

## **BROTHER vs BROTHER: THE COLONIAL CITIZEN SOLDIER IN NATAL DURING THE ANGLO-BOER WAR AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR LATER ACF REGIMENTS IN THE 1950s AND EARLY 1960s**

**Mark Coghlan**

*(Military Historian, KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Museum Service, and Regimental Historian, Natal Carbineers)*

### **Opsomming**

*Daar is reeds baie geskryf oor die militêre gebeurtenisse van die Anglo Boereoorlog, of die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, veral gedurende die huidige eeufees herdenking. Die betrokkenheid van die swartes is een voorbeeld, maar hierdie referaat het te doen met die verband tussen die Engelse wit setlaars van die kolonie van Natal en dié van Hollandse afkoms, in die konteks van die reaksie van Natal administrasie tot die oorlog.*

*Dit is van belang dat vir die koloniste van veral die noordelike deel van die kolonie die Anglo Boereoorlog verskeie aspekte van 'n burgeroorlog getoon het. Vir die wit inwoners van dié distrikte was die oorlog, aangedryf deur Britse imperialisme, glad nie welkom nie.*

*Die bitterheid van dié aspek van die sogenaamde stryd tussen "Boer en Brit" het erge gevolge gehad, spesifiek in Natal waarvandaan die Natal Carbineers afkomstig is. Dit was veral in die vroeë dekades van die Nasionale Party regering (1948 tot ongeveer 1965) dat dit gelyk het asof die Anglo Boereoorlog nog aan die gang was, en dat "Engelse" militêre eenhede soos die Natal Carbineers gestraf is vir hulle sonde van 'n halfeeu vantevore.*

### **PART 1**

#### **Fighting the 'Natal Dutchmen'**

The impact of the Anglo-Boer War on South Africa's history has been a major focus of academic reappraisal of the conflict. This paper reflects the legacy of Afrikaner-Natal English colonial settler conflict, with special emphasis on the relationship between the Nationalist government and the Natal Active Citizen Force (ACF) regiments between 1948 and the mid-1960s.

The Anglo-Boer War emphasis is on the Natal Carbineers, one of the colonial volunteer regiments mobilised on 29 September 1899. For the first six months of the war in Natal, the bulk of the Natal Carbineers, and other Natal regiments such as the Natal Mounted Rifles (NMR) was besieged in Ladysmith, apart from minor forays in the foothills of the Drakensberg.

### Early Anglo-Boer War days

One squadron of the Carbineers (and one of the Imperial Light Horse), had been detached to Colenso on mobilisation, and in late November 1899 was attached to Sir Redvers Buller's Ladysmith relief column. Apart from the battle of Colenso, this Estcourt-Weenen Squadron played little part in the engagements of the relief campaign, but its scouting and reconnaissance elicited praise from several observers.<sup>1</sup> The first signs of English-Dutch settler antagonism in Natal arose as early as November 1899, when Boer commandos penetrated with virtual impunity as far south as Mooi River in the Natal midlands. During the first week of December the Carbineers became involved in the thorny matter of the alleged vandalism of abandoned settler homesteads by Boer commandos or disaffected 'Natal Dutchmen'. The Natal press carried numerous indignant letters of protest denouncing this practice.<sup>2</sup> Some inflammatory contemporary histories of the war, such as that by Clement H. Stott (*The Boer invasion of Natal*), also criticised the invaders. Referring to the period of Boer offensive success culminating in the investment of Ladysmith, Stott says:

The whole of the northern half of Natal was in their hands, and they now commenced to commit those atrocities which marred their otherwise courageous behaviour during this war. They went out in bands of two or three hundred, ruthlessly looting every deserted farmhouse they came across, and wantonly destroying anything they could lay their hands on.<sup>3</sup>

Officially the Boer leadership denounced vandalism. On 16 October 1899, Commandant-General Joubert made this clear to the inhabitants of the colony: "De Commandant-Generaal Joubert verklaart en maakt bekend aan alle inwoners van de Kolonie Natal dat..."<sup>4</sup> Commenting on the occupation of Weenen on 17 November 1899, Stott fired off another hostile salvo: "They then entered into the shops and houses, taking possession of blankets, provisions, boots, clothes, and anything that could be of any service to them, loading their booty on to wagons which they had seized in the neighbourhood."<sup>5</sup>

This aspect of the war in Natal was to have far-reaching consequences. As far as the Dutch-speaking Natal colonists were concerned, there was an inclination to 'tar them all with the same brush', as reflected in the following Natal Police report for 1899:

For some time prior to the outbreak of hostilities the loyalty of the Dutch in northern districts of the colony was more than suspected, and the unanimous refusal of Dutch members of rifle associations to take the oath

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis Creswicke, *South Africa and the Transvaal War*, II (Edinburgh, 1900), pp. 44-45.

<sup>2</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 18 November 1899 and 30 January 1900.

<sup>3</sup> Clement Stott, *The Boer invasion of Natal* (London, 1900), p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> National Archives Repository, Pretoria (Hereafter NAR), Leyds Archives (LA) (I), telegram 58, 16/10/1899.

<sup>5</sup> Stott, *Boer invasion*, pp. 108-109.

of allegiance to Her Majesty pointed conclusively... to their disaffection, and the existence of an intention to rebel should opportunity offer.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is important to strike a balance on this topic, and a report from the magistrate of the Estcourt Division, R.H. Addison, for 1900, is worth quoting:

The conduct of several of our Dutch farmers, especially that of Mr J.G. Hatting, of Rama, and Johannes Hendrik Hatting, of Blue Ball, Colenso, has been most praiseworthy during the Boer invasion. These men, although pressed by the enemy, refused to take up arms and assist them in any way.<sup>7</sup>

It is also recorded by a particularly jingoistic writer, George Clarke Musgrave, that several 'Dutch loyalists' in Newcastle resisted considerable Boer compulsion to join their ranks after their occupation of that town on 14 October 1899.<sup>8</sup>

On one occasion, 7 December 1899, a force of between twelve and twenty four Carbineers joined a six-man Natal Police patrol that left Frere for the Gourton-Springfield area, where 150 head of cattle had been reported captured and two suspects apprehended.<sup>9</sup> In command was Major Alan Chichester of the Royal Irish, Buller's provost-marshal. On the return journey they were intercepted by several burghers from a nearby commando. "Major Chichester then ordered forward part of his troop with the prisoners in charge, while he and the rest of the men held the enemy at bay. A brief fusillade ensued, in which five of the enemy's ponies were killed, and several of the Boers were shot".<sup>10</sup> However, the Boers had secured the available cover, and the small force retired towards Frere.

The files of the Natal government's Department of Lands and Works record that on 12 December four 'Natal Dutch' (J.H. Oosthuyze, A.M. Oosthuyze, D.J. Oosthuyze and M.J. Jansen) were sent in from Frere to stand trial by court-martial.<sup>11</sup> Although the charges are not specified, evidence suggests that it was a sequel to the Chichester expedition of the 7th. In December three Engelbrechts (Jacobus, Johannes and Hermanus) were also tried for treason at Estcourt. They were sentenced to fines of £200 and two years imprisonment.<sup>12</sup> *The Natal Witness* argued with some validity that

<sup>6</sup> Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (Hereafter PAR), NCP, Departmental Reports 1899, Commissioner of Police, p. F9.

<sup>7</sup> PAR, NCP 714/7, Departmental Reports 1900, Magistrate Estcourt Division, pp. B30-31.

<sup>8</sup> George Clarke Musgrave, *In South Africa with Buller* (London, 1900), pp. 91-92.

<sup>9</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 9 December 1899; Creswicke, *Transvaal War*, II, p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> Creswicke, *Transvaal War*, II, p. 152; Bennett Burleigh, *The Natal Campaign* (London, 1900), pp. 126-127, 146 and 157; *The Natal Witness*, 12 December 1899.

<sup>11</sup> PAR, MJPW 71, HP 8497/1899.

