoli campaign and showed his inexperience. Pedersen has argued that his performance was better than that claimed by Bean.²⁴ That Monash became a successful division and corps commander reflects not only his intelligence and planning ability but also the fact that if a commander could survive the early period of inexperience, the experience of the new war was more valuable than that of the old.

The 1st, 2nd and 3rd Light Horse Brigades fought as infantry at Gallipoli. The commanders of the first two, Chauvel and Granville Ryrie had, as mentioned earlier, extensive experience in the Boer War and demonstrated their ability to lead men at Gallipoli. The commander of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade was the elderly FG Hughes, who had not served in South Africa. When he proved incompetent, Jack Antill relieved him. A regular officer, Antill had commanded a squadron of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles in South Africa and at times acted as regimental commander.

Two other Boer War veterans proved to be highly capable commanders at Gallipoli. Major William Glasgow had won a DSO in South Africa. At Gallipoli he was promoted to command his light horse regiment, was given command of the 13th Brigade the following year and became commander of the 1st Division in 1918. Harold (Pompey) Elliott was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for service in South Africa. He commanded a battalion at Gallipoli, and the 15th Brigade from 1916 until the end of the war. He was one of the AIF's outstanding commanders.

A question mark hangs over the performance Major-General Gordon Legge, a regular officer who commanded the 2nd Division at Gallipoli and on the Somme in 1916. It has been claimed that Legge lacked experience. After the 2nd Division's failed attack at Pozières in July 1916, the British commander, General Sir Douglas Haig, wrote in his diary that some of the Anzac Corps divisional commanders were 'so ignorant and (like many Colonials) so conceited that they cannot be trusted to work out unaided the plan of attack'.²⁵ Yet Legge probably served longer in South Africa than any other Australian. He arrived in South Africa in December 1899 as commander of the New South Wales infantry units and served in the Australian Regiment. Later he was adjutant of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles. When his company returned to Australia in December 1900 he stayed on as intelligence officer with De Lisle's column. He left South Africa in July 1902 and reached Australia in October 1902. He was apparently

happily married and had a young child when he left for South Africa. Perhaps he stayed on for a second year to try to redress the criticism of his command in the first year. Legge's biographer has pointed out that his performance in South Africa 'left a cloud over the significant aspect of his capacity for field command'.²⁶ He received neither promotion nor decoration for his South Africa service. When his senior and demanding staff appointments in Australia and his attachment to the War Office are taken into account, it is evident that he was not an inexperienced officer, but the Boer War service did not seem to have helped his later career.

The three brigades of Legge's 2nd Division had a less trying experience at Gallipoli than those of the first contingent. The commander of the 5th Brigade was William Holmes, a militia officer with extensive service in South Africa. He went there as a lieutenant and returned as a brevet lieutenant-colonel, having been wounded, mentioned in despatches and awarded the DSO. According to the Australian official history of the First World War:

The South African campaigns taught him the importance of attention to detail, the value of initiative, and the importance of personal conduct and efficiency; he returned to Australia with a record of good service, and a reputation for personal bravery, ability, and capacity for command.²⁷

Holmes commanded the land forces in the expedition to capture German New Guinea in 1914. After commanding his brigade in France in 1916 he took command of the 4th Division but was killed in action in July 1917. Following discussions with Gellibrand, Bean wrote in his diary:

Bridges was not a leader but a commander; White has never had the chance to be a leader. He is easily our best soldier, but a staff officer and scholar, not a commander yet. Holmes is the first Australian commander. He had the power of command which Hobbs and Monash have not ... He was able to keep his brigade up to it at Pozières in a way no other man could have done.²⁸

The 6th and 7th Brigades at Gallipoli were commanded by men who were too old for war service, even though one had Boer War experience.²⁹ Before long they were replaced. Neither replacement had served in South Africa; but one was a British officer (Gwynn) with operational service elsewhere, and the other (Paton) had recently served in German New Guinea.

Light Horse

It is difficult to generalise about the value of infantry command experience in the Boer War. Nonetheless, it seems that it was useful in the early stages of the First World War, but soon lost its utility as officers tried to come to grips with the demands of a new war. By contrast, however, the experience of mounted rifle or cavalry operations was to prove invaluable in the First World War. In South Africa, Australian mounted troops gained a reputation for competence and effectiveness and at various stages provided large proportions of the mounted troops available to the British commanders. As LF Field concluded, by May 1900 the Australians 'were for the first time in a position to make an impact as a national force'.³⁰ But no Australian commanded at higher than regimental level, and generally commanded at a lower level. Despite the numbers of Australians deployed, the standard British histories of the Boer War barely mention them except perhaps to describe the Wilmansrust debacle or the execution of Handcock and Morant.³¹

