

The first Australian unit in the Boer War

Craig Wilcox



TYPES OF NEW SOUTH WALES REGIMENTS

NEW SOUTH WALES LANCERS
Troopers Review Order

NEW SOUTH WALES MOUNTED RIFLES
Review Order

NEW SOUTH WALES FIELD
ARTILLERY OFFICERS

A group of New South Wales Lancers training in London found themselves in South Africa as the first Australian unit sent to the Boer War of 1899–1902.

Next time you're lucky enough to find yourself in London with a day or two to spare, take the train out to Kew Gardens, walk past the tempting pub beside the railway station, and head for the Public Record Office, Britain's gigantic official archive. If you know where to look, you can encounter a forgotten part of Australia's military heritage.

Records WO32/8209 and WO32/8211 are two of the thousands of bundles of files (called "pieces") which the Public Record Office has inherited from Britain's War Office. Inside the two pieces, among other documents, are 72 small blue slips of paper. All were signed by Australian soldiers in October 1899. Forty-seven of the

slips read: "I am willing and desire to proceed on service to South Africa". Twenty-five read the opposite: "I am unwilling to proceed on service to South Africa", or, in one case, "I have not had time to consider the question of going to South Africa and cannot at present make up my mind." The slips are the mute testimony to the confused and controversial dispatch of the first unit of Australian soldiers to the Anglo-Boer war of 1899–1902 – a war in which 10,000 or more Australians fought and which cost 500 Australian lives.

Above: After Richard Simkin, *Types of New South Wales regiments*, published in the supplement to the *Army and Navy gazette*, London 1900 (chromolithograph, 28.1 x 20.3 cm, AWM ART 19890)

Australians at Aldershot

The unit was a squadron of the New South Wales Lancers which had come to England for six months' intense training with the British army at Aldershot. As a training exercise the visit was a failure from the start. The lancers' captain, Charles Cox, was a vain, blustering bully who preferred socialising to soldiering. Their two lieutenants were likeable but hopelessly incompetent. A few of the men in the ranks were diligent soldiers – men like Hugh Vernon, an architect's son, and Ben Harkus, a postman when not in uniform. Many, though, had come merely to see England on the cheap. Such unpromising human material was unlikely to be much improved by more training.

In any case the lancers, like almost all Australian soldiers at the time, were not professional fighting men but citizen soldiers who normally wore their uniforms for only a few hours each week. Their easy discipline and comfortable approach to their military duties made mixing with regular soldiers difficult regardless of how committed they were. Relations with the Carbineers, a cavalry regiment to which the squadron was attached, were notably frosty, and Cox had to plead hard before his squadron was allowed on autumn manoeuvres.

To make matters worse, the lancers could never shake off recurrent influenza and the measles. It was common for twenty of them to be in hospital at any one time. Perhaps fate was against them. Even their emu mascot died after swallowing buttons, badges and a belt buckle.

But the lancers' ill-luck and incompetence, even the cold shoulder they received from ordinary British soldiers, did not really matter. What mattered to their sponsors was that slouch hats were being seen on parade beside tartan kilts and bearskin bonnets. New South Wales was still a British colony, Queen Victoria still the ruler of one of the largest empires the world had seen. Empire-minded men – including James Burns, the lancers' colonel back in Sydney, and Joseph Chamberlain, the British government's powerful

Secretary of State for Colonies – believed that the lancers' presence at Aldershot would be the first of many interchanges between British and colonial military units. These would help stave off the development of colonial military forces into separate national armies and blend them into one vast, united British imperial army. The lancers' powerful London patrons, especially Lord Carrington, a former governor of New South Wales and the lancers' honorary colonel, toasted them at great banquets, invited them to military tournaments, and praised them in the pages of the press – not for what they were, but for the great future their visit seemed to represent.

Volunteered for war

Joseph Chamberlain hoped that colonial units on interchange would “share the dangers and the glories of the British Army”. The chance for sharing came sooner than he or anyone else expected.