<sup>12</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 12 and 15 December 1899; *Times of Natal*, 11 December 1899.

had the bulk of the mounted volunteers not been trapped in Ladysmith, they would have been a more effective check on Boer looting.<sup>13</sup>

As early as 29 November 1899, the Natal government was fielding claims for losses from farmers south of the Thukela, as a result of the Boer invasion.<sup>14</sup> One query came from the Mooi River Farmers' Association on 2 October 1899, through the pen of its president, and attached Carbineer officer, George Richards.<sup>15</sup> This was prior to the outbreak of hostilities, and Richards was informed by the governor that "if Natal should be attacked it will be defended if necessary by the whole force of the Empire, and that redress will be exacted for any injury to her or to HM loyal subjects in the Colony due to such attack."<sup>16</sup> There was subsequently some dispute as to whether colonists "received any warning from the military authorities or otherwise of the advance of the Boer forces, or any intimation of the necessity for the removal of their stock."<sup>17</sup>

The issue of Boer raids, looting and compensation was to drag on until after the Boer forces had been evicted from the colony in June 1900. The Natal government deprecated the Boer actions, but was not pleased with the abandonment of the countryside by colonists:

The Government views with the deepest concern the desertion of their homes by inhabitants of certain of the country districts of the Colony through apprehension of ill-treatment by the invading forces of the South African Republic and the Orange Free State.

So far as the Government has been able to ascertain, the houses of those who have remained at their homes have not been interfered with, nor have the occupants been subjected to personal ill-treatment.<sup>18</sup>

On 24 May 1900, an impatient Buller wrote from Newcastle to the GOC, lines of communication:

The proper way to end a war is to defeat the enemy in the field. This you will never do if you scatter your forces and turn them into herds to guard cattle or sheep.

I am moving up towards Pretoria; I have left about the Drakensberg troops sufficient, in my opinion, to guard Natal from any serious raid; but I cannot pretend that I can protect any particular farmer's cattle.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 23 November 1899.

<sup>14</sup> PAR, PM 17, Minute Paper 9115/1899, 29 November 1899.

<sup>15</sup> PAR, CSO 1636, Minute Paper 7628/1899, Richards to Colonial Secretary, 2 October 1899.

<sup>16</sup> CSO 1636, Minute Paper 7678/1899, Col. Sec. to Richards, nd.

<sup>17</sup> PM 17, PM to Governor, 1 December 1899.

<sup>18</sup> CSO 1633, Minute Paper 9445/1899, Government Notice, PU Sec, 22 November 1899.

<sup>19</sup> PM 17, Minute Paper 3036/1900, Buller to GOC Lines of Communication, 24 May 1900.

There were examples of farmers who remained on their farms with no difficulties, and remained on good terms with the Boers.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, it was not only the Boers who earned a reputation for looting. The implication in such nicknames as the Imperial Light Looters (Imperial Light Horse) and Bethune's Buccaneers (Bethune's Mounted Infantry) speaks volumes.<sup>21</sup> The Natal Carbineers was itself accused of looting. A resident of a farm near Ladysmith reported that on Sunday 22 October 1899:

We saw two wagons with twenty Natal Carbineers coming down the road ... and go to our forage-room... Ben went to the stables to see what they were doing, he found them busy loading father's forage... my brother asked whether they intended paying for the forage, and the answer was 'certainly not.'<sup>22</sup>

Writing on the aftermath of the Gun Hill sortie outside Ladysmith on the night of 7-8 December 1899, Richard Danes commented that "the irregulars of ours, like most irregulars, were grand men at the looting. They found a dug-out cave, and in it boots and blankets and mackintoshes and various other welcome plunder."<sup>23</sup>

#### Colenso: The battle

Friday 15 December 1899 saw the relief column's initial abortive effort to breach the Boers' Thukela Line with a head-on attack at Colenso. The battle of Colenso was to be the first major test for the Carbineers who, according to William Park Gray, had extra reason to be nervous: "During this period of the war we had been told that the Boers were so incensed against colonials for fighting against them that they would shoot us on sight".<sup>24</sup> This remark cannot be firmly substantiated, but several pieces of circumstantial evidence should be considered. In a report, dated 17 November 1899, from the Boer 'Hoofdlaager' outside Ladysmith, it was stated that the "Estcourt column had a skirmish with the Natal Carbineers yesterday, resulting in two Boers being killed. The column was deceived by the Carbineers speaking in Dutch".<sup>25</sup>

The action in question is probably the Ennersdale skirmish on the day of the armoured train ambush - the 15th. Commenting on this incident, Park Gray described how he and a companion switched to Dutch to extricate themselves from a confrontation with a Boer

<sup>20</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 5 March 1900.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), p. 210; J.B. Atkins, *The Relief of Ladysmith* (London, 1900), p. 131.

<sup>22</sup> PAR, Maggie Bester, "My experiences during the Anglo-Boer War", A 72/4, Schoon Papers.

<sup>23</sup> Richards Danes, *Cassell's History of the Boer War* (London, 1901), p. 346.

<sup>24</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, Gray typescript, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 21 November 1899.

contingent that in heavy rain had mistaken them for their own men.<sup>26</sup> An anonymous columnist complained to *The Natal Mercury* in February 1900, of "the frequently murderous treatment of wounded volunteers."<sup>27</sup> In January 1900 a Colonial Scout taken prisoner at Chieveley on 7 December 1899, wrote to the prime minister of Natal to the effect that "colonial volunteer prisoners who know the country are treated worse than convicts."<sup>28</sup> Clement Stott did not spare the rod either:

These ambitious desires of the Boers... (broadly, the march to the coast) ... seemed to have taken a firm hold of them, and also of most of the local Dutch farmers, some of the latter, sad to relate, joining the invading forces and assisting the enemy in fighting against the British, under whose government they had enjoyed every privilege.<sup>29</sup>

The experience of Churchill himself is also significant. When captured on 15 November 1899, he had expected the cruel treatment promised by the colonial press, and was pleasantly surprised by the decent treatment that he in fact received.<sup>30</sup> The *Standard and Digger's News* took pains to emphasize the "express gratitude"... of the prisoners - "for humane treatment in contrast to what they were told to expect from Boers. This was except for Natal volunteers, whose attitude was thanks for nothing."<sup>31</sup> In a enclosure in a report on POW conditions in Pretoria, however, Buller comments: "No mention here is made of the treatment accorded at Pretoria to prisoners of colonial corps. I have had a good deal of evidence sent me that they are wilfully badly treated."<sup>32</sup>

The Boers also expected the worst from their colonial captors. Ben Viljoen, who ended his war as a general, commented that, after the battle of Elandslaagte, he would have considered surrendering to English troops, but not to colonial volunteers, who he thought were pursuing him at the time.<sup>33</sup> Commandant Adolph Schiel and Captain de Witt Hamer were two officers of the Boer foreign volunteer contingents. Captured at Elandslaagte, they both expressed gratitude at their humane treatment.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Gray typescript, pp. 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 15 February 1900.

<sup>28</sup> PAR, CO (MIC) 1/1/1/1/202 (PRO179/209), encl. in confidential despatch No. 4, 19 January 1900.

<sup>29</sup> Stott, *Boer invasion*, p. 114.

<sup>30</sup> James Muller, "At large on the veldt: Winston Churchill in the South African War". Paper delivered at UNISA Library Conference on Rethinking the SA War, (August 1998), p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> *The Standard and Digger's News*, 21 November 1899.

<sup>32</sup> CO (MIC) 1/1/1/1/205, CO 179/211, enclosed in confidential despatch, Buller, 27 April 1900.

<sup>33</sup> H.H.S. Pearse, *Four months besieged: The story of Ladysmith* (1900), p. 146.

<sup>34</sup> PAR, CSO \*\*\*, Hamer to OC HMS Tartar.

On the emotive subject of looting, Stott says that the "disloyal Dutch appear to have been among the principal perpetrators of these acts of despoliation..."<sup>35</sup> Corroboration of Churchill's story comes from an unexpected quarter - *The Natal Witness*: "The reports concerning the harsh treatment by the Pretoria authorities of colonial prisoners-of-war, must... be received with a certain amount of reserve in view of the fact that as far as can be learned, the prisoners captured by the Boers have been treated as well as circumstances will permit."<sup>36</sup> However, *The Witness* does complain about the double-standards of the Boers in expecting the assistance of Transvaalers or Free Staters, no matter where resident, while condemning similar colonial support for the British.<sup>37</sup>

These comments and allegations suggest a civil war aspect to the Natal colonist-Boer confrontation on the Natal front, that was not a factor for professional British troops. Both Boers and Natal volunteers were citizen soldiers. Churchill made a pointed reference to this when he stated that "the colonist... especially the men from Natal were filled with a bitterness against the enemy which regular soldiers in those days considered unprofessional."<sup>38</sup> As early as March 1900, Churchill appealed against a 'spirit of revenge' as 'morally wicked and practically foolish'.<sup>39</sup> As far as the war was concerned, he urged: "While we continue to prosecute the war with tireless energy... we must also make it easy for the enemy to accept defeat."

