

The Munster Fusiliers and the South African War 1899 - 1902 Part 2

Background

The annexation of the Orange Free State was announced on 24th May 1900, and the Transvaal on 1st September. With both capitals captured, many people believed that the war was over, but they had not reckoned on the toughness and determination of the Boers to carry on the fight by other means, particularly by the use of guerrilla warfare. This was typified by their leaders, President Steyn and General Christian DeWet of the Orange Free State and General Louis Botha and J.H. Koos De La Rey of the Transvaal.

While the British controlled the railway lines, large areas of the republics were still in Boer hands. DeWet operated in the Orange Free State, Botha in the eastern Transvaal and Koos De La Rey in the western Transvaal. The war deteriorated into a series of skirmishes, and the British found themselves involved with an elusive foe, fighting a type of war with which they had no previous experience.¹ The Boer commando units, which varied in size from anything to 60 men to 3000 men,² could travel about forty miles a day and were always on the move, appearing unexpectedly to sabotage, ambush and harry the numerically superior British forces.³

These Boers who continued to fight became known as the 'Bitter enders', while those who handed in their weapons and surrendered were called the 'Hard uppers'. In an attempt to deprive the Boer commandos of information and places to shelter, Roberts and Kitchener began a policy of burning the farms and homesteads of those who continued to fight.

The British regarded every farmhouse as an enemy food depot, sanctuary and nest of spies. Most of the farms that were burned were in the Orange Free State. Among the reasons given for the destruction of properties were: harbouring of Boers, abuse of the white flag, hiding ammunition, assisting the enemy, and the cutting of telegraph lines. The number of Boers still on active service at that period was estimated to be just under 10,000 men.⁴ One British soldier called the policy of farm burning 'domestic murder'.

Meanwhile the Boers who had given up the fight, and their families, had to be protected. Boer generals had made it their

by Des Ryan



M.T. Steyn, President of the Orange Free State.

official policy to drive them from their homes.⁵ Kitchener had 'camps of refuge' set up for the homeless families and their black servants. Eventually Boers captured during the fighting were also lodged in these camps. Large numbers of people were grouped together and housed in tents, giving rise to a new phrase in the English language - the words 'concentration camp'. It was, I believe, during the revolt in Cuba in 1895 that the term first came into use. Cuba was a Spanish possession, and a large army was sent under the command of General Weyler to suppress the rebels. One of the measures that he adopted was the herding of civilians into 'concentration camps', where many died from the unhygienic conditions and from malnutrition.⁶ The first camps in South Africa were set up in September 1900, and during the course of the war there were 50 such camps.⁷

In 1901 the camps in South Africa were swept by disease - pneumonia, measles and enteric fever. Due to bad administration, inefficiency and lack of sanitary knowledge, an estimated 20,000 white people, mainly children, died.⁸ It is not known how many coloured people died in the camps.⁹ Improvements in the running of the camps came about when Miss Emily Hobhouse visited them in the same year and brought them to the notice of the British public. During the course of the war about 130,000 people were interned in



General de Wet.

