

WEST AUSTRALIA HILL...SOUTH AFRICA 1900.

by Jim Grant

To the medal collector the main battles of the South African war of 1899 to 1902 are well known, as are the major defeats. Not so well known are the innumerable small desperate struggles, involving a few dozen or few hundred men, which added up to the final defeat or victory.

Although participating in many of the major actions the "colonial" contribution to this war was greatest in the field of irregular warfare. To the hard riding, independently minded Australian troopers British regular army tactics in this area were incomprehensible, either they couldn't catch the Boers or when they did they got themselves killed before they could achieve anything.

11974 Australians fought in South Africa. This is the story of some twenty five of them in their first action.

These men were from the Western Australian Company of the First Australian Regiment. Raised in Perth, for service in South Africa as an infantry company on the 13th October 1899 they were, on arrival in Cape Town, amalgamated with Victorian, South Australian, Tasmanian and New South Wales companies to form the regiment. Under the command of Col J.C. Hoad the regiment moved north through De Aar and Belmont to Rensburg where early in February they were converted to mounted infantry.

Shortly after sunrise on the 9th February 1900 100 men of the Inniskilling Dragoons and 37 men of the Western Australian Company, under the command of Captain Haig of the Inniskillings, were on patrol about three miles to the south of the camp when large numbers of Boers were observed among the small hills to their right. As they came under fire Capt. Haig ordered a retreat and instructed Capt Moor to take his mounted infantry and hold a nearby kopje, a small detached hill, and delay the enemy advance. Moor, with Lieuts Parker, Darling and about 20 other ranks rode to the kopje and after detaching Lt Darling and four men to hold a small rise on the left flank the rest ran to the top of the hill and made hasty preparations to defend it. This was limited to throwing up small sangars, in front of each soldier.

The kopje was in the open end of a horseshoe shaped ring of hills which were held by the Boers who wasted no time in opening fire on the defenders. The first casualty on the Australian side seems to have been Sergeant G. Hensman who was shot through the hips and legs as he raised himself to get a clearer view of an enemy movement. Privates A Krygger and Conway went to his assistance, the former bandaging Hensman's wounds and building a sanger in front of the wounded man. He also tried to make some cover from the sun by arranging some branches over the sergeant. On his fourth trip with materials to assist Krygger Michael Conway was shot through the head and died immediately. The Boers unfortunately seemed to have assumed that the position held a sniper and Hensman was hit another five times.

The position was shelled at various times throughout the day, and two infantry assaults were attempted. These were effectively stopped by accurately aimed independent rifle fire which came as a surprise to the attackers who expected

"British" soldiers to fire in volleys to the front of their positions.

By early afternoon the flanking party was beginning to run out of ammunition and they had to crawl round to the horse holders to obtain more. On five separate occasions Capt Moor sent riders to request permission to retire and although all got out safely none were permitted to try to get back although Pte J Messer volunteered to go. Major G F McWilliams, the company medical officer, repeatedly asked for permission to go forward but it was not until dusk that his request was granted. En route to the hill he met Moor and his men.

At dusk, Captain Moor had decided that nothing further could be gained by remaining on the hill. The Boers were already beginning to slip past in the gathering darkness, so he ordered a retreat on his own authority. They successfully withdrew from the hill and returned to camp without incurring any further casualties.

Later that evening Pte Krygger led an ambulance party to the hill and brought Sgt Hensman back to the camp. The Boers had found him when they had occupied the area and had removed his accoutrements and stolen his watch.

Michael Conway was buried at the foot of the hill.

The days fighting was now over but the final casualty list had not yet been tallied, Sgt Bishop died on the 14th February of sunstroke as a result of exposure on the kopje and Sgt Hensman succumbed on the 12th March, not long after his appointment as Lieutenant had been gazetted. This brought the losses to three dead and five wounded.

A wounded burgher was brought into Bloemfontein Hospital a short time later and he recounted the attackers feelings. There had been 400 Boers in the attacking group and they thought it would be easy to overrun such a small party, "but we did not know the Australians then." Accurate shooting dropped many of the men making a frontal attack and the remainder realised that it was futile to continue in that fashion. Attempts were made to crawl round the position but the defenders merely waited until they had a clear shot and picked them off. They also found that shelling the hill only made the Australians shoot straighter!

The Boer Commandant had offered the defenders the chance of surrendering but received in reply a show of bayonets over the sangers and cries of a "derisive nature" The young burgher said "we could do nothing but lie there and swear."

It would seem that both sides must have greeted the arrival of sunset with some relief.

In none of the accounts of this action is any mention made of an attempt to support or relieve the detachment. The reason for this apparent abandonment of Moor and his men is explained by an earlier decision by Lord Roberts to halt his march into the Orange Free State and attack General Cronje at Paardeberg. As a consequence of this General French who was operating to the west of Rensburg with his mounted force was withdrawn and replaced by General Clements with a mainly infantry holding force on the 6th February.