### Hussar Hill

Until 10 January 1900 Buller's army licked its wounds at Chieveley. The Boers were, of course, still in occupation of the northern bank of the Thukela, and responded to British-colonial scouting with periodic forays of their own. It was one of these ventures that gave rise to another memorable diary-date for the volunteers and the Natal Carbineers. On 20 December 1899 a twenty two-strong patrol surprised a seven-man Boer party on Hussar Hill, a strategic ridge south-east of Colenso, killing two Boers caught robbing the body of a dead Hussar killed there the previous day. The Carbineer action appears to have been a deliberate ambush, with men posted a few hundred metres from the Hussar body and the balance occupying a ridge further back.<sup>40</sup>

### Acton Homes

In early January 1900 the Natal volunteers joined Buller's Spioenkop excursion. On the morning of 18 January the Natal Carbineers squadron, on the left flank of Dundonald's

---

<sup>35</sup> Stott, *Boer invasion*, p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 9 January 1900.

<sup>37</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 9 January 1900.

<sup>38</sup> Winston Churchill, *My early life* (London, 1947), p. 303.

<sup>39</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 29 March 1900.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Danes, *Cassell's History of the Boer War* (London, 1901), p. 418.

brigade, advanced on Acton Homes, west of Spioenkop. They were accompanied by the ILH and the King's Royal Rifles. Carbineer scouts reported a Boer column advancing along a track towards a nearby defile between two koppies.<sup>41</sup> The ILH and Natal Carbineers squadrons were despatched to "snare it if they could."<sup>42</sup> They executed a successful, and rare, ambush of the Boers.

### The white flag at Acton Homes

A feature of the engagement at Acton Homes was a disputed white flag incident. Approximately one hour into the action a white flag appeared on the Boer right flank. According to McKenzie, he ordered a cease-fire and stood up, only to be greeted with a hail of gunfire.<sup>43</sup> After the action a *Natal Witness* editorial condemned alleged Boer abuses of the white flag: "Numerous instances have occurred where the abuse of the symbol and sign of surrender have been resorted to to cover retreat, to destroy the fruit of victory and, worst of all, to inveigle men and officers to a treacherous death..."<sup>44</sup> Evidence of the emotive nature of the white flag debate is evident in contemporary British histories of the war. Creswicke, for example, said that "the use of the white flag by the enemy was now beginning to be mistrusted, for daily evidence of treachery were forthcoming."<sup>45</sup> This mistrust was reflected at the highest levels of the British military command. Buller, in a special order to his troops on 12 January, warned: "If a white flag is displayed, it means nothing unless the force displaying it halt, throw down their arms, and throw up their hands at the same time."<sup>46</sup>

After the skirmish Gray sought out a burgher named Moodie and was distressed to learn of his Natal English connections - he was even related to the Moors, a prominent Estcourt family. He had married a Dutch girl and the chivalrous McKenzie was impressed by his conviction that he had to fight for the Boers. Moodie and McKenzie were, in fact, on first name terms, another comment on the civil war nature of the conflict.<sup>47</sup>

The treatment meted out to one William Zunckel, who had a son and nephew serving with the Carbineers, also aroused comment.<sup>48</sup> When Zunckel snr, and his brother, Albert, had visited his kin at Spearman's Camp in late January 1900, they were

---

<sup>41</sup> Creswicke, *Transvaal War*, III, p. 99.

<sup>42</sup> H.W. Wilson, *With the flag to Pretoria*, I (1900) p. 267; J.H. Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*, III (Pretoria, 1977), p. 114.

<sup>43</sup> McKenzie, *Delayed action*, p. 169.

<sup>44</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 24 January 1900.

<sup>45</sup> Creswicke, *Transvaal War*, II, p. 111.

<sup>46</sup> F. Maurice, *History of the War in South Africa*, II (London, 1906), p. 264

<sup>47</sup> McKenzie, *Delayed Action*, p. 169; Gray typescript, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> *The Natal Mercury*, 1 February 1900.



promptly arrested. British military authorities feared that the Zuncckels, "having remained in the district during the Boer occupation, might possibly have been in collusion with the enemy."<sup>49</sup> The matter was considered serious enough to attract the attention of both the governor and prime minister.<sup>50</sup>

### Life after Ladysmith

The story now moves to the British advance, and Boer retreat, through northern Natal in the wake of the relief of Ladysmith. Buller's army did not launch any immediate attempt to pursue the commandos. Many took the opportunity to investigate deserted laager sites around Ladysmith, helping themselves to an abundance of ammunition and stores.<sup>51</sup> According to Stott, this included cases of modified ammunition.<sup>52</sup> This was another bone of contention. Such alleged caches fuelled the accusations from both sides that the other was employing 'illegal' or dum-dum' ammunition that, by mutual understanding, was not fitting in this 'white man's war'.<sup>53</sup>

Once the Boers were evicted from Natal in June 1900, guerilla operations in the colony's northern districts necessitated the continued presence of the volunteers:

The Brigade is placed at Dundee not only to guard the lines of communication, and prevent if possible any raiding force of Boers from cutting our railway-line... but they are also protecting the colony, which is the first duty of volunteers: and, until the Boers have been completely cleared out of the Vryheid-Utrecht district, as well as along the Berg to the west, it is of the utmost importance that there should be a strong mobile force at Dundee to check raiding... by any small parties of Boers.<sup>54</sup>

It was during this period of the war that colonial troops became aware of the special challenges of the Boer guerilla campaign. They were also introduced to "the frustration of guerilla war and the destruction involved in waging total war against entire societies."<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> *The Natal Mercury*, 1 February 1900.

<sup>50</sup> CSO 1640, Minute Paper 1236/1900.

<sup>51</sup> Dacre A Shaw, "Trooper, Natal Carbineers: A personal narrative of the Natal campaign, 1899-1902" (1902), pp. 74-75.

<sup>52</sup> Stott, *Boer invasion*, p. 208.

<sup>53</sup> Musgrave, *In South Africa with Buller*, pp. 203-204.

<sup>54</sup> PAR, MJPW 76, Minute Paper 5237/1900, memorandum, Dartnell, Natal Volunteer Brigade, 2 July 1900.

<sup>55</sup> Callwell, 'Protest against Modern War', p. 66.

### Amongst the Natal Dutch once again

During these operations the Natal volunteers revisited one of the unsavoury aspects of its participation in this conflict: the matter of Dutch-speaking colonists from the northern rural districts - the so-called 'Natal rebels'. There was a sequence of trials of British subjects in Natal who were suspected of disloyalty. The womenfolk of men on commando reportedly maintained an intense level of hostility towards the colonial troops, maintaining that "we should have fought with the enemy seeing that we were colonials..."<sup>56</sup>

Geoffrey Powell, a biographer of Buller, makes the following observation on contact with Dutch-speaking inhabitants, in the context of the scorched-earth policy and farm burning: "Although locally raised troops who had seen their compatriots suffer in a similar way from the Boers, were happy to comply with such orders, many British soldiers were revolted by the practice."<sup>57</sup> This comment on a colonial penchant for exacting revenge for the Boer depredations and plunder in northern Natal and the Natal midlands during 1899, should be considered in the light of recent interpretations of what was termed in some quarters as '*vermiezucht*' (a lust of destruction) on the part of British-colonial troops.<sup>58</sup>

This harsh tinge to Natal colonial sentiment is evident in the remarks of Ladysmith resident, G.W. Willis: "The invasion of Natal and parts of the Cape Colony and other districts of British territory by the Boers, and the wholesale looting and destruction of property they have everywhere perpetrated, deprives them of all sympathy and consideration when the day of reckoning up comes around."<sup>59</sup>

The establishment of 'vigilance committees' to promote Imperial-Natal colonial interests, in centres such as Newcastle and Dundee, was also not conducive to reconciliation. These lobbying groups were a local manifestation of British-based organisations such as the Imperial South Africa Association.<sup>60</sup> The committees sought compensation for losses incurred by colonists during the Boer invasion.<sup>61</sup> On 18 October 1900, a deputation from the Pietermaritzburg Vigilance Committee sought clarity from the Natal

<sup>56</sup> Shaw, "Trooper, Natal Carbineers", p. 110.

<sup>57</sup> Godfrey Powell, *Buller, A Scapegoat?* (London, 1994), p. 187.

<sup>58</sup> Helen Bradford, "Gentlemen and Boers..." Paper delivered at UNISA Library Conference on Rethinking the SA War (August 1998), p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> G.W. Willis to brother, William, in *Unpublished Letters from the Siege*, Ladysmith Historical Society series (1991), p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Thompson, 'Pressure groups, propaganda and the state...' Paper delivered at UNISA Conference, 1998, pp. 4-21.