In early June 1899, just six weeks after the lancers had arrived at Aldershot, war seemed likely in South Africa between the British empire and the independent Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. The War Office began to organise to send a British army corps to South Africa to crush the Boers. It would include cavalry regiments with which the lancers were training. Chamberlain asked colonial governments in

Canada and Australasia to send small units to fight beside the army for the war's duration.

As Aldershot began to hum with military preparations, Cox asked his men whether they wanted to go to war with the rest of the cavalry.

Above: A captain during the Boer War, Cox was regarded as unreliable by some of his men and described as “a very foolish person” by a British official. Nevertheless by 1921, when this portrait was painted, Cox had achieved the rank of brigadier. John Longstaff, *Brigadier General Cox* (1921, oil on canvas, 76 x 63.8 cm, AWM ART 02997)

Right: Trooper Hugh Vernon, seated on the right, at first sympathised with the Boer cause but later decided to fight and was wounded in action. Here he poses with two other New South Wales Lancers after they had been invalided home to Australia. (AWM P1208/28/28)



Boer War 1899-1902





Above: New South Wales Lancers parade in England in late 1899, prior to their departure for South Africa. (AWM P0295/843/007)

The men later said they did not think Cox was serious. Cox later said that all the sergeants but one were eager to fight. Whatever the truth was, Cox informed Burns in Sydney and Carrington in London that the squadron had volunteered. Soon the press knew of the lancers' "patriotic" gesture.

At a banquet in August, Cox boasted publicly of the havoc his soldiers would wreak on the enemy. Hugh Vernon complained in a letter to his family that "Cox made a fool of himself" during his rambling speech, and that "we don't reckon on more than 15 that will go under him. The others will desert in a body."

There were complex reasons for their dissent. One or two, Vernon included, sympathised with the Boers and hated "the landgrabbing policy the English follow". Australian distrust of being dragged into British wars was rare in this period, and what Vernon most objected to – for the moment, at least – was an unjust war, not a British one. A more common feeling among the lancers was fear that Cox and the incompetent lieutenants would lead them to disaster on the battlefield. Even Vernon said he would think about going if he could be led by a British army officer.

Above all, the lancers resented the way Cox had assumed, and then advertised, that they would follow him to war. Were they not entitled to consult their relatives and employers on the matter? To be asked officially whether they wanted to fight in a foreign war? Did not the question of whether their squadron, a part of their colony's military forces, could fight outside the colony rest with the New South Wales government rather than with Cox? Forbidden by military custom from criticising their captain openly and unwilling to offend their patrons, the lancers retreated into a savage silence.

Early in September Cox assembled the squadron and warned that the finger of scorn would be pointed forever at those who did not go to South Africa. Believing he was armed with his men's compliance if not their consent, he lodged a written request that the squadron be allowed to fight in South Africa. He also visited Chamberlain's Colonial Office to plead his case. There he explained to an official that the *Nineveh*, the ship on which the lancers were to return to Sydney, would sail on 10 October and would stop at Cape Town. There need be no special arrangements to transport the squadron. It could sail just ahead of the army corps and alight at Cape Town, all at its own expense.

Cox's offer seemed to Chamberlain's staff "a splendid opportunity to use Colonial troops". Of course the New South Wales government would have to endorse use of the squadron for war, but the Colonial Office correctly identified the slow-moving, unimaginative War Office, which administered the British army, as the more significant obstacle.

While the Colonial Office went to work persuading the War Office, Carrington – at Burns' suggestion – telegraphed Sydney to announce, "Entire squadron here volunteer [for] service ... sincerely hope Government of New South Wales will sanction this patriotic offer". Bearing Carrington's telegram, Burns and the colony's military commandant petitioned the New South Wales minister responsible for defence. No time must be lost in making a decision, urged Burns, with the *Nineveh's* embarkation just a week away.