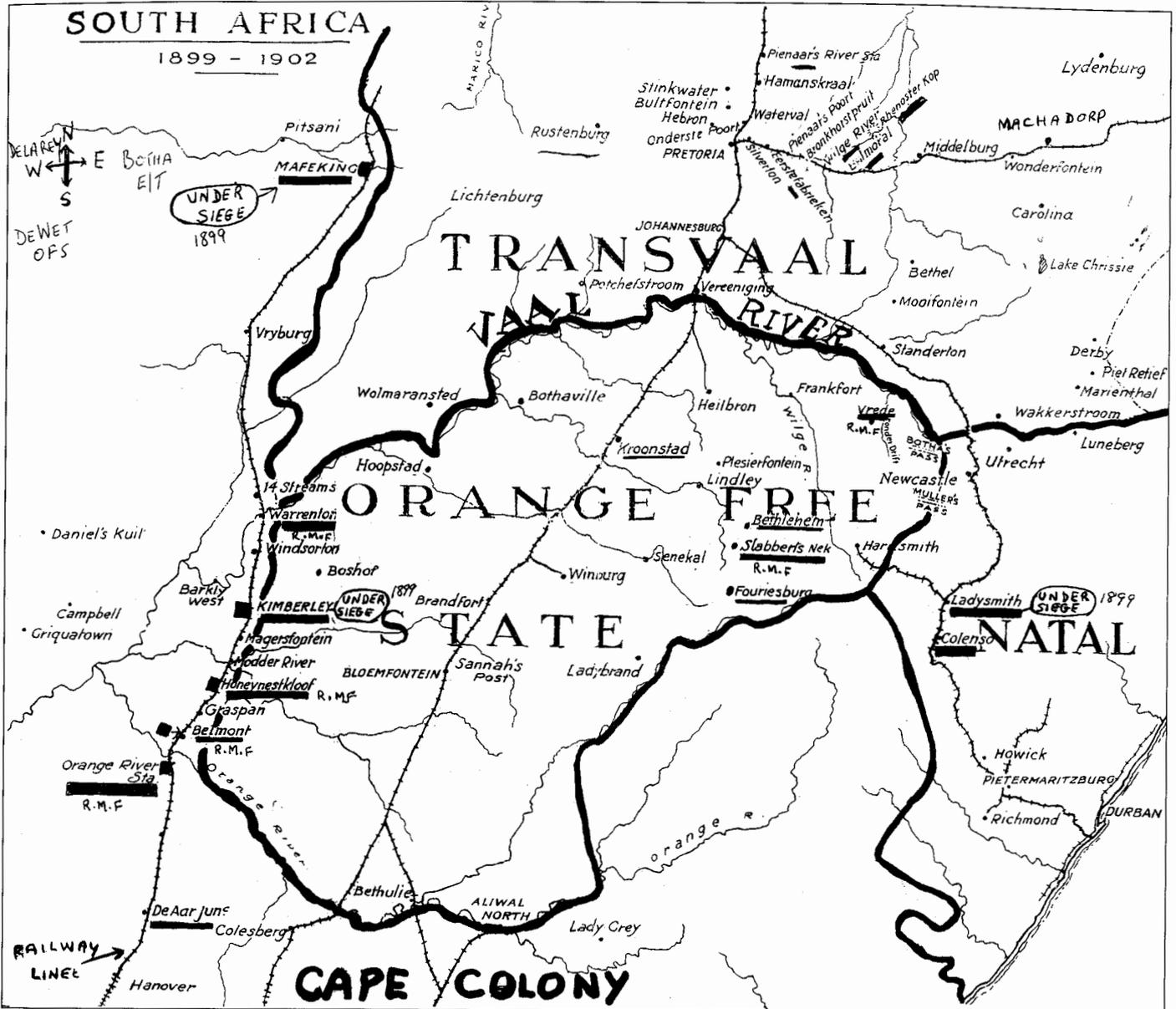


General Louis Botha.

the camps. Other Boer prisoners were sent to British colonies as far away as India, Ceylon, Bermuda and St. Helena.

Other tactics used by General Kitchener were the building of what became known as the 'blockhouse' line system (see map) and the use of barbed-wire. Originally the railway lines had been protected from sabotage by the digging and manning of trenches near vital points such as railway stations, supplemented by mounted patrols between each point. Now the British army began building small stone forts and corrugated iron blockhouses, manned by a full-time garrison of seven soldiers and some African scouts. The posts were connected by telegraph and linked together by barbed-wire fencing, while armoured trains patrolled the railway lines. At first the blockhouses were built one mile apart, then half a mile, and eventually a quarter of a mile apart.¹⁰

From July 1901, this system was being



South Africa, 1899-1902, showing places named in the text.

constructed across the whole of South Africa. It served several purposes - as a barrier to restrict Boer movements, and it carved up the countryside into areas of more manageable size in which to trap Boer commando units.¹¹ The blockhouse line system covered an area of 3,700 miles and had 8,000 blockhouses manned by 50,000 troops and 16,000 Africans. Although the blockhouses were bullet-proof, they were not shell-proof, but by this time the Boers were fighting a guerrilla war and had practically given up using artillery.¹²