Mention has already been made of Chauvel and Ryrie. Chauvel spent a year in South Africa as a major with the Queensland Mounted Infantry. He was adjutant for a while, commanded a squadron, and later commanded a force known as Chauvel's Mounted Infantry. As his biographer noted, he had learned 'the art of handling a mixed command and [the experience] had taught him much about discipline and the problems of horsemanship in a harsh country. He had come through the tests of battle and of independent command with his reputation

enhanced'.³² In 1902 he returned to South Africa as commanding officer of the 7th Battalion of the Australian Commonwealth Horse but did not see action. His gift for careful administration, observed in South Africa, came to the fore when he commanded the Anzac Mounted Division in Sinai in 1916.

When Chauvel was promoted to command the Anzac Mounted Corps, Edward Chaytor who had served in the Boer War succeeded him. Major-General William Hodgson who commanded the Imperial (later Australian) Mounted Division was a British regular officer. The five Australian light horse brigades that served in these two divisions between 1916 and 1918 had eight commanders. Of these, six had served in the Boer War. They had had extensive experience and were some of the great characters of the AIF. Granville Rylie, who commanded his brigade (with some breaks) from 1914 to 1919, had commanded a squadron of the force that relieved the defenders of Eland's River. 'Fighting Charlie' Cox led the first colonial volunteers to reach South Africa and returned there in 1901 as commander of a regiment of New South Wales Mounted Rifles that distinguished itself in operations alongside British regulars. He commanded the 1st Light Horse Brigade from 1916 to 1918. 'Galloping Jack' Royston, who commanded the 2nd Light Horse Brigade at the battle of Romani and later the 3rd Light Horse, was a South African who had spent much of the South African War in command of Australians. The two commanders who had not served in South Africa, Grant and Macarthur-Onslow, received their commands in the latter part of the war and had gained experience in Sinai and Palestine.

Artillery

Much of the mounted rifle experience of the Boer War could be transplanted to the war in Palestine in 1916-18 and indeed might have contributed directly to the success of the British mounted operations in that campaign. The same could not be said about the experience of the artillery. In South Africa the British Army employed 84 batteries of Royal Horse Artillery, Royal Field Artillery, Royal Garrison Artillery and other colonial artillery units, 50 independent artillery sections (Pom-poms and Galloping Maxims) and four militia garrison artillery companies, and at the high point of October 1900 a total of 15,000 gunners were serving there. Against this record, the Australian artillery contributed just one battery, consisting of five officers and 174 other ranks, with a further one officer and 43 other ranks joining later as reinforcements. With its six 15-pounder BL field guns, the unit took part in no major battles and was usually split into two-gun sections. However, the commitment was important. The battery was the only permanent Australian army unit and the only Australian field battery sent to South Africa, and its members gained experience that was to prove valuable as the Australian permanent army built on the small nucleus of permanent gunners in the post-federation period.³³

The First World War was an artillery war that saw the development of artillery techniques to a very high level. There were only glimpses of these developments in the Boer War. Guns were often fired in the direct rather than the indirect fashion and artillery was not employed in the massed role. Australian officers learned about the handling of men in operations but gained little in the knowledge of artillery techniques. It is not surprising then that the early and senior commands of the Australian artillery contained fewer Boer War veterans than the light horse or infantry units. Colonel Talbot Hobbs, the artillery commander of the 1st Division, had not served in South Africa. Of his three brigade commanders, two were Boer War veterans. Sydney Christian was a regular officer who had commanded a field artillery section in South Africa. George Johnson, a militia officer, had received considerable experience when serving with British units in South Africa. He returned to South Africa as commanding officer of the 4th Battalion of the Australian Commonwealth Horse but it did not see action. Charles Rosenthal, commander of the 3rd Field Artillery Brigade, had not gone to South Africa. The commander of the divisional ammunition column was a Boer War veteran.

As the First World War progressed the AIF had 13 officers who commanded artillery units with the rank of brigadier-general. These included the artillery commanders of the five infantry divisions and the commanders of the corps and heavy artillery. Of these 13 officers, four were British regulars and one was a New Zealand regular officer. Of the remaining eight, three

were Australian regular officers, Coxen, Phillips and Christian. Only Christian served in the Boer War. Of the five Australian militia artillery commanders, Hobbs, Johnston, Grimwade, Rosenthal and Bessell-Browne, only Johnston and Bessell-Browne served in South Africa. Bessell-Browne began as a private in the Western Australian Mounted Infantry, but was commissioned in the field. He returned to South Africa as adjutant and then second-in-command of the 5th Western Australian contingent and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. He was an outstanding battery commander at Gallipoli. Significantly, Hobbs and Rosenthal, who commanded infantry divisions, and Walter Coxen, the leading Australian gunner at the end of the war, had not gone to South Africa.