Some historians see behind these manoeuvres a conspiracy to rush the New South Wales

Troopers, Review Order.

government into committing soldiers to fight in South Africa. That is unlikely. Chamberlain wanted Cox's offer accepted, but it only concerned one hundred men and he had bigger fish to fry. He wanted all colonial governments to offer to send troops to join the British army during the war. For maximum propaganda value, those troops should sail from their own shores. Thus Chamberlain telegraphed the New South Wales governor that Cox's offer was to be considered "outside of general arrangements" he hoped the colony would make for war.

On 3 October the War Office agreed to incorporate the lancers into the army corps, while in Sydney the New South Wales government gave provisional approval for the squadron to fight, pending agreement by parliament, scheduled to meet in a fortnight. The lancers had been volunteered for war.

That same day the first indication of the lancers' true mood came to light. A clergyman who shared a train with some members of the squadron learned of their "great discontent at the way in which their Captain is getting them sent off to the Transvaal." He wrote to the War Office warning that many lancers "would probably refuse at the last moment" to go to war. Alarmed, the War Office ordered an immediate investigation.

There was only one way to find out the lancers' real wishes – and it would never have been taken if the British authorities had been the ruthless imperialists they are sometimes painted. On 8 and 9 October the 72 lancers who were not absent from Aldershot – generally on

unauthorised leave – were led one by one into a small room where an officer sitting at a desk asked them to sign one of the two blue slips of paper now held in the Public Record Office. The wonder is that so many lancers were now prepared to go. Still, the War Office and Colonial Office were furious when they realised that Cox had lied to them. "Captain Cox is evidently a very foolish person," wrote one official. It was too late to do anything but speak sternly to Cox – and to make him settle the debts he had run up at Aldershot. In any case, any lancers who did not want to fight could return to Sydney on the *Nineveh* after the others embarked at Cape Town.

If the British authorities knew that not all lancers were about to embark for war, the people of London did not. A hundred thousand turned out on 10 October to farewell the lancers on their way to board the *Nineveh* – but not because they all shared the vision of a future imperial army. By chance, news had just broken of the Boer ultimatum that finally triggered the long-brewing war. The lancers seemed to be the exotic first component of the army corps off to the front to chasten the enemy. London's lord mayor hailed the lancers' heroic determination to uphold England's honour. Carrington praised the patriotism which had prompted the men to throw in their lot with the mother country. Through all the speeches and cheering the lancers "looked extremely depressed," observed an Australian photographer. Hugh Vernon avoided the painful spectacle altogether by staying in London to study.

Below: An Australian with a large-calibre mortar on wheels in South Africa during 1900. (AWM P0175/462/001)



War or home?

When the *Nineveh* entered Cape Town on 2 November, Cox read a telegram from Sydney which told him that the New South Wales parliament had endorsed the lancers' use in war. But Cox was instructed to send home unfit men and also young ones whose parents had told the government they wanted them kept out of battle. Cox and 69 men stayed in South Africa. The army command, warned of Cox's unreliability, at first kept the depleted squadron from any serious fighting. In December it was reinforced from Australia and from London – Vernon had decided to fight after all. "I never smile – my heart is in South Africa – I hate English people," he lamented, and with these confused sentiments he too joined the war. With the reinforcements came a competent major, George Lee, to whom Cox had to surrender his command. But this was not enough to prevent the lancers' being involved in one of the first debacles to befall Australian troops in war. In January 1900 some lancers, along with members of another New South Wales cavalry unit, were ambushed at Slingsfontein. One lancer died from bullet wounds and ten were taken prisoner.

Meanwhile, 31 of the Aldershot lancers had returned to Sydney – including Charles O'Sullivan, staunch as ever in his simple refusal

to fight, and Ben Harkus, who felt that his duty to the post office and his sick wife outweighed his duty to the empire. News of the men's return preceded them, prompting an angry debate between those who defended the right of citizen soldiers and Australians to refuse to fight in foreign wars, and those who felt that if the empire were in danger it was every soldier's duty to fight wherever he was asked to fight. Larrikins inside parliament as well as out accused the men of hiding behind the skirts of their female relatives. James Burns denied that any lancer was coming home for reasons other than illness or youth, and he dared the politicians to insult his soldiers face to face. He had to apologise to parliament to avoid losing his commission.

