

# The Munster Fusiliers and the South African War 1899-1902

## Background

**B**y the end of 1901, the scorched earth policy and the blockhouse line system of the British were beginning to take effect on those Boers (bitter-enders) who continued to fight on. They were finding it harder to get food, ammunition and clothing. It had reached a stage where the Boer commandos were taking the uniforms from captured British soldiers and wearing them, minus their insignia and military trappings. The last stages of the conflict became a war of attrition which the Boers could not hope to win<sup>1</sup>.

## Peace Overtures

Several of the Boer prisoners captured in 1900 were men of some influence. Even though they had taken part in the fighting, some of them knew that the war could not be won. With the encouragement of Gen. Kitchener, they formed themselves into the Burghers Peace Committee and discussed ways of ending the war. After meeting in Pretoria on 21 December 1900, where they were addressed by Kitchener, the members of the committee were allowed the freedom to make their way to the camps and hideouts of their fellow countrymen. Their reception was severe, being regarded by the commandos as traitors and cowards. At Ben Viljoens camp in the Transvaal, the President of the committee was executed. At De Wet's camp in the Orange Free State, two members of the committee were court-martialled, one of them being flogged and then shot. Other members of the committee were lucky to be able to get back to British lines<sup>2</sup>.

In another peace initiative in early February 1901, Kitchener let it be known that he was willing to meet the Boer General, Louis Botha. On 28 February, under protection of safe conduct, Botha met Kitchener at the town of Middleburg, which was situated on the Delagoa railway line in the eastern Transvaal. Kitchener put British policy for the Transvaal and the Orange Free State on the table. The main points were: annexation, a general amnesty for all Boer fighters, return of all prisoners from abroad, and self government as soon as possible. The Boers were also to receive financial assistance<sup>3</sup>.



The abortive peace conference at Middelburg in Transvaal on 28 February, 1901. (Front row, left to right) de Wet, Botha, Lord Kitchener, and Major-General Sir Bruce Hamilton; Colonel Henderson is standing behind de Wet. The British are wearing black armbands in memory of Queen Victoria.

by Des Ryan Part Three

When De Wet heard the proposals he said "what is the use of examining all the points, the only object for which we are fighting in the independence of our republics." On 16 March Botha wrote to Kitchener, and without giving any reason, informed him of the breaking off of negotiations<sup>4</sup>.

A year later, on 7 March 1902, British forces, again under the leadership of General Methuen, suffered one of the worst defeats of the whole guerrilla war, when nearly 200 men were killed or wounded and another 600 captured by the Boer commandant De La Rey<sup>5</sup>.

The very same day correspondence sent by Kitchener reached the camp of the Transvaal government. The contents were copies of letters between the governments of Great Britain and Holland, who were at that time giving refuge to President Kruger. The message was that the Dutch government was willing to act as mediator between the warring parties. The British government had already rejected the

Dutch offer: they felt that the only way to end the conflict was by getting the Boer representatives to meet with Gen. Kitchener, but at the same time they wanted the Boers to know that they were looking for ways to end the war.

On 26 March, the man who had done so much to disrupt relations between Britain and the Transvaal, Cecil Rhodes, died.

By this time the Boers had decided to negotiate, and on 19 April their leaders, under British protection, met at the town of Klerksdorp in the Transvaal to discuss the outcome of the war. The terms which they eventually accepted were much the same as those offered by Kitchener the previous February.

On Saturday, 31 May, after two and a half years of fighting, a treaty which ended the war was signed at the town of Vereeniging.

## The Munsters

Towards the end of January 1901 the Munsters left Rhenoster Kop and took over garrison duties from the Royal Fusiliers on the Wilge river and



The Christmas post arrives for British troops in South Africa, 1901.

(Photo courtesy Tom Keogh).

Bronkhorst stream. The following month they took part in what one history of the regiment called 'expeditions to farms.' These 'expeditions' more than likely meant that they took part in the eviction of Boer families and the destruction and burning of their property. All crops, stock and wagons were reduced to ashes<sup>6</sup>. By that time at least 630 buildings, farms, mills, cottages and hovels had been burnt. The buildings burned in the Orange Free State exceeded those in the Transvaal by nearly 100. In a few instances houses were burned without orders and by persons unknown<sup>7</sup>. An Australian, Walker Thompson of the Bushman's Corps, in a diary entry in 1901 (exact date not stated) condemned the scorched earth policy and the burning of homes, saying that he came over "to fight men, not women and children." He added that, after a long march, very cold and wet, the Munster Fusiliers "thought it would be easier to mind corpses than live men, so they bayoneted about 30 of the Boers and then lay down and had a good sleep"<sup>8</sup>.