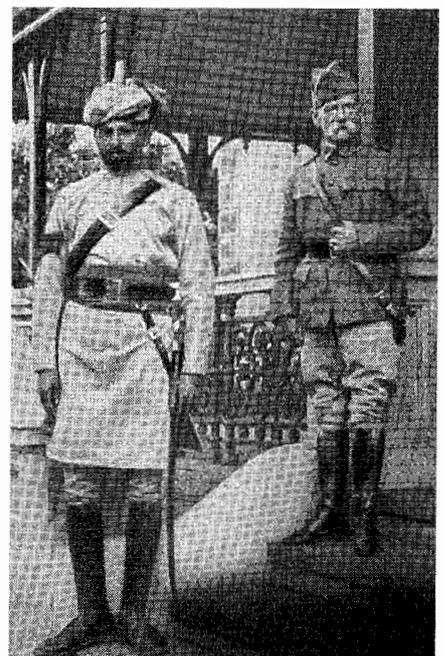
Another drastic measure taken by the British was death by execution. General Kitchener used Africans to help in the manning of the blockhouse lines. When the Boers captured non-whites with weapons, they shot them; British court-martials condemned the Boers to death for murder. Another act which drew the death penalty was the burning of public buildings. Cape Colony was put under martial law after a number of raids into the colony by Boer commando units between 1900 and 1901. The Boers burned public

buildings when they came across them, regarding this as reprisal for what the British had done to their farms.¹³ Cape Dutch who took up arms against the British were also liable to be executed for rebellion.

The Munsters

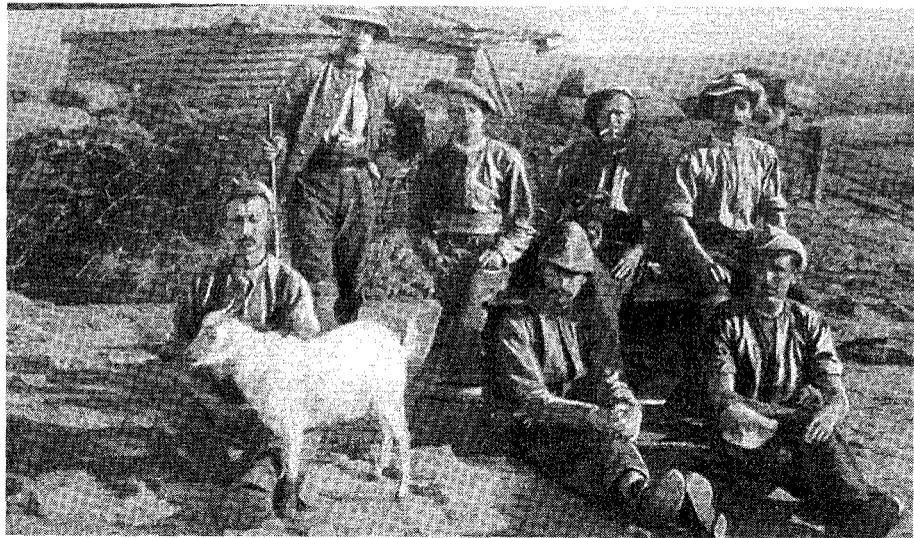
Early in May 1900, the Munsters, now attached to the 20th Brigade under General Paget, left Warrenton, moving back down the railway line to Windsorton Road Station.¹⁴ From there the men began what can only be described as a long march:-

"The hardships we have gone through are not to be forgotten. We had to march 127 miles, and some of that was forced marching, on half our food, hard biscuits and bully meat and a drink of cold tea. This country is no good; I can see nothing in it since I came out. All the time that I have travelled there was not one tree to be seen only barren land. I will be very glad to get away from this place, as there is nothing but dead horses and cattle lying



Field Marshal Lord Roberts with his Sikh servant.

about. There is sure to be a plague after this war. Our clothes are in rags, and we have none to replace them. We left Warrenton on the 8th of May, after fighting there for seven weeks. We went to Windsorton Road, and from there to Boshof, from Boshof to Hoopstad, from Hoopstad to Bothaville, from Bothaville to Kroonstad, and from Kroonstad to Lindley, and we had some fighting at Lindley with DeWet (a Boer general). He captured 400 of our Imperial Yeomanry (mainly Irish). They were too far ahead; they were acting as scouts. I did not see a paper for the last couple of months. I suppose the war will be over by the time you get this letter. We don't hear much of what is going on in the country, as we are kept in the dark of everything - even we would not be told where we would be going to when on the march"¹⁵