<sup>61</sup> PM 17, Minute Paper 4098/1900; PM 19, Minute Paper 1514/1900, president, Ladysmith and Dundee Vigilance Committees to Prime Minister, 3 September 1900.

prime minister on such issues as the expansion of Natal as a 'booty of war', at the expense of the ex-Boer republics.<sup>62</sup>

On 26 March 1900, when the Boers were still on Natal soil, a public meeting in the Market Hall, Pietermaritzburg, was reported in *The Natal Witness* under such headings as 'Root out the Republics' and Retribution for Rebels'.<sup>63</sup> One speaker, Dr Chas Allen, mocked the Boer proclamation of a war of independence as a war of plunder, and urged that the republics "must be wiped off the face of civilisation."<sup>64</sup> Another speaker spoke of 'disloyalists' who had abused British protection. To enthusiastic applause he urged disenfranchisement and the confiscation of property.<sup>65</sup> In September 1900, Captain G.F. Tatham of the Natal Carbineers produced copies of addresses of welcome from 'Natal rebels' to General Piet Joubert.<sup>66</sup>

According to diarist Tom Fielding, the troops were also motivated in this unsavoury task by reports of armed blacks fighting with the Boers, and the familiar controversy of the white flag. "We have been fired at from houses flying the white flag, but they have paid for it. Under circumstances like these we loot the farms of every valuable, break up the furniture, and burn the whole caboodle."<sup>67</sup>

In April 1900 a bill was passed in the Natal Parliament to indemnify military forces for unspecified acts committed during the enforcement of martial law, only lifted on 4 October 1902.<sup>68</sup> However, "regulations should be so framed as to interfere as little as possible with the civil rights of peaceful inhabitants and their freedom to pursue their ordinary avocations."<sup>69</sup> In fact, according to a memorandum accompanying the circular on martial law, Kitchener requested his GOCs to "very carefully investigate charges of disloyalty made against colonists of Dutch extraction before acting on information which is very often biased by political and personal influences."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, a "feeling of sympathy with an enemy of their own race, unless it finds expression in some act of

---

<sup>62</sup> PM 19, Minute Paper 8240/1900, 19 October 1899.

<sup>63</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 27 March 1900.

<sup>64</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 27 March 1900.

<sup>65</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 27 March 1900.

<sup>66</sup> PM 19, Minute Paper 1949/1900.

<sup>67</sup> Talana Museum, Fielding diary, p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> PAR, CO (MIC)1/1/1/205, CO 179/211, enclosure in despatch 132, 26 April 1900; Harris, p. 43.

<sup>69</sup> PAR, CO (MIC)1/1/1/205, CO 179/211, enclosure in despatch 132, 26 April 1900; Harris, p. 43.

PAR, ZA 33, CR 234/1900, circular memorandum 7, Kitchener, 3 February 1900.

disloyalty, is not to be considered an offence."<sup>71</sup> There had to be specific evidence of sedition, the passing of information, or the taking up of arms.

### The Volunteer Composite Regiment

It was at this point in the local colonial volunteer war effort, (October 1900) that the Volunteer Composite Regiment (VCR) was born. By late 1900 the Boers were generally 'on the run', evading British sweeps and garrisoned towns, but still striking at targets of opportunity. The formation of the VCR to smoothly assume the role of the Natal Carbineers and others, enabled the British in northern Natal to continue operations efficiently.

Convoy protection, plus patrolling to interdict Boer raiding parties, comprised the new regiment's major duties. One of the major Boer incursions into northern Natal took place in late October 1900, when a large force destroyed the Wasbank railway bridge on the 26th.<sup>72</sup> They were also required to check the documentation that the 'Dutch' inhabitants of the northern districts were required to carry.<sup>73</sup> Trooper Bizley commented on the 'evacuation', in January 1901, of a family from a farm at the foot of the Drakensberg: "... hard lines in some ways, but the fortunes of war, can fancy what 'twas like when our own people had to leave."<sup>74</sup>

In January 1901 the VCR was also called upon to venture into Zululand, unarmed and under a flag of truce, to deliver a proclamation to the Boers from Lord Kitchener.<sup>75</sup> This proclamation, dated 20 December 1900, incorporating an extension of the internment camp system, read, in part, as follows: "It is hereby notified to all burghers that if, after this date, they voluntarily surrender they will be allowed to live with their families in government laagers until such time as the guerilla war now being carried on will admit of their returning safely to their homes..."<sup>76</sup>

It would appear that the VCR was called upon to carry out, in a concerted fashion, Kitchener's scorched earth policy, that was reluctantly implemented by Colonel G.R. Blomfield, the regional military commander at Dundee. On 9 March Bizley wrote: "Our purpose is to destroy everything except eight days rations for women and children and

---

<sup>71</sup> PAR, ZA 33, CR 234/1900, circular memorandum 7, Kitchener, 3 February 1900.

<sup>72</sup> Nicholson diary, 1899-1901, Talana Museum, 26 October 1900; *The Natal Witness*, 29 and 30 October 1900, and 3 and 16 November 1900.

<sup>73</sup> Nicholson diary, 9 November 1900.

<sup>74</sup> Bizley diary, Talana Museum, 25 January 1901.

<sup>75</sup> Nicholson diary, 4 January 1901.

<sup>76</sup> *Times History*, V, p. 87.

all women's clothing, destroying all men's apparel. These are the orders under which we are working now."<sup>77</sup>

On 27 October 1900 the VCR participated in the burning of six farms of "unsundered Natal rebels", one of many such operations during this 'pacification' period of the war.<sup>78</sup> Bizley remarked to his diary how he wished "it had been Boer men there ... (and) ... how helpless the women are."<sup>79</sup>

### **The final months, and the death of Colonel Evans, VCR**

During most of 1901, the VCR suffered the fate common to many an irregular regiment in guerrilla wars of containment: scattered in numerous minor outposts, or attached to columns and larger commands.<sup>80</sup> In January 1902 Boer patrols demonstrated that the depleted commandos were still capable of making life difficult for 'occupation troops' in northern Natal.

The most prominent incident of this type occurred on the night of 19-20 February 1902, when the commanding officer of the VCR, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Evans, was killed near Vryheid while accepting the surrender of a group of burghers. The men of the VCR saw the killing of their commanding officer as a deliberate and murderous act of 'conduct unbecoming'.<sup>81</sup> After the incident the captured Boers were fortunate to survive as prisoners-of-war.

### **Postscript**

A central theme in this paper is that of the postwar socio-political implications of the Anglo-Boer War on Natal, and the impact of the conflict on the citizen-soldiers of the volunteer regiments. In June 1902 Dutch-speaking families were still denied permission to return to farms in formerly sensitive areas such as the Acton Homes district.<sup>82</sup> However, the Natal government lost no time in re-incorporating its Dutch-speaking citizens into the colony's defence apparatus. In 1902 a bill, 'To create a Burgher Force' (Bill No 36), was debated in the Legislative Assembly. It was to supercede Bill No 5 of 1877, 'To establish a Home Burgher Force'.<sup>83</sup> Although not specifically restricted to Dutch colonists, it was clearly intended as a home guard akin to the rifle associations.

---

<sup>77</sup> Bizley diary, 9 March 1901.

<sup>78</sup> Nicholson diary, 27 October 1900.

<sup>79</sup> Bizley diary, 25 March 1901.

<sup>80</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 24 September 1901.

<sup>81</sup> *The Natal Mercury*, 10 March 1902.

<sup>82</sup> PAR, Escombe collection (A 72/4), correspondence, De Jager to commandant, Ladysmith, 6-11 June 1902.

<sup>83</sup> PM 27, Bill 36/1902.

