



The South African War



Many Canadians have put their lives on the line in wars and peace support efforts over the years. In many ways the origins of our country's tradition of international military service and sacrifice can be traced back to the South African War, fought between 1899 and 1902. This conflict in a distant land so different from our own was the first time large numbers of Canadian soldiers served overseas.

BACKGROUND

As the 19th century drew to a close, the British Empire was nearing its height. With colonies, dominions and territories stretching around the world, it was said that “the sun never set on the British Empire.” One of the areas where it exerted its influence was in southern Africa.

The British first gained control of territory in the region from the Dutch in the early 1800s. The original Dutch settlers (known as the “Boers”) resisted British rule, however, migrating away from the centres of British control along the coasts and establishing the Orange Free State and the Transvaal Republic in the mid-1800s.

Tensions in southern Africa escalated as the years went by, particularly after the discovery of rich diamond and gold deposits in the second half of the 19th century. The presence of these natural resources and the resulting influx of new settlers led to increased British interest in the Boer territories and fighting erupted in 1880. An uneasy peace was soon re-established but the situation remained strained until finally boiling over again with the outbreak of the South African War on 11 October 1899.

CANADA RESPONDS

In the decades after Confederation in 1867, Britain still had great influence in Canada's affairs. When the South African War erupted, it quickly requested military assistance from members of the Commonwealth. National opinion was split over what some people (especially in French Canada) saw as a “British War” in which our country should not become involved, while others (especially in English Canada) were drawn to the idea of defending the Empire.

In the end, Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier compromised by offering to send soldiers who volunteered for the conflict plus military equipment, as well as arranging for transportation to South Africa. In turn, the British would pay the Canadian soldiers' wages and arrange for their return home upon completion of their service. A thousand men were then quickly recruited to form the First Contingent that sailed from Québec City on 30 October 1899

The 2nd Regiment, Canadian Mounted Rifles on patrol in South Africa, February - March 1902.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada PA-173029



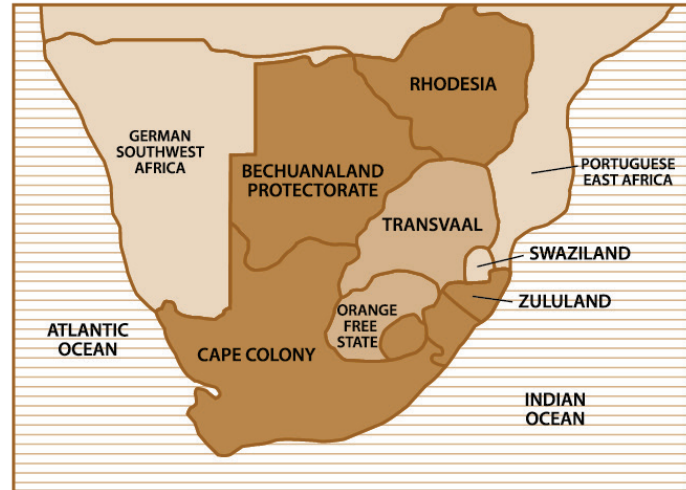
The Boers were tough fighters, familiar with the African terrain that was their home and expert marksmen. The British suffered serious setbacks in the opening battles of the war and made an urgent request for Canada to supply more horse-mounted troops. In response, a second contingent was soon brought together, made up of two regiments and three artillery batteries. Troop trains loaded with these volunteers and their horses were greeted with thunderous welcomes at stations across Canada as they headed to Halifax to set sail for South Africa. More units from Canada would follow as the war progressed, including a field hospital. In total, more than 7,000 Canadians would volunteer for service during the conflict.

THE TIDE TURNS

After their initial defeats, the British regrouped and launched counter-offensives in early 1900. The Canadians got their baptism of fire in the Battle of Paardeberg in February 1900, where they distinguished themselves in the first significant British victory of the conflict—a triumph greeted by much excitement back in Canada. The price was high, however, as 18 Canadians were killed and 68 more wounded on the first day of the battle—our country’s bloodiest single day of fighting in the war.

The Boers soon turned to guerrilla tactics against the more powerful British forces. Canadians took part in many smaller actions in the latter portion of the war, such as the Battle of Leliefontein in November 1900. During this phase of the fighting, Canadians undertook many gruelling scouting patrols through the harsh terrain on horseback, braving Boer sniper fire and the risk of ambush. The cowboys and Northwest Mounted Police members from the Canadian West who had volunteered for service in South Africa were especially skilled at these roles.

The war finally ended with the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging on 31 May 1902. The Boers surrendered their independence in exchange for aid to those affected by the fighting and eventual self-government, among other terms. The Canadian soldiers could finally return home, although some chose to remain there as members of the South African Constabulary.



HEROISM

Great courage was evident throughout the South African War and five Canadians earned the Victoria Cross, the highest award for military valour: Sergeant Arthur Richardson, Lieutenant Hampden Cockburn, Lieutenant Richard Turner, Sergeant Edward Holland and Lieutenant William Nickerson. Another Canadian, Private Richard Thompson, was recommended for the Victoria Cross twice for his brave actions but did not receive one. Queen Victoria learned of the situation and knitted a special wool scarf for Thompson and a handful of other soldiers like him whose bravery had not been officially recognized.



SACRIFICE

Canada's contributions in the South African War came at a cost. Approximately 280 Canadians lost their lives (most due to injury or illness brought on by the harsh conditions) and more than 250 were wounded. The names of the fallen are recorded in *the South African War / Nile Expedition Book of Remembrance* which is displayed on Parliament Hill.

LEGACY

Canada's experiences in the South African War would only be the beginning of an impressive tradition of international military service. The skill, courage and sacrifice demonstrated by those Canadians so long ago would be seen time and again in the years to come, whether in the First or Second World War, the Korean War, or numerous peace support operations around the world.

The war also marked the first time Canadian women served with the military overseas, with 12 Nursing Sisters helping the sick and wounded in South Africa. In fact, Prince Edward Island's Georgina Pope, who led the Canadian Nursing Sisters in South Africa, was awarded the Royal Red Cross for her impressive service under difficult conditions—the first time a Canadian ever received this prestigious award.

These trailblazing nurses helped lead the way in establishing a tradition of military service by Canadian women that today sees females in all roles in the Canadian Armed Forces, from serving on submarines to active combat.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations.

To learn more about Canada's role in the South African War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at veterans.gc.ca or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

This publication is available in other formats upon request.

Canadian infantrymen fighting the Boers during the Battle of Paardeberg. 18 February 1900.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada PA-181414

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