

Boer soldier from the Transvaal (South African Republic), c. 1900. AWM P07379.064

Page 63: Boer troops made strategic use of their home terrain. AWM 129017



Troopers, not trackers

There is no proof that Indigenous men went to the Boer War as trackers and were denied return to Australia.

BY PETER BAKKER AND THOMAS ROGERS

Over the last few years it has become known that a number of Aboriginal men served in several Australian contingents during the Second Anglo-Boer War. However, there is a widely-circulated story of 50 “black trackers” that dominates the interpretation of the role that Aboriginal men played during the Boer War and the treatment they received at the end of their service. There are three essential parts to this story: (1) that in early 1902 Lord Kitchener, the Commander in Chief of the British forces in South Africa, specifically requested the Australian government to send Aboriginal trackers to serve in fighting the Boers; (2) that 50 black trackers travelled to South Africa on the transport ship *Euryalus*; and (3) that at the end of the war they were left stranded in South Africa because they had been refused re-entry into Australia, following the requirements of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901. But close scrutiny turns up no evidence to support any part of this story.

Kitchener’s request

The Boer War erupted in October 1899 between the British Empire and the two Afrikaner republics, the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (known to the British as the Transvaal).

The Boer War is generally seen as having three phases. In the short first stage, the infantry-dominated British army was besieged at several points by mounted Boer forces that were more mobile and better suited to South Africa’s terrain. This period included what the British termed “Black Week”: the shocking and decisive defeats of British forces at Stormberg, Magersfontein, and Colenso in the week of 10–17 December 1899. The second phase of the war saw the British launch a major counter-offensive that left them in control of most of the major towns in South Africa, including the two Boer capitals, Bloemfontein and Pretoria. The third phase was the longest, lasting from September 1900 to the end of the war in May 1902. During this time, the Boers conducted a guerrilla campaign against British forces and logistics, which the British struggled to counter.

By late 1901, the British were desperate to put an end to the fighting. Recognising his forces’ persistent weaknesses of poor mobility and susceptibility to ambush, Kitchener requested trackers from Canada and newly federated Australia.

In January 1902 these requests were reported in Australian newspapers. At first there was some confusion about what exactly Kitchener wanted. He

had asked for “trekkers”, which Prime Minister Edmund Barton thought could mean bullock drivers, and so he wrote back for confirmation. Kitchener responded that he needed “trackers”, and recruiters in Australia began looking for men experienced in tracking, as well as riding and shooting. There was no indication that Kitchener meant Aboriginal trackers, nor that Barton sought Aboriginal trackers. However, one newspaper interpreted the request in this way, and it is perhaps here that we see the origin of the “50 black trackers” story.

On 6 January 1902, the *Bendigo Independent* inexplicably reported that Kitchener had asked the Governor-General of Canada to send “black trackers”. The next day, the same newspaper declared that Kitchener had also requested “black trackers” from Australia. So far, this is the only known Australian newspaper report of Kitchener asking for black trackers specifically.

The steamship *Euryalus*

As a result of Kitchener’s request, the NSW parliamentarian William Willis informed Barton that he would send 50 “bush trackers” on board the steamer *Euryalus*. There is no indication that the “bush trackers” were Indigenous. ▶

but more importantly, none seems to have embarked on the ship.

Sydney's *Evening News* published a lengthy report of the vessel departing Sydney for Durban, noting that 607 horses were being carried. There is, however, no record of 50 men embarking or landing, nor any documentation regarding provision for their food or pay in this or any of the other accounts of the ship's voyage. There is no mention of any white officer or officers in charge of the men. If a contingent of Aboriginal trackers had been on board, they would have been commanded by one or more white officers, following the pattern set in the colonial native police forces. There is no paper trail suggesting that police trackers were taken from Australia. Black trackers were a valuable resource for the police, and such a large number would not have been sent without leaving evidence. In fact, there is no mention of any servicemen on board the *Euralyus* for this voyage.

But contemporary issues concerning race were exposed in this newspaper account. The reporter wrote that the crew of the *Euralyus* was "a dark one,

but all British subjects nevertheless", and the first mate remarked that "they are restricted aliens, and all members of the British Empire". It is possible that the crewmen were South Asian, because the ship had come from Calcutta. The reporter showed an awareness of the complexities of sailing between ports in the British Empire, as at that time restrictive immigration policies had been established in Australia and in the ship's destination, Natal, South Africa. In this context, it seems unlikely that the reporter would not have mentioned a large group of Aboriginal trackers on board.

George Valder's report

In 1907 South Africa was in the grip of a depression, and many Australians living there became unemployed and unable to return home. The Commonwealth government agreed to pay the passage home of these stranded Australians. The condition was that those returning would repay the money once they had found employment in Australia. George Valder, the New South Wales government's commercial agent in the Cape Colony, began

assessing applicants to the scheme. Of the 3,000 applicants that he assessed, Valder accepted about 1,300. On returning to Australia, he presented the NSW government with a report on this process.