On 28 February Kitchener, in an attempt to end the war, offered peace terms to a delegation of Boers led by General Botha at the town of Middleburg. The Boers decided that neither the Orange Free State nor the Transvaal would accept the proposals unless the annexations were reversed and the independence of the two countries was restored<sup>9</sup>.

After the negotiations had broken down, the Munsters were ordered to concentrate in the Middleburg area. There, on 14 April, they joined General Beatson's column, which was made up of the Victorian Mounted Infantry, the 1st. Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders and the 9th Batt. Royal Field Artillery. The column was sent in pursuit of Boer commandos north of the Delagoa railway line during the last two weeks of April and the first two weeks of May, and during that time they captured over 100 Boer prisoners.

During a second and third sweep of the countryside, this time north and south of the line, several prisoners and 100 wagons were captured. On 9 May, the battalion returned to Bronkhorst.

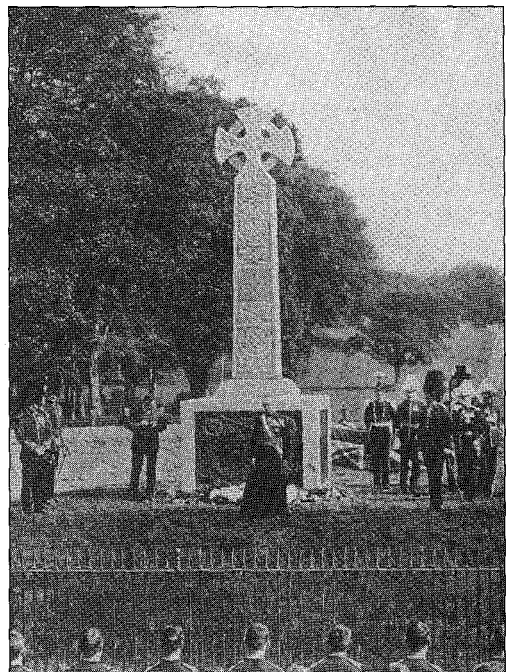
A few days later the battalion was split in two, companies B, C, F and G staying with Gen. Beatson's column, which was still carrying out searches north and south of the Wilge. Meanwhile, on 12 May, companies A, D, E and H arrived at Gen. Plumer's headquarters in Silverton, near Pretoria. Plumer's column consisted of 340 men from the 5th Queensland I.B., 419 men from the New Zealand M.R., four guns of the 18th Batt. Royal Field Artillery and two pom-poms (quick firing artillery). The column set out the next day towards the town of Bethel, which they reached on the 20th, as escorts to a convoy of supplies. On 23 May, the oxen convoy of the column, 120 wagons of sick and



Lt-General Lord Methuen who was de la Rey's adversary for most of the war.

wounded soldiers, prisoners and Boer families, under the protection of the Munsters and the Somerset Regiment, left Bethel and headed for the railway town of Standerton. At 6.00 on the morning of the 25th the convoy was attacked at Mooifontein by Ben Viljoen, one of Botha's commanders. The Boers came galloping over a nearby ridge and opened fire at close range<sup>10</sup>. Helped by an improvised squad of cooks and invalids, they held him off<sup>11</sup>. As the fighting got more intense, the Boers set fire to dry grass around the convoy and, under the cover of the smoke, they made a dash to get at the baggage and tried to seize some of the cattle. As darkness came the fighting subsided, but it was renewed the next day. Eventually the Boers gave up and rode off<sup>12</sup>.

In early June the column reached Piet Retief, where some of the Munsters were given the job of taking Boer prisoners to Wakkerstroom. Later in the month they rejoined the main column at Utrecht in Natal. Plumer's column left Utrecht on 24 June, recrossed the border into Transvaal, arriving on 7 July at Wonderfontein on the Delagoa railway line. From there the four companies of the battalion were sent to Pretoria to take charge of a 'gold train' which was going from Johannesburg to Cape Colony. When they reached De Aar they handed over escort duty and made their way to the Orange River Station<sup>13</sup>. As the station came into view, the men could see the hospital wing of the Orange River concentration camp, which was quite close to the line. The main camp itself was well laid out, the tents being 12 yards apart and a space of 20 yards between each row. But appearances were deceptive and the camp still needed to be overhauled<sup>14</sup>. Between August and December the battalion, nearly 700 strong, did garrison duty at Kimberly, escorted convoys to Boshoff and were sent out to threatened points on the railway line. Christmas day, 1901, was spent at Kimberly<sup>15</sup>.