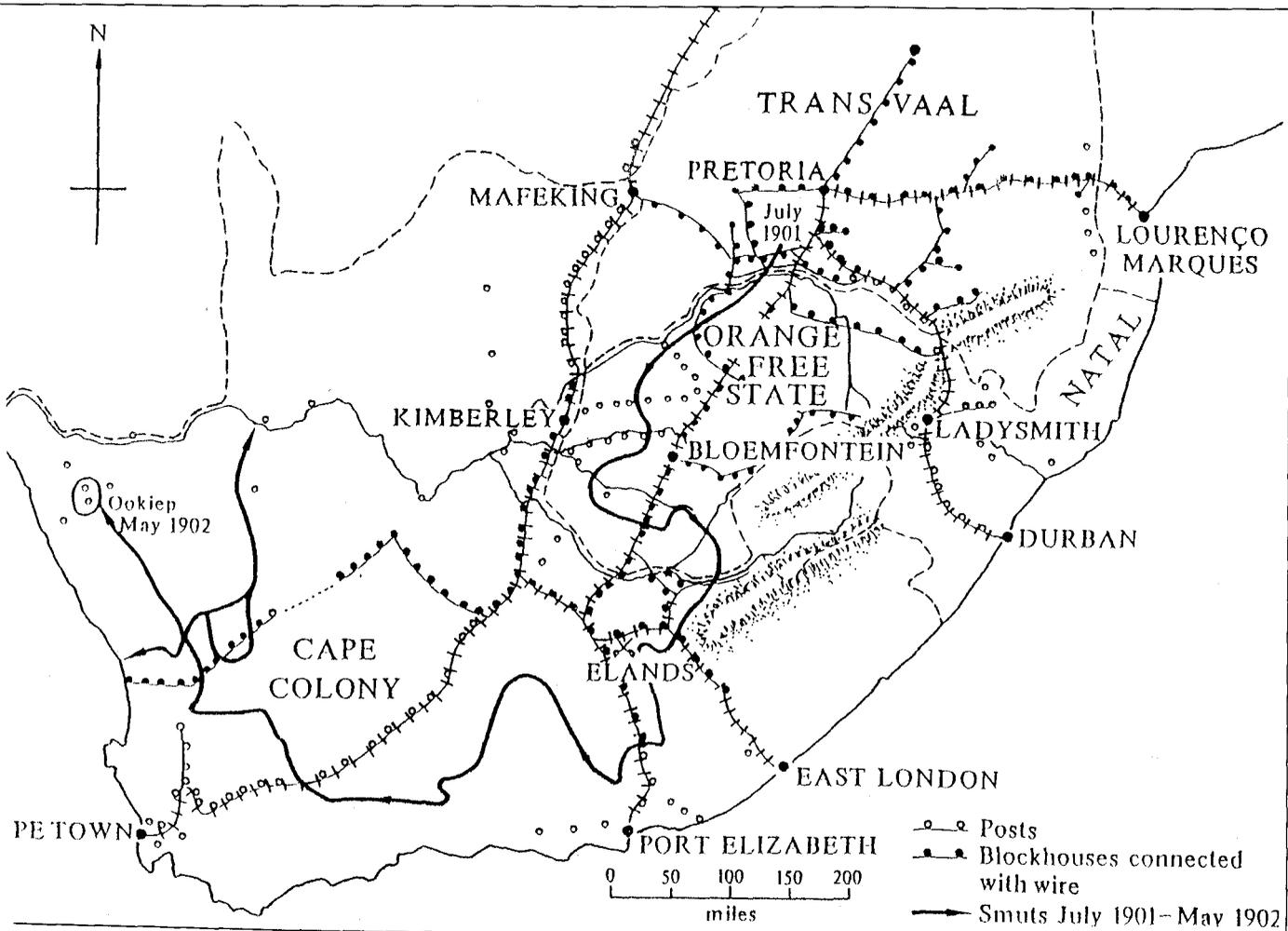
Grenadier Guardsmen manning a blockhouse.

"We first came across DeWet outside Boshoff, and kept on his track until we came to Lindley. We occupied that town for one month. There I suffered the most. We were twelve days besieged; always on the alert from daylight to darkness. We had only four guns of the 38th Field Battery, one half of our battalion, half the Yorkshire Light Inf., two companies of the Scottish Rifles, the other half of the battalion bringing a convoy from Kroonstad. DeWet you know was the downfall of General Gatacre (who returned to England in disgrace). He is the devil after convoy and very often succeeds. Two days

before our convoys came, after trying to flank us for three weeks, he shelled us right, left, front and rere. If his shells were good I would not be the writer of this letter. His shells were good but badly timed. He made a desperate rush up the right flank to capture our convoy, but the little garrison fought with all their might, having but very few casualties; they meant to defend it, though we were properly starved. We had to pay 4d. for a loaf of black bread. It would barely do a hungry man for his breakfast; 1s. 6d. for a pound of sugar; 2s. for as much Indian meal as

would fit in a small handkerchief; tobacco cannot be had for love or money. We were supposed to have DeWet surrounded several times but he got away. He is still at large, but it will not be long."¹⁶