Clement's command was recognisably inadequate for the task. He had four and a half infantry battalions, two

batteries, two squadrons of cavalry and The First Australian Regiment. His mounted force numbered barely 800 men and he had been ordered to hold a thirty five mile front and prevent the passage of any Boer force attempting to enter Cape Colony. If, however, the Boers became aware of his weakness he was authorised to extricate his scattered positions and fall back on Naauwpoort fighting a series of delaying actions. Clements had split up his force into seven main groups to maintain the appearance of a larger force so when General Celliers attacked the British right flank with a large force the individual posts were hard pressed to defend themselves and unable to manouver to assist any other group.

Abbreviations used in the following section :

Q.S.A. Queens South Africa Medal

K.S.A. Kings South Africa Medal

J Johannesburg

DH Diamond Hill

W Wittebergen

B Belfast

CC Cape Colony

OFS Orange Free State

T Transvaal

No awards were made for the action although a number of the men received awards for subsequent service.

Known participants and casualties at West Australian Hill.

Capt. H.G.Moor Promoted to Major backdated to 14.10.1899
KIA at Palmietfontein 19.7.1900. Awarded Q.S.A. with bars
J/DH/W/CC

Had previously served in Bechuanaland with the Royal Artillery and received the medal for that campaign. Was Officer Commanding Permanent Artillery, Western Australia immediately prior to taking up command of the 1st Contingent.

Lieut. H.F.Darling Promoted to Captain 1.1.1901. Awarded
D.S.O. London Gazette 19.4.1901. Q.S.A. with bars J/DH/W/CC.

Served with the Geraldton Rifle Volunteers from the 23.3.1896 and was commissioned on the 6.9.1897. He joined the 44th Battalion A.I.F. as a Captain on the 20.3.1916, transferred to the 28th Battalion A.I.F. as a Major on the 15.12.1916. For his services with the A.I.F. he received the British War Medal and Victory Medal.

Lieut. F.W.M.Parker Subsequently a Lieutenant in the Royal Irish Regiment, resigned to take command of 5th Contingent-(Mtd Infy) Awarded D.S.O. London Gazette 19.4.1901. Q.S.A. with bars B/CC/OFS. K.S.A with two bars.

He joined the ranks of the Perth Artillery Volunteers in April 1894 and was commissioned on the 30.11.1897. After serving in South Africa he continued to serve with the Commonwealth Military Forces in Western Australia. He

enlisted in the A.I.F. on the 18.8.1914 and went to Egypt as a Captain with the 8th Field Battery where he died of disease on 18.3.1915.

He was awarded the Colonial Auxiliary Forces Long Service Medal in 1914 and the 1914/15 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal for services with the A.I.F.

41 Coy. Sgt. Maj. P.M. Edwards Awarded D.C.M. London Gazette 27.9.1901. Q.S.A. with bars J/DH/W/CC.

Sgt. G.G.W. Hensman Wounded, died of wounds 12.3.1900 Promoted Lieutenant, 7.3.1900, with effect from 1.1.1900. Awarded Q.S.A. with bar CC.

18 Sgt. G.N. Bishop Died of sunstroke, 14.2.1900, as a result of exposure on the 9.2.1900. Awarded Q.S.A. with bar CC.

112 Sgt. S.J. Unkles Wounded. Awarded Q.S.A. with bars J/DH/W/CC.

60 Lc-Cpl. J.N. Tratham Mentioned in despatches by Commanding Officer on the 25.2.1900. promoted to Corporal 17.3.1900. Captured at Vaal River 29.5.1900 and freed from Pretoria on the 7.6.1900.

97 Pte. J. Ansel Wounded. Awarded Q.S.A. with bars CC/OFS

104 Pte. J. Bird Wounded. Awarded Q.S.A. with bar CC.

96 Pte. M. Conway Killed in action. (ref text) Awarded Q.S.A. with bar CC

51 Pte. L. France Wounded. Awarded Q.S.A. with bars DH/B/CC/OFS.

101 Pte. G. Gifford Wounded. Awarded Q.S.A. with bars CC/OFS/T.

94 Pte. A. Krygger Mentioned in despatches, 10th and 17th February 1900. Awarded Q.S.A. with bar CC. Mentioned in despatches by Commanding Officer on the 10.2.1900 and 17.2.1900. Invalided to Australia 31.7.1900.

9 Pte. J. Messer Promoted to Corporal 25.10.1900. Dangerously wounded at Diamond Hill, 11.6.1900. Awarded Q.S.A. with bars J/DH/CC/OFS.

46 Pte. W. Murray Awarded Q.S.A. with bars CC/OFS.

86 Pte. W.R. White Awarded Q.S.A. with bars J/DH/W/CC.

"Operations at Slingersfontein, 9.2.1900.

The General Officer Commanding wishes to place on record his high appreciation of the courage and determination shown by a party of twenty men of the Western Australians under the command of Captain H.G. Moor in the above

operations. By their determined stand against 300-400 men they entirely frustrated the enemy's attempt to turn the flanks of our position."