The South African War Memorial, Killarney.



Lt-Colonel H. Plumer.

1902

On 3 January 1902 two hundred men from the battalion joined Lieut.-Col. Sitwell's formation, which had been detailed to take a convoy to Griquatown, which had been cut off for about four months. After crossing the Vaal River, the convoy headed west towards the village of Campbell. On the afternoon of the 13th, they were attacked near Doornfontein by about 400 Boers. After beating off the attack, the Munsters were ordered forward to clear a ridge, which they did at bayonet point in less than a quarter of an hour. Meanwhile back in Kimberly, on the same day, another convoy set off for Boshoff. On its way the convoy dropped off companies A and E to build block-houses on the Frankfort Hill. On 23 January, the convoy resumed its advance and as it reached Wacht-eeen-beetje, about half way between Kimberley and Boshoff, it came under heavy rifle fire from a Boer commando unit. Fourteen Munsters, having run out of ammunition, were surrounded. The Boers called on them to surrender, and when the officer in charge refused, he and his corporal were shot dead and three other men were wounded.

On 15 April, companies C and E, attached to Col. Pilcher's command, accompanied convoys to Daniels Kuil and then into Griquatown. When they reached Doornfontein, where some of the men had been killed and wounded in January, a party of 31 Munsters were left behind to wait in ambush as the column moved on. They opened fire on some Boers passing through the area, killing or wounding three and capturing several rifles and horses.

### The Second Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers

The 2nd Battalion Munster Fusiliers was stationed in India when the war began. They set sail for South Africa in December 1901, half the battalion, companies B, H, G and F, arriving on 30 December at Durban, in Natal. These men were employed mainly in building block-houses from Botha's Pass to Vrede. While some of the men manned the block-houses, others spent their time marching around the countryside in pursuit of the Boers.

The remainder of the battalion, companies A, C, D and E, arrived on 6 January 1902. These were sent to Newcastle, also in Natal, where they relieved the 2nd Batt. Dublin Fusiliers. Fifty-one of these soldiers were sent to Muller's Pass, on the border between Natal and the Transvaal. There they built and garrisoned five block-houses. Later, during a sweep of the Orange Free State on 20 and 21 February, a party of 211 men were sent to Botha's Pass to help with the defence of the block-house line. One of the Munsters was wounded in a trench when the Boers rushed the line<sup>16</sup>. When the war ended both battalions remained in South Africa for several months. On 18 September, the 1st Munster Fusiliers arrived in Cape Town, minus 117 of its men who had been seconded to the 2nd Battalion, to begin their journey back to India. The battalion arrived at Bombay on 10 October 1902. In the meantime the 2nd Battalion was also preparing to leave. In early October, 342 soldiers were sent to India to bring the 1st back up to battalion strength. On 10 October, the 2nd Battalion left Durban on the troopship *Orient*. On 16 November, they disembarked at Queenstown (Cobh)<sup>17</sup>.

### Postscript

On 16 July 1938, the *Limerick Chronicle* published a letter from the ex-MP and former member of the Irish Parliamentary Party (Parnell's), Michael Joyce. It was in response to an error which the newspaper had made. At the end of the South African War, Joyce intervened to save the life of a Limerick man who had been involved in a mutiny at Pretoria. The cause of the mutiny is not known, but the soldier was a member of the Leinster Regiment and was due to be hanged<sup>18</sup>.

While attending a session of Parliament in London, Joyce decided to tackle Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, who had no love for the Irish Party. The findings of the courtmartial had been telegraphed to Chamberlain for approval. Joyce decided that there was no time to be wasted. He took, for a private member, the unprecedented course of crashing the Minister's Sanctum. He introduced himself to Chamberlain, and a tense interview followed, on which the life of the Limerick man depended. "I will look into the matter" was Chamberlain's reply.

"Did you, Sir," said Joyce, "ever hear of a place called Limerick?"

"Yes," came the answer.

"Well, if you save the soldiers lives and ever come to Limerick, I can" added Joyce, "guarantee you a great welcome"<sup>19</sup>.

Chamberlain granted a reprieve to the condemned man, but he was sentenced to penal servitude for life.

Five people were involved in the mutiny, including the Limerick man. Two of the others were also sentenced to penal servitude for life, and two to twenty years. In 1905, when General Botha, then President of South Africa, was in London on government business, Joyce appealed to him through the office of the then Colonial Secretary, John Sealy, and also through John Dillon, the Irish MP, who was a personal friend of Botha. The end result was that the five men were given their freedom<sup>20</sup>.

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