During the fighting at Lindley, a line of outposts extending half-way around the town was manned by the Munsters and other regiments. During the whole month of June there was fighting every day, and the Boers constantly shelled the area. On one day alone, over 200 shells were fired at the Munsters positions, seriously wounding one man. This led to the supply



Map showing the blockhouse lines.



Lord Kitchener.

of rations running short. On June 26th, the Boers made a determined effort to take the town, but were beaten back on all sides. The next day the attack was renewed, but the timely arrival of reinforcements from Kroonstad forced the Boers to withdraw.¹⁷

Kruger

To avoid being captured by the advancing British forces, President Kruger left Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal, in a private railway carriage. While his train was stopped at Machadorph, he was interviewed by a British newspaper reporter, who had crossed into the Transvaal from Portuguese territory:

"It is true that British forces have occupied Pretoria," said Kruger, "that however does not mean the end of the war. The Burghers are determined to fight to the last as long as 500 armed men remain in the country."

In reference to the capture of the capital, he said: "Capital, what is a capital? The republican capital, the seat of government, is here in this car. There is no magic about any special site. Our country is invaded, but not conquered. I shall not leave my country."

Mr. Francis Reitz, the State Secretary, who was travelling with the President, said that "the war is not yet over. Guerrilla warfare will go on over an enormous area. We intend to fight to the bitter end."

President Kruger intervened to say that "it is only now that the real struggle has begun."¹⁸

On July 2nd, Paget's 20th Brigade, joining forces with Major-General Clements' Brigade, moved out of Lindley towards the town of Bethlehem and Slabberts Nek. On July 6th, a rider with a flag of truce went forward to the Boer positions at Bethlehem and demanded the

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HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN?



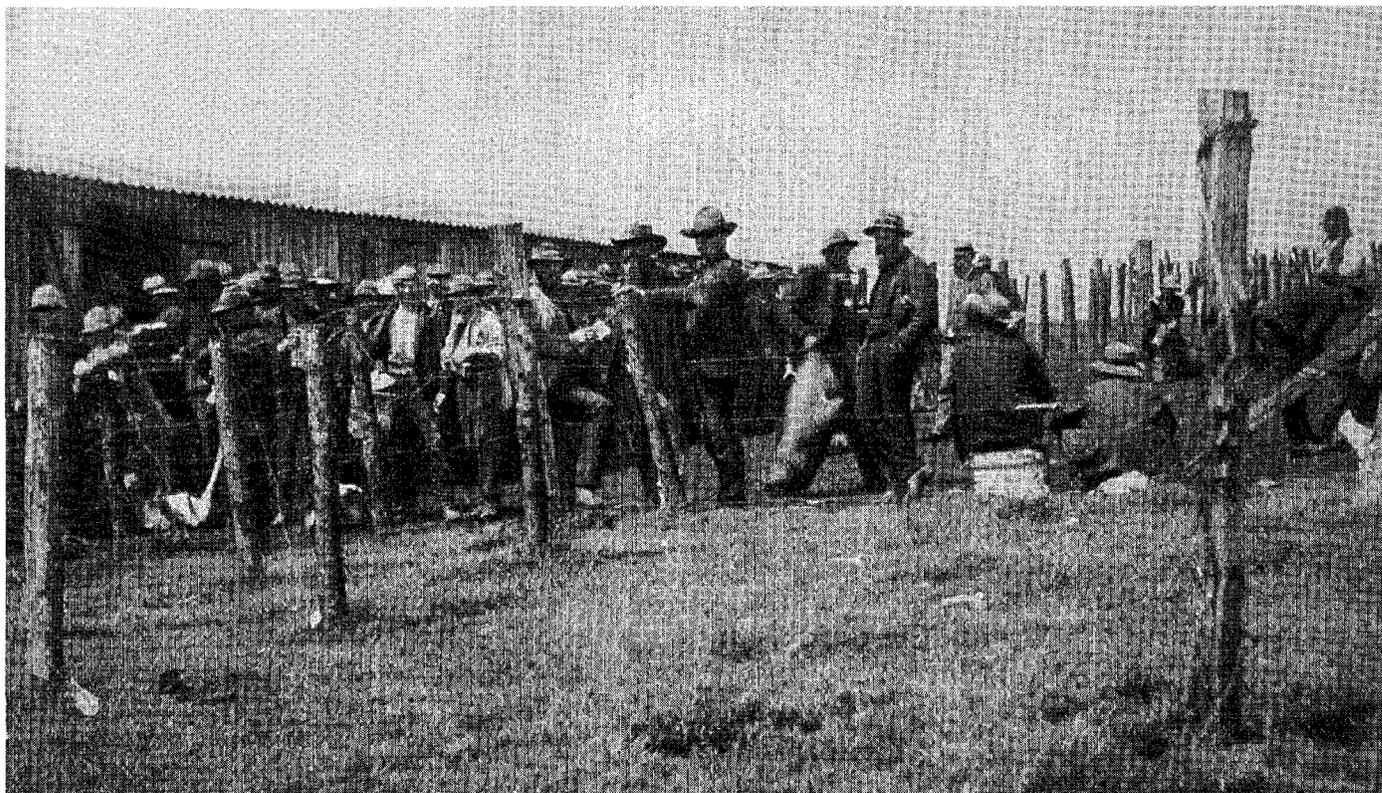
SHALL BRITISH TROOPS BE USED AGAINST LOYAL ULSTER?