The 31 lancers landed at Circular Quay on 10 December after a few weeks in quarantine – dogged by sickness to the last. They came ashore early in the morning and dressed in civilian plain clothes to avoid attention, but a small crowd was ready to jeer them. White feathers would be the only decorations for these, the men who two months before had been hailed as heroes.

Burns, smarting after having to make his apology to parliament, chaired a military inquiry to establish whether all the men had good reason to return. He accepted reasons of sickness (eight men) and youth (another eight), even family commitments like Harkus' (five men) and O'Sullivan's open refusal. Two men had been dismissed by Cox for disobedience, hence their return. That left seven "unsatisfactory" lancers, whom the embarrassed colonel promptly hounded from his regiment.

But the public pressure never lifted from any of the men. The war was going badly for the empire, so badly that many feared Germany or France might come in on the Boers' side. Frightened Sydneysiders did not care whether Ben Harkus and others had been officially exonerated for returning. And many of the returned men agreed that, unlike two months ago, the empire was in danger and it was time to offer their services. Most, including Harkus, enlisted in one of the contingents the New South Wales government was now raising for South African service.

Left: Australians' horses fared badly. Here a soldier farewells his horse after it has died on the veldt. (AWM P0295/843/285)





Above: A small group of Australian soldiers cook a meal outside their tent in 1900. (AWM P0175/462/007)

Harkus and 14 others, mostly Aldershot men, joined the squadron in March. It was now attached to the British cavalry for the great, punishing ride on Pretoria which by June 1900 destroyed the Boers as an army – though not as an enemy. The relentless pace, vast distances, dry countryside and lack of targets for the charge destroyed the cavalry as well. Cavalrymen who survived the heat and endemic typhoid fever began to use mounted rifle tactics, riding horses and ponies purely for mobility between battlefields. The lancers performed no great feat of arms and never used their lances during their year of active service. Still, they fought no worse than the British cavalry whose skill they worshipped.

Charles Cox returned to Sydney a hero to many and a villain to some. Hugh Vernon was invalided home. Ben Harkus died of typhoid fever. Another casualty of the lancers' visit to Aldershot, of the Anglo-Boer war and of the lancers' commitment to it, was the dream of further interchanges between the empire's military units and a single imperial army. The war helped clarify in the colonies' minds that yes, they wanted to help fight for the empire – but on their own terms, not subject to British-army and British-government direction. Their military forces were not going to become part of the British army.

The author

Dr Craig Wilcox is writing the Australian War Memorial's history of Australians and the Boer War. He is the author of *For hearths and homes: citizen soldiering in Australia, 1854–1945* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998).

TO COMMEMORATE THE CENTENARY OF THE ANGLO-BOER WAR, SOUTH AFRICA IS ISSUING A SERIES OF STAMPS, COVERS AND SPECIAL CANCELLATIONS



The first collector unit comprises a mint se-tenant pair of stamps, a First Day Cover and two ABOPHIL Covers with special commemorative cancels.

This complete unit is available at \$10.00 each, post free.



One of the three special cancellers

The ABOPHIL envelope depicts a sculpture which commemorates the Peace Treaty of Vereeniging.



In conjunction with the stamp issue a major International Philatelic Exhibition is being held. A limited edition of 12 special postcards reflecting various aspects of Boer War philately is being produced. They will become sought after collector's items.

The complete unit of 12 postcards is available at \$36.00 a set, post free.

To order any of these items send your name, address and appropriate payment (money order, cheque, or Credit Card) to :

Three of the 12 postcards

STAMPS FOR COLLECTORS
PO Box 428, Port Adelaide 5015
Fax: (08) 8242 5735
E-mail: stamps@senet.com.au