The section of this document relevant to the black tracker issue was entitled "The Colour Question". Adhering to the Immigration Restriction Act, he rejected all the claims of white Australian men who had married "coloured" women in South Africa – that is, women of mixed European and African or Asian ancestry. Under the Act, these women could not emigrate to Australia, and Valder had been instructed not to break up families in this way. But what was the status of people of colour who had been born in Australia and wanted to return?

Valder described these applicants in the racial language of the time: "in some instances these were the descendants of American Negroes resident in Australia, others were evidently half caste, and two or three were either Aboriginals, or Aboriginal half castes". He refused their applications, again citing the



Immigration Restriction Act. Two of these coloured men responded that they had left Australia before the Act had come into effect. On advice from the Prime Minister, Valder told them that they would need a permit to disembark in Australia.

It is not clear whether these two men were Aboriginal or of African American descent. It is also not known if they had served in the Boer War, though it is possible. Valder estimated that 80 per cent of all male applicants had served in the war, but

not necessarily in Australian units. It is worth remembering that more soldiers served in irregular units than in the Canadian, Australian and New Zealand contingents combined. These units were generally mounted infantry under the command of a British officer. Many irregular soldiers were Australians, but irregulars were not supported by Australia. Many of them had made their own way to South Africa during the war or had already been employed there at the start of hostilities.

Conclusions

Aboriginal men *did* serve in the Boer War. But so far, the only ones identified have been troopers, not trackers. The idea that 50 Aboriginal trackers were sent to South Africa and were then denied entry back into Australia has no basis in the available records.

The *Euralyus*, the ship that was to have taken 50 "bush trackers", appears to have taken only its cargo of horses to the front. Even if the 50 men were on board, there can be no certainty that they were Aboriginal trackers.

Many unemployed Australians attempted to return to Australia from South Africa during the 1907 depression, and some were hindered by White Australia policies, including a small number of Aboriginal people. This is, of course, an indefensible bureaucratic injustice. However we cannot say for certain that these men were veterans of the Boer War, or if they were, that they had fought in Australian units.

This is a period of Australian military history that is ripe for further investigation. The colonial period was one of great mobility. We are confident that further research will reveal more stories of Aboriginal service in the Boer War. ●

+ From Gongolgon to Otahuhu



Detail from wedding photograph of Alfred Ernest Whye and Mabel Anne Plumley, married on 22 June 1904 in Otahuhu, New Zealand. Photograph courtesy of the Whye family.

Alfred Ernest Whye was born to Carry Francis Hilt, an Aboriginal woman, and Alfred Whye, a white man, in the late 1870s at Gongolgon, near Brewarrina, NSW. In February 1901, Alfred enlisted in Sydney as Trooper 3067 in the 3rd NSW Mounted Rifles, thus becoming one of the Aboriginal men known to have served in the Boer War. Arriving in Durban in May 1901, Alfred's unit took part in operations in the Eastern Transvaal and Eastern Orange River Colony, which included fighting against the Boer breakthrough at Langverwacht Hill in February 1902. Alfred returned to Sydney on the *Aurania* in June 1902 and was awarded the Queen's South Africa medal with five campaign clasps: Cape Colony, Transvaal, Orange Free State, South Africa 1901 and South Africa 1902. His discharge papers rated his wartime conduct and character as "exemplary".

Returning to life as an Aboriginal man in Gongolgon did not appeal to Alfred, who had experienced adventure and travel in the army.

Besides, there was little available employment on any of the drought-stricken outback stations. After spending a year in Sydney without regular work, Alfred determined in 1903 to go on a working holiday to New Zealand before adventuring on to Canada. After six months' work in Waiuku, another Boer War veteran convinced him that he should settle in New Zealand. Taking this advice, Alfred explored the North Island before making his home in Otahuhu, South Auckland. He found employment with the railway signals department, a job he kept until he retired in 1940.

In June 1904, Alfred married Mabel Anne Plumley. He and Mabel reared a happy family of five children, all of whom had professional careers and raised families. During the First World War, Alfred's name was placed on the New Zealand Army Reserve List for 1916–17, but was not called up. Mabel died in 1932, and Alfred married Ethel McCrory in 1935. They decided to become foster parents and cared for many children over

the years. His grandchildren fondly recalled him waking early to work in his big vegetable garden.

Although Alfred never returned to Australia, he kept up a correspondence with his friend Allan Yeomans in Sydney, who was a former station owner near Brewarrina. Alfred had probably worked for Yeomans before his Boer War service. Yeomans apparently kept Alfred's mother informed that he was doing well.

Interviewed in 1968, aged in his 90s, Alfred reflected on his Boer War experiences. He recalled that his unit had "chased the Boers around and about. We captured hundreds of them and took all their big guns. In the end all they were left with were their rifles. They were tough though, by gee. The gamest I ever saw. Some of them were boys, only 12 years old they were. And old men, with their clothes all patched up. But gee could they fight." Alfred Ernest Whye passed away on 28 April 1969 and was buried in Otahuhu Cemetery. PETER BAKKER



Whye's Queen's South Africa medal and campaign clasps for Transvaal and Orange Free State. The medal is missing its ribbon and 3 other campaign clasps. Photograph courtesy of Kathy Whye.

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