Membership was conditional on taking the oath of allegiance to King Edward VII, and the commander-in-chief was the colonial governor.<sup>84</sup>

### Some Anglo-Boer War conclusions

Perhaps it was inevitable that the colonial volunteer corps were tasked with the policing of their Dutch-speaking co-citizens, especially when mounted infantry were denied effective participation for much of the war. Until the siege of Ladysmith was raised on 28 February 1900, "the work done by these corps (the Natal Carbineers, for example) need hardly be taken into consideration; for, shut up as they were in a beleaguered town, they had little chance of doing any legitimate cavalry work."<sup>85</sup> The military reality for Natal was fairly distant from the picture sketched by the British colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, in a speech at Leicester, England, on 29 November 1899:

Side by side with our soldiers, shoulder to shoulder, their equals in gallantry, we find the Colonial forces, the men belonging to Natal, the men of the Rand... they have taken their full share in the obstinate fighting which has gone on in the defiles and around the cities of Natal... we hope that we... shall never forget the loyalty and the courage which has been shown by that Colony... although they saw that country ravaged, their farms looted, their citizens insulted, they have never wavered for a moment. They have sent their sons to the front to die or conquer: they have used their resources to the utmost in a cause which indeed is theirs, but which is also the cause of Britain throughout the Empire...<sup>86</sup>

The energetic prose of Richard Danes, in *Cassell's History of the Boer War*, captures the admiration of many contemporary observers for the volunteers' 'style of play', in the following account of the British-colonial attack on End Hill, outside Ladysmith, on 3 November 1899:

It was wholly because of this very adaptability to the conditions of guerilla hill-fighting that they did what they did. For they steadily, cleverly, stole up that hill-side. They crawled on hands and knees; they wriggled along like snakes, and only when it was quite safe to do so, only when perfectly sheltered, did they stand upright.<sup>87</sup>

Danes was, however, wary of waxing too enthusiastic over the merits of the colonial irregulars:

Had the whole campaign been left to the irregulars it would have been one endless succession of ambushes, sniping-parties, surprises and

---

<sup>84</sup> PM 27, Bill 36/1902.

<sup>85</sup> *The Times*, 14 November 1900.

<sup>86</sup> PAR, CSO 2609, telegram, Queen to G.S. Plowman, Assistant Under-Secretary to CSO, December 1899; *The Natal Witness*, 1 December 1899.

<sup>87</sup> Danes, *Boer War*, p. 203.

ruses, continued until such time as the last Natal sniper had stolen a march on and got first shot at the last Boer sniper.<sup>88</sup>

By early 1900, following costly defeats and setbacks, the neglected value of mounted infantry was more apparent. In late February 1900 *The Natal Witness*, in a report from the English *Daily Mail*, commented that "military experts seem generally agreed that the irregular horse now in South Africa and being sent out, will, when properly organised, play as important a part in the crushing of the Boers as our regular forces."<sup>89</sup>

There is one aspect of the marginalisation of colonial forces that is often overlooked when the military prowess of the Boer burgher is considered. This is the fact that, contrary to popular belief, many Boer fighters were no more familiar with Natal conditions than the British soldier.<sup>90</sup> The bulk of the commandos had been raised from towns such as Johannesburg and Standerton, far removed from the theatres of war, and from the traditional rural background of the Voortrekkers, with which the traditional fighting and hunting skills of the Boers are associated.<sup>91</sup> The Natal Carbineers themselves had to admit a genuine admiration and respect for the Boers. Arthur Crosby writes:

What a lesson this campaign has been to the military, in fact, to everyone interested in military tactics. Though in the colony, we, or those who have come into contact with the Boers, never held them so cheaply, but we certainly never gave them credit for the great skill and daring shewn.<sup>92</sup>

### The legacy

When the British Army departed in 1902, there remained for the Carbineer citizen soldiers the task of rebuilding a country with their former adversaries. However, it was not to prove easy to forgive and forget. Contemporary English observers, such as Clement Stott, who wrote of the war largely as an adventure yarn, saw reconciliation as a simple matter: "The Dutch farmers and British colonists have ever lived peaceably side by side, the relationship between them being most cordial, and as soon as the war-clouds are entirely dispersed this peace will be again restored and the former friendships renewed."<sup>93</sup>

There was much to be bitter about, on both sides. Stott himself comments on the war's impact in Natal: "The loss to Natal colonists through this war was terrible. Not only was

---

<sup>88</sup> Danes, *Boer War*, p. 240.

<sup>89</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 22 February 1900.

<sup>90</sup> Creswicke, *Transvaal War*, III, p6.

<sup>91</sup> G. T. Tortlage, personal communication, 1994.

<sup>92</sup> "Extracts from notes taken on the Boer campaign, 1899-1900: Arthur Joseph Crosby" (Ladysmith 1976), 22 February 1900.

<sup>93</sup> Stott, *Boer invasion*, p. 219.

there stagnation in trade... (but also)... the loss of livestock and wholesale destruction of farmsteads ... (and) ... the loss of brave volunteers at the front."<sup>94</sup> This bitterness was in respect of both the nature of the conflict (a long and arduous one), and the manner in which it "continued to be fought over between clumps of empire loyalists and defeated but unreconciled Afrikaner republicans."<sup>95</sup> Elements of the English settler population in Natal during the conflict also saw the opportunity of 'imperialist' conquest at the expense of the republics.<sup>96</sup>

The mobilisation of Afrikaner ethnic nationalism in the twentieth century was given momentum by the heroic representations of the Boer warrior in this, the '*Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*'.<sup>97</sup> The war was also "a classic example of imperialism breeding its antithesis in uncompromising nationalism."<sup>98</sup> In Natal the rise of Afrikaner nationalism was manifested very strongly in northern districts such as Klip River, and in the districts of Vryheid and Utrecht, acquired from the Transvaal.<sup>99</sup> The 1954 annual report of the Royal Natal Carbineers Association spoke of this 'Cold War'. There was, it warned, a ...danger of extinction... from the Nationalist government whose minister of defence is inexorably antagonistic to all organisations having a British complexion or origin, particularly those units which opposed the Republican Army in the South African War nearly 55 years ago.<sup>100</sup>

Bill Nasson provides a succinct summary of this simmering Cold War, when he writes that:

...the survival of cultivated memories of concentration camp cruelties and brutal conquest in war remained closely connected with the rise and eventual ascendancy of a republican nationalist Afrikanerdom, tilting at the political and economic citadels of South Africa's languid English establishment.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Stott, *Boer invasion*, p. 29-30.

<sup>95</sup> Bill Nasson, "The War one hundred years on". Paper delivered at UNISA Library Conference on Rethinking the SA War (August 1998), p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> PAR, CSO 1643, Minute Paper 1928/1900, Newman et al to PM, 14 March 1900.

<sup>97</sup> Kobus du Pisani and Louis Grundlingh, "'Volkshelde': Afrikaner nationalist mobilisation and representations of the Boer warrior". Paper delivered at UNISA Library Conference on Rethinking the SA War (August 1998).

<sup>98</sup> Du Pisani and Grundlingh, "Volkshelde".

<sup>99</sup> Verne Harris, "The reluctant rebels..." (BA Hons. University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1982), conclusion.

<sup>100</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, RNCA minute-book, volume 2, RNCA annual report, 31 March 1954.

<sup>101</sup> Nasson, "One hundred years on", p. 1.



The war was kept alive as a "burning issue within the crucial social networks of religion, politics, family and friendship."<sup>102</sup> Populist writings,

...helped to harden a rapidly consolidating collective mentality and memory by creating an exalted sense of national character: hardened, tough, valiant, and wily. While harping on war memories of bitterness, anguish and redemptive Christian fortitude, it was no less necessary to commemorate superhuman republican bravado, exemplified by the gritty epic of diehard resistance, and the seemingly clairvoyant genius of Boer generalship.<sup>103</sup>

## PART 2

### 'At last we have got our country back', 1948 and after: Enduring the early Nationalist years

It is often assumed that, because the years since World War II involved negligible active service for the (Royal) Natal Carbineers, until the Namibian Bush War, there were no challenges to be faced by regiments such as the Carbineers. This was not the case, and the forty years since the Nationalist victory in the 1948 General Election were fraught with difficulties, and overshadowed by the legacy of the Anglo-Boer War. In fact, South Africa's turbulent socio-political history during this period impacted inexorably on the Active Citizen Force, influencing everything from uniforms to the very existence of many regiments.

South Africa emerged from World War II as one of the victorious Allied powers, its enhanced prestige and military strength at an all-time high, notwithstanding its racial problems. The 6th South African Armoured Division, the most powerful military force ever to leave the country's shores, had acquitted itself with distinction. As had been the case with most South African conflicts, both home and abroad, this war had also been fought largely by volunteers from the country's citizen regiments.

It was to be the so-called traditional regiments, like the Royal Natal Carbineers, who were among those sectors of white society destined to bear the brunt of the political hostility of the Afrikaner Nationalist government, and endure a decade or more of trial and tribulation. For the observant the warning bells had been ringing for some time, possibly since the surrender of Boer forces at the conclusion of the Anglo-Boer War. It was to this event that Dr D.F. Malan referred in his election day victory speech on 26 May 1948, when he proclaimed: 'at last, we have got our country back'.<sup>104</sup> The bitter conflict had bred a deep-seated legacy of resentment against British supremacy in the region. This resentment had been reinforced by the 1914-1915 Rebellion, when prominent Boer leaders such as Generals Kemp and De Wet were prosecuted for leading a resistance against South African support of Britain in World War I.