SOURCES

The Australians and the Boer War by R L Wallace

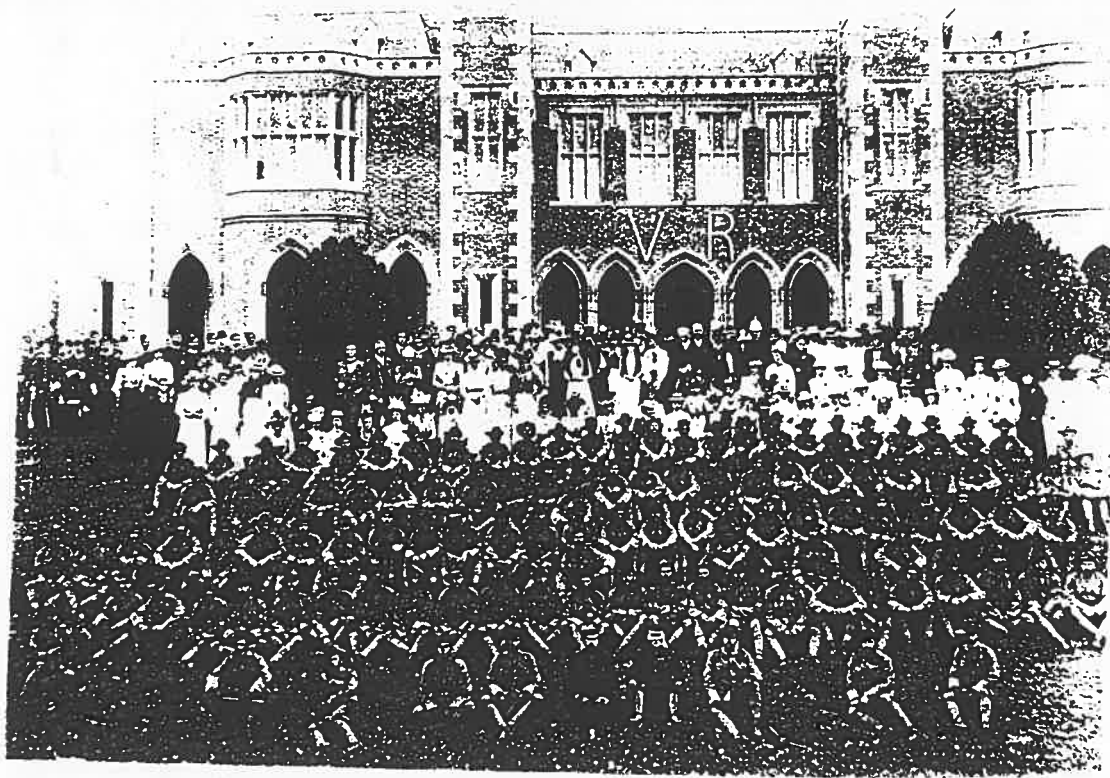
History of the West Australian Contingents serving in South Africa during the Boer War by Lt-Col J Campbell

Official Records of the Australian Military Contingents to the War in South Africa by Lt-Col P L Murray

Western Australian Contingents to the South African War by John Burridge

The Times History of the War in South Africa

Western Australian Government Gazettes and local newspapers



First Contingent WAMI
 GOVERNMENT House Farewell
 2 Nov 1899

KRYGGER VC ?

by John Sweetman

It was reported in The Illustrated London News, that " Alone among the colonies, Australia has never held a V.C. This reproach has been taken away by Trooper Morris, N.S.W. Lancers, who rescued a wounded comrade at Arundel and Trooper Kruger of the West Australians has also won the coveted distinction. "

However, this was not to be the case for either of the two men.

In the case of No. 94 Private Alexander Krygger / Kruger, of the 1st Western Australian Mounted Infantry, he was only to receive the clasp " Cape Colony " to his South Africa Medal.

He was born in Ballarat, Victoria, in 1867 to a German father and a Irish mother. An engineer by trade, he also served in the 3rd Battalion of the Victorian Militia for eleven years, during which time he became an excellent soldier and a skilled marksman.

Came in Western Australia in the late 1880's to work in the gold mines which he did until a depression in the mining industry closed many of the mines, thus putting Alexander Krygger and many others out of work.

At this time, his marksman's skill were to provide him with a living as a kangaroo shooter. It is not known if this was the occupation that he was following at the time of the call for volunteers for the 1st Contingent for service in South Africa, as his enlistment details show only :-

No. 94. Private Alexander Krygger.

Age : 31 years and six months.

Birthplace : Victoria.

Occupation : Engineer.

P.M.S. : 11 years in Victorian Militia.

On enlisting in the contingent, he was described as being in his early thirties, 5ft. 6in. in height, weighed 10 stone 4 lbs. and " was as hard as nails. "

On the 9th of February, 1900, he was a member of the patrol led by Major Moor which came in contact with a Boer force heading for the British supply depot at Slingersfontein, which the patrol had just left.