1914 postcard recalling Irish Nationalist views on the Boer War.

surrender of the town. This was refused by General DeWet. General Paget made a wide turning movement and succeeded in getting hold of the most important position covering the town. This was done before dark by two companies of the Munsters and the Yorkshire Light Infantry. During the fighting the Munsters ran out of ammunition and had to take the Boer positions at bayonet point. Thirty-two Munsters were killed or wounded during the engagement.¹⁹ The following morning the fighting continued and by noon the town was in British hands.

After a weeks rest, the battalion

received orders to force Slabberts Nek, a passage-way through the hills. The day before the attack, July 22nd, there was a severe rainstorm, and when the men went into action the next day their uniforms were still wet. The Boers were entrenched in the hills on both sides of the Nek. Two companies of the Munsters were sent forward to check out the area and, if possible, to bring rifle fire to bear on the Boer artillery. The Boers were so strongly entrenched that the men were ordered to return. The next morning the Boers evacuated their positions and retreated towards Fouriesburg.



Boers in a concentration camp on the island of St. Helena.

Realising that he could be trapped behind the hills, DeWet split his forces and made his way back during the night through the British forces camped nearby. The remaining Boers elected Marthinus Prinsloo as leader and continued their retreat towards Fouriesburg.

On 30th July, Paget's forces reached Fouriesburg, where over 100 British soldiers were being held captive. The Munsters were present when Prinsloo and his force of over 4000 men surrendered, and the captive soldiers were released. Two weeks later, on August 13th, the Munsters travelled by rail to Pretoria, where the next day they had the honour, with the 1st West Riding Regiment, of marching past the commander of the British forces in South Africa, General Roberts.²⁰

Limerick

There was much sympathy for the Boer cause in Limerick, and throughout the country and the world. There were often nights when some poor man, on his way home from the pub with a few drinks on him, would shout "Up the Boers", leading to an appearance in court charged with being drunk and disorderly. On one occasion, a man was assaulted for wearing a khaki tie.²¹ But these were minor incidents compared to some more serious cases. A Munster Fusilier sergeant in charge of Strand Barracks was arrested for tampering with the mail from South Africa and taking two sovereigns from a letter.²² Many complaints were also received about the conduct of several women who were receiving separation allowances from the British War Office while their husbands were on active

service in South Africa. From the moment the money was received until it ran out, some of the women were rarely sober, with the result that their young families were neglected.²³

Two prominent people in the nationalist movement visited Limerick in September and December 1900, and both of them made reference to the war in South Africa. Michael Davitt, a Land League leader and member of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster, resigned his seat when the war started and went to the Transvaal. Afterwards he wrote a book called *The Boer Fight for Freedom*. He came to Limerick for a meeting of the United Irish League on Sunday, 2nd September, and had this to say: 'I have been in South Africa and in the Boer trenches, and I can say that the bravery was all on one side, and if General Botha had 40,000 men instead of 30,000, he would have licked General Roberts.'²⁴