---

<sup>102</sup> Nasson, "One hundred years on", p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> Nasson, "One hundred years on", p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> G.H. Galpin, *At last we have got our country back* (Cape Town, 1968), p. 16.

Certainly, British hopes that the country's new-found wartime military professionalism in the wake of World War II would not be spoiled by excessive partisanship, were doomed. For many Afrikaners this was a crusade matched only by the threat from the country's black majority. In fact, Brian Bunting suggests that "conflict with the African peoples and with the British has been the core of Afrikaner consciousness" from as early as the second British annexation of the Cape in 1795.<sup>105</sup> For the Afrikaner Nationalist, South Africa's English-speaking white citizens, particularly in Natal, were by 1948 too closely associated for comfort with the imperialist power under whose yoke the 'volk' had suffered so much.

South Africa had fought resolutely against Nazism, only to find the country's war effort undermined by the Nationalist Party and sympathetic allies such as the Ossewa Brandwag (OBW), the largest pro-Fascist Afrikaner grouping in South African history. South Africa was, in fact, the only country among the Allies where the parliamentary opposition was totally opposed to the war effort, doing all in its power to impede it. It must be mentioned, however, that despite the overwhelming perception of Afrikaner resistance to involvement in 'Britain's War', the majority of volunteers to the armed forces were Afrikaans-speakers, who risked ostracism in their communities.

During the war the signs were grim. In April 1942 the Natal branch of the Ossewa Brandwag, based in Greytown, circularised a resolution from the organisation's 'Groot Raad', that concluded with: "Ons ken net een vyand, die kapitalistiese Empire. Vir ons Republiek sal ons veg teen enige vyand." (We know only one enemy, the capitalist Empire. We shall fight for our Republic against any enemy).<sup>106</sup> Carbineer veterans recall physical attacks in Afrikaner strongholds like Pretoria.<sup>107</sup> Soldiers on leave from military camps around Johannesburg and Pretoria had to travel in protective groups.

This resistance to the British Commonwealth war effort had been anticipated in a bizarre 1939 plot to seize transport and aircraft, and to take 8 000 troops out of the country in the event of the September 1939 Parliamentary vote on participation in the war going against Smuts's United Party.<sup>108</sup> The successful Royal visit in 1947 was dismissed by the Nationalists as a ploy by Smuts to further his party's prospects in the 1948 elections. Smuts had deliberately squandered the opportunity to hold an election in late 1947, because he had given an undertaking not to make political capital out of the visit.

The Nationalists were not to prove as generous. Soon after his election defeat Smuts was reputed to have supervised the removal, in the dead of night, of secret documents that would suddenly have explosive potential in the hands of the new government. Erasmus, in fact himself ordered the seizure of Army Intelligence files concerning

---

<sup>105</sup> Brian Bunting, *The rise of the South African Reich* (1964), p. 14.

<sup>106</sup> Greytown Museum, OBW resolution, 1942.

<sup>107</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, Jerry Hurley World War II manuscript.

<sup>108</sup> E.P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (1960), pp. 1-18.

former Broederbond activities, and was reputedly stunned when Smuts beat him to the punch, although he still managed to destroy two truckloads of incriminating documents. On Friday 23 July 1948 the CID raided the offices of Military Intelligence in Pretoria, and the director of Military Intelligence, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Powell, was summarily dismissed.<sup>109</sup> The axing of Powell, a member of a crack army team that investigated dissident Afrikaner groups such as the Broederbond, came hot on the heels of the sensational bowler-hatting of Major-General Everard Poole, Deputy Chief-of-Staff, and former general officer commanding the 6th Division.

Before proceeding further, it is worthwhile considering briefly some assessments of the general role of the military in postwar South Africa. In South Africa's increasingly conflict-ridden society, where the government faced a constant crisis of legitimacy, and the military was drawn into the maintenance of the white minority state apparatus, the concept of the non-political soldier subordinate to the civil authority was to be severely challenged.

During the period under question there was tension between elements in the upper echelons of the military establishment and the Citizen Force, not least in predominantly English-speaking Natal where the influence of British military tradition, reinforced by the Anglo-Zulu War, the Anglo-Boer War, and the World War II experience, on local military formations, was especially strong. For example, in an increasingly Afrikaner, and potentially hostile SADF, many English-speaking officers resigned their commissions in the immediate postwar years, in anticipation of discrimination. 1948 was to usher in an intensive purge that saw the 'suiwering' (purification) of the 'Britsegesinde' (British-orientated) Union Defence Force, and its transformation into a largely Afrikaans and Nationalist preserve by 1959. This had two important consequences: Firstly, there was the strong British focus within the immediate postwar UDF, in terms of institutions, uniforms, rank titles etc - the targets of Erasmus's Ministry of Defence. Then there was that cardinal principle that "military authority be subordinate to the political authority of the civil state".<sup>110</sup> This was to generate enormous tensions for those with strong personal and political principles.

South Africa, and Natal in particular, was in political turmoil by the early 1950s, and in Carbineer-country, Pietermaritzburg itself, the midlands and northern Natal, this was probably typified by the activities of two relatively short-lived protest movements: the Horticulturalists and Freedom Radio, which flourished briefly in the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>111</sup> These movements, and the earlier Torch Commando, were essentially English-speaking white South Africa and Natal's reaction to perceived Nationalist abuses amidst the flood of Apartheid legislation that overwhelmed the country after 1948. Then there was the associated perception among the predominantly ex-service

---

<sup>109</sup> *Rand Daily News*, 24 July 1948.

<sup>110</sup> Philip Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 18.

<sup>111</sup> See M. Coghlan, "The Horticulturalists and Freedom Radio", UNP History Workshop, 25-26 October 1993; and M. Coghlan, "The Horticulturalists, Freedom Radio, and the Erase Erasmus Society", *Natalia* (December 1995).

membership of organisations such as the Torch Commando that the Nationalists were abusing the wartime achievements and sacrifices of soldiers for the blatant pursuit of party political ends, and in the minds of many, a quasi-fascist state.

The Carbineers campaign for survival in the 1950s and early 1960s was to prove one of its hardest-earned 'battle honours' and this against its own military and political masters! Incidentally, if the Royal Natal Carbineers did feel specifically targeted, they were in fact in good company. In 1959 the Imperial Light Horse, Carbineer compatriots from the siege of Ladysmith, came close to dissolution before surviving as the Light Horse Regiment.

In the case of units such as the Transvaal Scottish and the Cape-based Middellandse Regiment the threat was more difficult to pinpoint and therefore counter.<sup>112</sup> This was partially the consequence of the significant numbers of Afrikaners attracted to these regiments, a legacy of World War II. Many of these Afrikaner members inculcated the same regimental loyalties and traditions that inspired their English-speaking colleagues, and were often just as resentful of political interference. However, there were Afrikaans-speaking members of English-medium ACF regiments, particularly in the Cape and Transvaal, who considered that Afrikaans in these units was treated as 'die tongval van die verowerde'.<sup>113</sup>

One portent of gloom was the sentiment-charged removal of the so-called 'Red Tab' from the army uniform, an issue first raised in September 1949. This shoulder title was a concession to Nationalist opposition to South African entry into the war. It designated voluntary service beyond the country's borders but within Africa, and was referred to by Smuts as a 'badge of honour'. The removal of the tabs represented the demise of yet another symbol of the country's war effort, and of the combat experience of individual veterans. Of course, it was a welcome measure for those who considered the tabs a divisive symbol, and ridiculed the soldiers who wore them as 'Red Lice'. The government was under considerable pressure from its own political constituency.<sup>114</sup>

Another blow to fall at this time, August 1950, was the bitterly resented alteration of lieutenant-colonel to commandant, followed a few years later, in 1959, by further rank changes such as field-cornet for lieutenant. Significantly, such Boer commando-orientated rank titles were identical to those used by the wartime Ossewa Brandwag. An apparent obsession with symbolism may appear quaint and misplaced today, but these symbols were tangible representations of the co-ordinated unity of purpose considered essential to the smooth operation of military organisations composed of disparate individuals. However, no matter how much emphasis the Carbineers placed

---

<sup>112</sup> Hamish Paterson, SA National Museum of Military History.