Medical Services

The Australian Army Medical Corps, which developed to a very great extent during the First World War, owes its origin to the New South Wales Army Medical Corps which served in South Africa. The commander of the Corps in South Africa was Colonel William Williams, whom a British war correspondent described as 'the first man I have met who seems to be a master of Army medical work in the field'.³⁴ In the decade following the Boer War the British Army Medical Corps made a concerted effort to learn the lessons of that war. These lessons were taken up by the Australian Army Medical Corps that was established after Federation with Williams as surgeon general.

Williams, elderly, overweight and in poor health, became director of medical services of the AIF until superseded by Neville Howse in November 1915. Howse had served under Williams in the Boer War where he won the first Victoria Cross to be awarded to an Australian. Howse too had seen the problems of medical administration in South Africa and was determined to improve the administration of the AIF's medical services. He was promoted to major-general in 1917 in recognition of the remarkable work that he had done with the development of a separate and efficient Australian Army Medical Corps. Other senior AIF medical officers, such as William Eames and Thomas Fiaschi, also served in South Africa.

Conclusion

The mere observation that certain senior officers of the AIF served in South Africa does not necessarily prove that they were influenced by that experience, let alone indicate the extent of that influence. However, unless each individual expressed his thoughts on paper it is now probably impossible to prove the case either way. In some cases, however, we do have evidence. Birdwood attributed his appointment to command the AIF directly to his Boer War experience. We know that Gellibrand tried to learn from his short period of active service. There seems no doubt that the success of the Australian Light Horse in Palestine can be attributed to the experience of its commanders in South Africa. It seems more than coincidence that two of the finest leaders at Gallipoli were the Boer War veterans, Glasgow and Elliott.

War is not just about techniques and tactics. As Sir Basil Liddell Hart put it, 'Human nature ... changes but slowly, if at all and human nature under stress of danger, not at all'.³⁵ The Boer War showed the value of training, discipline, leadership and administration to anyone who was willing to learn. An appreciation of these timeless military qualities was invaluable in the newly raised AIF. It is likely, then, that the experience of the Boer War had a greater effect on the commanders of the First AIF, particularly in the early stages of the First World War, than has been generally recognised.

**Generals of the AIF or generals with direct command of
Australians**

Birdwood	Imperial Army	Regular	Boer War
Bridges	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Chauvel	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Chaytor	NZ	Regular	Boer War
Cox, HV	Imperial	Regular	Boer War
Gellibrand	Australian	Regular (ex)	Boer War
Glasgow	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Godley	Imperial Army	Regular	Boer War
Hobbs	Australian	Militia	
Hodgson	Imperial Army	Regular	
Holmes	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Howse	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Legge	Australian	Regular	Boer War
McCay	Australian	Militia	
Monash	Australian	Militia	
Rosenthal	Australian	Militia	
Sinclair-MacLagan	Imperial (AIF)	Regular	Boer War
Smyth	Imperial Army	Regular	Boer War
Walker	Imperial Army	Regular	Boer War
White	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Total: 20 generals of whom 15 served in the Boer War			

**Brigadiers of the AIF or those with direct involvement with
Australian (including those promoted to major-general in the First
World War)**

Anderson	Imperial (AIF)	Regular	
Antill	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Bennett	Australian	Militia	
Bessell-Browne	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Blamey	Australian	Regular	
Brand	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Burgess	NZ (AIF)	Regular	
Burston	Australian	Militia	
Cannan	Australian	Militia	
Carruthers	Imperial Army	Regular	(Other active service)
Christian	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Chauvel	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Cox, CF	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Coxen	Australian	Regular	
Cunliffe-Owen	Imperial Army	Regular	Boer War
Davies	Imperial (AIF)	Regular	Boer War
Dodds	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Drake-Brockman	Australian	Militia	
Elliott	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Foott	Australian	Regular	
Forsyth	Australian	Regular	
Fraser	Imperial Army	Regular	
Gellibrand	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Glasfurd	Imperial (AIF)	Regular	Boer War