At a meeting of Limerick Corporation on Thursday 18th October, Councillor Whelan proposed that the Queen of the Netherlands, the youngest monarch in Europe, should be thanked for offering President Kruger the protection of her flag in his hour of distress and having to leave his native land. (By this time Kruger had fled into Portuguese Mozambique). Councillor O'Brien refused to be associated with monarchy, declaring himself to be a republican. He said that he sympathised with Kruger, but would not support the motion, which was carried with four votes against.²⁵

Maude Gonne, a nationalist and suffragette, arrived in Limerick on Wednesday 12th December to give a lecture in the Athenaeum on 'Ireland and her Foreign Relations'. She had been in the Transvaal

earlier in the year and had met Major John McBride, who had formed a pro-Boer Irish Brigade, reputed at one time to have had 2000 men.²⁶ In the course of her lecture Miss Gonne said that Major McBride had done more for Ireland in organising the Brigade than any other living man. He saved Ireland's honour at a time of great need. The English Press, and news agencies all over the world for England, had not neglected her foreign relations, and were publishing the fact that 16,000 Irishmen were fighting in the Transvaal against the Boers and liberty, while the world was crying shame on Ireland and saying that Irishmen were miserable serfs.

On the following night, Thursday, a special meeting of the Corporation was called to confer the freedom of the city on Miss Gonne. The Mayor, John Daly, in announcing the decision to present her with the freedom, remarked that it was a distinction she had earned. At the conclusion of his address, Miss Gonne signed the roll of freedom.

Councillor Whelan then proposed that President Kruger be accorded the same honour. Councillor O'Brien wanted President Steyn's name included. Councillor Stokes wanted to know if they were acting legally in offering the freedom to a man who was at war with England, and pointed out that Kruger would never be able to exercise the franchise. Councillor Whelan noted that when Mr. Gladstone was made a freeman, the Mayor and Town Clerk went to England to get his signature on the roll book. Finally the proposal was carried by 22 votes to 2 against.²⁷

On August 15th, General Paget's column left Pretoria, moving northwards along the railway line, on their way to Warmbath. A few days later they clashed



Queen's South Africa medal awarded to Pte. J. Barry, Royal Munster Fusiliers.

Limerick Museum.

with De La Rey's men and were involved in some skirmishes at the town of Hamanskraal. When they reached Warmbath, where they remained for two weeks, they were under constant rifle and artillery fire. Some of the men were on duty on a nearby hill, but escaped uninjured. On September 3rd, a Boer guerrilla unit tore up 6 or 7 miles of the railway line behind Paget's forces. To avoid being cut off or isolated, Paget withdrew his men to Pienaars River station. On September 27th, the station was attacked from three sides. A company of the Munsters who were guarding it beat off the attack.

In mid-October, four companies of the Munsters were sent to the Marico Valley, near the town of Rustenburg, from which they returned on the 25th to their headquarters at Pienaars River.²⁸

Meanwhile Paget's reconnaissance units reported a build-up of General Botha's commando units, under the command of Commandants Viljoen and Erasmus, near the Wilge River. By November 25th, Paget had concentrated his forces at Eerestefabrieken, which was on the main railway line from Pretoria. The Boers had five artillery pieces, which included two Pom-Poms and a Maxim.²⁹

After three days fighting the Boers fell back on their main position at Rhenoster Kop (hill), about forty miles east of Pretoria, and eighteen miles from the railway line. Paget's forces met with a stubborn resistance and a fierce battle, the front of which extended seven miles, was

soon in progress. All along the whole seven mile front the contending forces were in contact for some considerable time, and the fire was terrific. General Paget initiated a counterattack in the shape of an attempt by the British right to turn the Boer left flank. In this movement the Munster Fusiliers and the West Riding Regiment bore the brunt of the fighting, and twice they advanced with a view to charging with the bayonet.³⁰

But it was impossible to make headway against the overwhelming fire. The men were pinned down and tired, but they held their positions on the ridge. Some of the men had to crawl through the grass to bring up supplies of ammunition and water. As soon as it got dark the men were ordered to dig-in. At the same time, Viljoen and his men, also using the cover of darkness, withdrew from the area. The next day Rhenoster Kop was fortified and held as an outpost for the protection of the railway against raids from De La Rey or Botha.³¹

The Munsters remained in this area during Christmas 1900.

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