<sup>113</sup> SANDF Directorate Documentation Service, MVEF/MV43, 'Grievances: Wearing of the Red Tabs, 1948-1951'.

<sup>114</sup> SANDF Directorate Documentation Service, MVEF/M43, letter to Minister of Defence, 23 June 1948.

on history and tradition, on another plane these were also potent political symbols to the Nationalists.

The aggressive 1953 restructuring of the Union Defence Force initiated a second wave of purges by Erasmus. Although it was Erasmus's stated intention that the measures were intended to strengthen the establishment of units in specific areas in case of mobilisation, it was apparent from the threat to the 2nd Royal Natal Carbineers at this time, that this meant the creation of Afrikaans regiments at any cost. The measures appeared to be aimed primarily at the English-medium regiments.

An early measure to counter the influence of the so-called English ACF was the revival in December 1953 of the nineteenth century Boer commando system, a "powerful socio-cultural institution with a formative impact upon multiple aspects of Afrikaner political culture."<sup>115</sup> Superimposed on or replacing British regimental tradition, it was better suited to the relatively unsophisticated socio-economic development of the ruling party, and its increasingly hostile 'siege culture' than was the British model, which reserved the task of community building to the civil state, while the military concentrated on the strategic protection of the state.<sup>116</sup>

It was Erasmus's intention that the commandos, the apparent recipients of a revitalised Afrikaner military tradition, would replace the cornerstones of Army manpower supply - the Active Citizen Force and Defence rifle associations. The Royal Natal Carbineers and other English-language units in Natal did not take kindly to these developments, and countermeasures were set in motion. There had, however, always to remain a delicate balance between the desire for decisive measures, and the less palatable alternative of keeping a low profile, thereby hopefully avoiding worse fates - such as complete disbandment.

A ballot system to supplement volunteer recruitment, was loaded against the 'English' regiments, an effort to marginalise them by depriving them of their manpower pools. In mitigation, though, it must be said that the situation in 1953 looked good for the English-medium regiments, especially in Natal. Out of 969 recruits called by that year's initial ballot in Pietermaritzburg and the Natal midlands, 687 were English, and in only one district, Newcastle, did Afrikaans ballotees predominate.<sup>117</sup>

In the face of considerable criticism, Erasmus enjoyed vociferous support in his own constituency for his ballot-language policy. One cultural organisation wrote as follows: "Die Afrikaanse Kultuurraad, Pretoria, spreek sy besondere dank en ingomenheid uit

---

<sup>115</sup> Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p. 23.

<sup>116</sup> Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p. 25.

<sup>117</sup> SANDF Directorate Documentation Service, KG Group 5, Box 221, CGS/GPO/1/3, ACF Organisation and establishment.

met die stigting van meer Afrikaanse regimente waardeur aan die Afrikaner met sy tradisionele militêre bekwaamheid, weer 'n tuiste in ons weermag gebied word."<sup>118</sup>

It has been argued, in defence of Erasmus, that during his decade as Minister of Defence he strengthened a Union Defence Force weakened by the exigencies of urgent postwar demobilisation. However, it has been suggested here that, apart from the admitted deficiencies of the UDF, the events of the 1950s were more a case of fixing something that was not broken, for political reasons rather than to improve effectiveness.<sup>119</sup>

### Swansong: The 2nd Royal Natal Carbineers

Towards the end of 1953 word was received from 'higher authority' that the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Natal Carbineers was to be disbanded, with effect from January 1954. It was of little solace to these Carbineers that the pill was sweetened by reference to the process as an amalgamation with the 1st Battalion. These are the bare facts, but they do not reflect the emotion and bitterness that swept this northern Natal bastion of the Royal Natal Carbineers.<sup>120</sup> Over the previous five years (1950 to 1954) it had become apparent that the battalion was to become one of the sacrificial victims of Defence Force rationalization, Erasmus's language policy and manipulation of the ballot system. In February 1951 there was sharp reaction from the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Henderson, to the proposed conversion of the battalion into an Afrikaans-medium one.<sup>121</sup>

The issues of language and the distribution of manpower was at the heart of the 2nd Carbineer response. This was not for any reasons of exclusivity, but rather because the recommendations had been made notwithstanding the fact that the unit was already effectively bilingual. In the Utrecht Troop, in the predominantly Afrikaans northern extremity of the province, there were only four 'English' names out of a total of twenty one.<sup>122</sup> For the Defence Department it was a simple matter: if the majority of a regiment's men were English or Afrikaans-speaking, then that language would be the medium of instruction. Furthermore, the English-speakers were considered well catered for in units such as the 1st RNC, the NMR, UMR and RDLI, with not a single regiment exclusively for Afrikaners.

After apparently backing off on the language issue, Erasmus rebounded later the same year with a proposal to cut the battalion's strength by one squadron, and then establish

<sup>118</sup> SANDF Directorate Documentation Service, MVEF/MUB/1, volume 3, Afrikaanse Kultuurraad to Erasmus, 25 August 1953.

<sup>119</sup> *Natal Sunday Post*, 29 January 1950.

<sup>120</sup> For example, see G.T. Hurst, *Volunteer Regiments of Natal and East Griqualand* (1945), pp. 61-62.

<sup>121</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 23 February and 13 June 1951.

<sup>122</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, 2 RNC Orders, 1937.

the Afrikaans-medium Regiment Smuts, later Regiment Noord-Natal, which previously Carbineer recruits from districts such as Newcastle were compelled to join.<sup>123</sup> The twilight of the 2nd Battalion became a vicious circle, with demoralising rumours of changes in language designation and title, and of course, complete disbandment, dogging its final years. Resistance was brushed aside with the suggestion that any strongly-held opinion on the part of military officers was politically inspired and therefore 'undesirable'- ironic considering the murky political background to the proposed disbandment itself.

It seems certain, for example, that both the Natal Mounted Rifles and Umvoti Mounted Rifles were threatened with disbandment or merger as early as 1952, unless the Carbineers and the RDLI surrendered their second battalions, to give effect to the reduction in the number of regiments called for by the government. The UMR, in fact, fended off another threatened disbandment, entailing conversion into a squadron of the NMR, ordered by Erasmus in 1959. In this UMR case a meeting in Pretoria in November 1959 failed to move Erasmus. They were saved by the proverbial bell when Erasmus was replaced by the more conciliatory Fouche as Minister of Defence. The UMR 'death sentence' was commuted to a reduction in strength.<sup>124</sup>

If there was such a sacrifice, it was readily made, but the contradictions regarding the 'scapegoat' factors such as manpower and language, with their distinctive political undertones, continued to rankle. It should be remembered that while the 1st Battalion's Pietermaritzburg and midlands base was solidly anti-Nationalist, northern Natal represented something of a frontline against Afrikaner Nationalism. Life in these political trenches was often uncompromising and brutal, as the Horticulturalists discovered when they reinforced the anti-Nationalist presence at political meetings in the region.<sup>125</sup>

There is also the experience of the Rand Light Infantry. The Johannesburg-based RLI was also 'selected' for conversion to Afrikaans, apparently because it was considered that its previous support base among the Rand miners of Cornish extraction had been replaced by Afrikaners. Following resistance from English-speaking members, Erasmus retaliated with a policy of starving the regiment of recruits until it fell into line.<sup>126</sup> In April 1960 a list of new ACF units, and the re-designation of others, was announced. Included in this list were twenty one new Afrikaans-medium regiments, but only two English ones.<sup>127</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 8 and 11 June 1951.

<sup>124</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, UMR file.

<sup>125</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, Mrs Sheila Henderson interview.

<sup>126</sup> SANDF, Directorate Documentation Service, MVEF (precise reference temporarily mislaid).

<sup>127</sup> SANDF, Directorate Documentation Service, MVEF, Box 7, MV 8/1, Aktiewe Burgermag Algemeen, volume 5.