Glasgow	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Goddard	Australian	Militia	
Grant	Australian	Militia	
Griffiths	Australian	Regular	
Grimwade	Australian	Militia	
Gwynn	Imperial Army	Regular	(Other active service)
Heane	Australian	Militia	
Herring	Australian	Militia	
Hobkirk	Imperial Army	Regular	Boer War
Holmes	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Howse (Surg-Gen)	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Hughes	Australian	Militia	
Irving	Australian	Regular	(No, but CO 6th ACH)
Jess	Australian	Regular	
Jobson	Australian	Militia	
Johnson	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Joly de Lotbiniere	Imperial	Regular	Boer War
Leane	Australian	Militia	
Lesslie	Imperial Army	Regular	(Other active service)
Linton	Australian	Militia	
Macarthur-Onslow	Australian	Militia	
Mackay	Australian	Militia	
Manifold (Surg-Gen)	Imperial	Regular	(Other active service)
Martin	Australian	Militia	
McCay	Australian	Militia	
McGlinn	Australian	Militia	Boer War
McLaurin	Australian	Militia	
McNicol	Australian	Militia	
Meredith	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Monash	Australian	Militia	
Moore	Australian	Militia	
Napier	Imperial Army	Regular	Boer War
Paton	Australian	Militia	
Phillips	Australian	Regular	
Pope	Australian	Militia	
Rankin	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Robertson	Australian	Militia	
Rosenthal	Australian	Militia	
Royston	S African	Militia	Boer War
Ryrie	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Sellheim	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Sinclair-MacLagan	Imperial (AIF)	Regular	Boer War
Smith, R	Australian	Militia	
Smyth	Imperial Army	Regular	Boer War
Stewart	Australian	Militia	
Spencer-Browne	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Tivey	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Walker	Imperial Army	Regular	Boer War
White	Australian	Regular	Boer War
Williams (Surg-Gen)	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Wilson	Australian	Militia	Boer War
Wisdom	Australian	Militia	

Total: 76 brigadiers of whom 33 fought in the Boer War.

Endnotes

1. CEW Bean, *Anzac to Amiens* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1961), 19.
2. Bill Gammage, 'The crucible: the establishment of the Anzac tradition, 1899-1918', in M McKernan and M Brown (eds), *Australia Two Centuries of War and Peace* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1988), 157.
3. Major WT Reay, *Australians in War: With the Australian Regiment from Melbourne to Bloemfontein* (Melbourne: AH Massina and Co, 1900), 35.
4. Ibid.
5. RL Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Publishing Service, 1976), 309.
6. LM Field, *The Forgotten War: Australian Involvement in the South African Conflict of 1899-1902* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1979), 164.
7. See John Mordike, *An Army for a Nation: A History of Australian Military Developments, 1880-1914* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992).
8. Field, *The Forgotten War*, 193-95.
9. CD Coulthard-Clark, *A Heritage of Spirit: A Biography of Major-General Sir William Throsby Bridges KCB, CMC* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1979), 118.
10. Quoted in *ibid*.
11. Sinclair-MacLagan has been included as an Australian although he was a British officer as he was accepted as an Australian and was on the AIF promotion list. Gellibrand is included as a regular because he spent most of his working life before the First World War as a British regular officer.
12. The figure includes officers who were later promoted to major-general. It also includes surgeon-generals as brigadier-generals.
13. Coulthard-Clark, *A Heritage of Spirit*, 38.
14. Field Marshal Lord Birdwood, *Khaki and Gown, An Autobiography* (London: Ward, Lock & Co, 1941), 124.
15. Rosemary Derham, *The Silence Ruse: Escape from Gallipoli* (Melbourne: Cliffe Books, 1998), 157.
16. Ibid, 159.
17. Ibid, 160.
18. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 11 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. 1988), 666.
19. Ibid, vol 8 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1981), 515.
20. Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), 574.
21. CEW Bean, *The Story of Anzac* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1940), 135-35.
22. Peter Sadler, 'The Paladin: A Biography of Major-General Sir John Gellibrand', draft manuscript to be published by Oxford University Press in 2000.
23. W Baring Pemberton, *Battles of the Boer War* (London: Batsford, 1964), 67.
24. PA Pedersen, *Monash as Military Commander* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1985), chapter 5.
25. Haig Diary, 29 July 1916, National Library of Scotland.
26. CD Coulthard-Clark, *No Australian Need Apply: The Troubled Career of Lieutenant-General Gordon Legge* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 36.
27. SS MacKenzie, *The Australians at Rabaul* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1927), 24.
28. Bean Diary, 18 July 1917, 82/36, Australian War Memorial.
29. Brigadier-Generals Burston and Spencer-Browne were both 59 years of age in 1915. Spencer-Browne had served in the Boer War. Linton, the initial commander of the 8th Brigade, who drowned in the sinking of the *Southland*, was 53. He had not served in the Boer War.
30. Field, *The Forgotten War*, 111.
31. See for example, Pakenham, *The Boer War*, and Rayne Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray* (London: Cassell, 1959).
32. AJ Hill, *Chauvel of the Light Horse* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978), 31.
33. DM Horner, *The Gunners: A History of Australian Artillery* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), 42-43.
34. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 12 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990), 507.
35. BH Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War* (London: Faber, 1943), 219.