### Emergency: 1960

From the moment of its election victory in 1948, the Nationalist government consolidated its hold on the country with an unprecedented fervour. Unrest raged episodically from May 1958 onwards in the Durban area. On 18 June 1958 widespread arson and pillage in the Durban townships, including Lamontville and Chesterville, caused £100 000 damage, and invited a drastic police response.<sup>128</sup> At the 47th Annual Conference of the ANC, held in Durban on 12 and 13 December 1959, 31 March 1960 was fixed as anti-Pass day and 15 April as 'African Freedom Day'. However, these plans were overtaken by the shootings at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960. Subsequent rioting prompted the banning of both the ANC and PAC on 28 March, and the proclamation of a State of Emergency on the 30th.<sup>129</sup> The basis for military involvement in combatting the civil unrest of 1960 lay in the internal security provisions of the original 1912 Defence Act. Legal authority, vested in Section 3(2) of the Defence Act of 1957, provided for the deployment of the Army in the 'prevention and suppression of terrorism and internal disorder'.<sup>130</sup>

For many in the Royal Natal Carbineers the most serious dilemma was that concerning obligated duty to a government whose hostility towards certain elements of the Citizen Force was still cause for concern. As regiments such as the Carbineers responded with typical alacrity and efficiency to the mobilisation of 31 March 1960, two recent examples of this hostility were fresh in the memory of many. On 11 July 1957, for example, the commanding officer, Commandant Edmonds, directed a blunt letter to Commandant-General Hendrik Klopper, Commandant-General of the Union Defence Force. Edmonds's ire had been aroused by a serious slur cast by the Army Chief-of-Staff on the ability and integrity in commanding officers of Natal ACF units, and the implied unreliability of these regiments in a crisis.<sup>131</sup>

Erasmus also reputedly issued instructions to disband all English-language regiments on the grounds that they may become involved in a coup to overthrow the government.<sup>132</sup> Such suspicion was wide of the mark, despite the heated sentiments of many Natalians on such issues as the Republic. The shortsightedness of this proposal was made clear a few months later with the CF deployment of April 1960.

For the Royal Natal Carbineers, the event that was to illustrate most acutely the bewildering contradictions of those turbulent years, was the Diamond Jubilee commemoration of the relief of Ladysmith in February 1960. As early as September 1959 the Carbineers had been approached by the Town Council of Ladysmith to participate in a re-dedication of a Carbineer War Memorial in the portico of the Town

---

<sup>128</sup> Campbell Collections, SB Bourquin file, report, Durban Department Native Affairs, Native unrest 1958-60.

<sup>129</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 31 March 1960.

<sup>130</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, 1912 Defence Act and 1957 Defence Act.

<sup>131</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, J.P. Edmonds file, letter, 11 July 1957.

<sup>132</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, Brigadier JG Willers to the writer, June 1994.



Hall. This was to be followed by a Retreat Ceremony on Saturday 27 February. Natal Command authority was received in early December, and on 29 January 1960 the offer was extended to include the Freedom of the Borough, in recognition of services during the Anglo-Boer War.<sup>133</sup>

There was consternation when, on the very eve of the commemoration, Carbineer participation was aborted by Fouche on the grounds that it would be inappropriate for a UDF regiment to 'celebrate' a British victory over the Boers.<sup>134</sup> Curiously enough, there seems to have been no objection to the granting of civic honours to the Imperial Light Horse in this same year, despite the ILH's origins amongst the English Uitlander community in Johannesburg. Within hours the immediate past commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Francis, had organised a private 'relief of Ladysmith' convoy conveying ex-servicemen to the town. There followed an impassioned 1 000-strong protest-march. The affair generated huge media interest in what would otherwise have been a routine civic event. In an indignant editorial on 29 February, *The Natal Witness* described the government action as "at once an unforgivable insult to the memory of the dead, and an open declaration of war upon the traditions of English-speaking South Africans". This belated South African War 'incident' is an opportunity to speculate on the connection between the legacy of widespread Afrikaner xenophobia generated by such factors as the British internment camp system during 1899-1902, and the entrenchment of Afrikaner Nationalist rule and its impact on the Natal regiments in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **The storm breaks: The coming of the Republic**

As the 1950s drew to a close, the inexorable advance of the contentious Afrikaner Republic, with its implicit totalitarianism, against which both formal white political opposition and popular protest appeared helpless, promised further blows for the country's 'traditional' regiments. In April 1957, for example, the British flag ceased to fly on official occasions, although in Natal this ruling was to be defied on several occasions.<sup>135</sup> Measures such as the withdrawal of the Union Flag while the country was officially still a Dominion, was an ominous sign for 'loyalist' white Natalians, who particularly feared the loss of Commonwealth status. It did not lend credence to assurances that in its re-organisation of the ACF the government intended to tread as little as possible on tradition.

On 3 February 1960 the Nationalists, and the country, were rocked by British Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan's epic 'Winds of Change' speech to Parliament. It included a threatened withdrawal of Western support if current racial policies were maintained. Until then Britain had tolerated successive Nationalist administrations on account of British economic and strategic interests. Then, in the referendum of October 1960, a

---

<sup>133</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, Borough of Ladysmith to RNC, 26 September 1959; RNC to Natal Command, 27 October 1959; Ladysmith to RNC, 29 January 1960; RNC internal circular, 9 December 1959.

<sup>134</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 29 February 1960.

<sup>135</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 17 April 1962.

narrow country-wide majority in favour of a Republic had nullified an overwhelming Natal majority in favour of the Union *status quo*. Although regiments such as the Royal Natal Carbineers continued to wage their own battles with higher authority for some time to come, this date did mark a watershed for those considering drastic action against the government, particularly in Natal, where feelings on the issue of the Republic bordered on violent. It was, for example, the 'now-or-never' moment for calls in the province for secession, but that never materialised and Natal separatism withered.

In March 1961, as the demise of Union approached, the battle over Royal emblems hotbed up. Topping the agenda was a Department of Defence Order for the removal of Royal emblems with effect from 30 May that year, and there was the threatened demise of regimental badges in favour of anonymous corps badges. It was generally considered prudent to negotiate such issues as the 'Royal' prefix, rather than risk more drastic action, such as complete changes in designation. The arguments put forward, in response to the claim that British symbols were incompatible with the Republic, were compelling. Most apparent was the fact that many British regiments had foreign emblems incorporated into their badges, symbols of historical growth in a regiment.<sup>136</sup>

Closer to home, there had been several Afrikaans-language regiments with names such as President Steyn and Louw Wepener, in existence while the country was still a Union. In fact, it was already policy to name Afrikaans-medium regiments after prominent South African soldiers, and the name of the Middellandse Regiment was changed to Regiment Gideon Scheepers (a Boer military hero) as recently as January 1954, so why should the reverse not apply under a Republic for regiments with British associations?<sup>137</sup>

The current Carbineer badge, with the Royal cipher removed, and the crown relocated to the centre and replaced atop the badge by the twin Natal wildebeest, was approved by the Minister of Defence with effect from 10 July 1962 - the day that the 'Royal' prefix was formally dropped.<sup>138</sup> A poignant symbol of loss associated with the onset of the Republic was the laying up of the 1955 Queen's Colour on 28 May 1961.<sup>139</sup> The Department of Defence's callous handling of this episode contributed to a general spirit of bemused resentment in Natal military circles.

Having won a narrow mandate in the referendum, the government gave effect to its republican clamour with the introduction of the necessary legislation in the 1961 session of Parliament. The Republic arrived on schedule on 31 May, but not without a touch of whimsical protest from the Royal Natal Carbineers. With miniature Union flags flying

---

<sup>136</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, PCAF Collection.

<sup>137</sup> SANDF, Directorate Documentation Service, KG Group 5, Box 221, CG S/GPO/1/3, ACF Organisation and establishment, memorandum: Council of Corps, Regiments and Kindred Associations of SA.

<sup>138</sup> The Natal Mercury, 27 July 1962.

<sup>139</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 29 May 1961.

from every tent at the headquarters, the band struck up 'Old Lang Syne' at two minutes to midnight on 30 May.

The Republic had arrived, bulldozed through by a confident and apparently omnipotent government, along with countless security measures, ranging from the irritating to the draconian. In a haunting editorial on 2 June 1962, entitled 'Watching for the Dawn', *The Natal Witness* commented ominously:

Nationalism is mounting to the zenith of its success. It controls the whole apparatus of State and enjoys the vociferous support of a bemused electorate. Fattened by autocratic power, it hungers for more and more power, like a Cyclops devouring its own children... The way is open to the establishment of a totalitarian state.<sup>140</sup>

In Regimental Orders for 2 June, the Colonel-in-Chief, Her Majesty the Queen, was officially struck off the roll of the Royal Natal Carbineers.<sup>141</sup> British Royal Colonelcies-in-Chief had been one of Erasmus's prime targets from as early as 1949, but he had been unable act until the establishment of the Republic opened the constitutional door for him. It was possibly the most clear indication to the men of this regiment of exactly which side had ultimately emerged victorious from the Anglo-Boer War.

---

<sup>140</sup> *The Natal Witness*, 2 June 1962.

<sup>141</sup> Natal Carbineers Archive, NC Regimental Orders, 2 June 1962.