The war that Boer defence beginnings

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s we look towards the centenary of the Landing at Galtipil, May 31, 2012, it will mark the anniversary of 110 years since the end of the Boer War.

This war saw the enlistment of 10,000 Australian volunteers (of whom 6500 enlisted twice), with approximately 500 deaths, half of which were caused by disease. The southern tip of Africa was originally colonised by Dutch (Boer) farmers. However, the British also established colonies along vital trade routes, assuming control of Cape Town in 1806.

The Boers, disgruntled at British rule and its abolition of slavery, moved north in the 1830s, establishing the republics of Orange Free State and Transvaal, and successfully repelled attempts by Britain to assume control of these areas in 1881. However, the discovery of gold in Transvaal in 1886 brought an influx of miners to the area (including many Australians), who began to resent the Boer rule, which demanded laws but denied voting rights and public office. The Boers, meanwhile, were suspicious of these foreigners who might attempt to establish British rule.

Petrolim and adventure IN 1899, an attempt was made to spark an uprising to provoke British action (and rule), assisted by a contingent of Australian settlers forming an unofficial “Australian Corps”. A potential war was brewing, and prior to any official declaration, the New South Wales Larcoy departed in March 1899, for six months training in Britain.

Other units formed in the other Australian states, and the first ships departed in October/November, collecting troops from each colony as they sailed to South Africa, arriving a few weeks later with the British forces under their command. Men enlisted for many reasons. In an era prior to Federation and following the diamond jubilee of the reign of Queen Victoria, most Australian residents identified with being British, and there was concern that a British defeat would encourage France, Russia, Japan (and later – Germany) to take up arms against the Empire and her isolated colonies.

The 1890s had been an extended period of drought across Australia, and the war offered adventure and one year of regular work – the pay of five shillings per day topped up by the colonial governments, far above the one shilling wage paid to the British regulars. Despite most costs being met by the British fundraising campaigns commanded to meet the costs of transport for men and horses, and relief for the families left behind.

The war and Kitchener INITIALLY, the Boers were victorious during “Black Week” in December 1899, sweeping into British Natal and besieging the towns of Ladysmith (after which the village near Wagga was named) and Mafeking, making the name of (British) Colonel Robert Baden Powell (who later went on to establish the Boy Scout movement and is honoured with a street name in Wagga) known throughout Australia.

Further contingents arrived during the year and were immediately put into service. Ladysmith was relieved in February, and Mafeking on May 15, the news prompting impromptu and rapturous celebration across Australia.

The next few months then began a chase to capture the commander of the Boer forces and the president of Orange Free State. At the end of November, 1900, Kitchener became the Commander in Chief, and implemented harsher methods to break down the Boer resistance.

Women, children and prisoners were rounded up into concentration camps, Boer property destroyed, and prisoners were executed for using yellow bullets and impersonating British soldiers by wearing captured British khaki uniforms and reportedly shooting from under the sanctity of the white flag.

The “Australian Commonwealth Horse” KITCHENER increasingly petitioned Australia for more troops, particularly at the end of 1900 when the contracts of the initial contingents expired. Many men re-enlisted, or enlisted with irregular British units which often made pay and adventure, and seemingly less discipline and inherance from the British army hierarchy.

Australia was in the process of federation. However, with no formal federal government until elections in March 1901, the request again went to the states. It was not until January 1902 that Australian Prime Minister Edmund Barton proposed the formation of a unified Australian contingent. Commanded by Colonel Edward Hutton, the Australian Commonwealth Horse was raised, with a new Australian uniform designed by a brass AC on the shoulder strap and the recognisable badge of the rising sun. The first contingent sailed in February 1902, closely followed by two more in April and May, bringing the total numbers to 3400 men. However, the man was disappointed in action, as the truce was signed on May 31, 1902.

Peace and after-effects AUSTRALIA was not involved in the peace negotiations of the Boer War. However, discussion was held as to the future of the defence of the Empire in a meeting of the British and colonial prime ministers in July.

In the absence of a navy of her own, Australia did agree to increase funding contributions towards the British navy; however, a united British Empire force was not agreed to. Instead, Australia developed her own defence force, providing for compulsory military service, but ruling that overseas service was not required for Australian conscripts.

The Boer War shares many similarities to World War 1, using trench warfare and demonstrating the need to develop good hygiene and medical facilities and more mobile tactics.

Many of the man who fought in the Boer War also went on to fight and command Australian troops in WII, further demonstrating their commitment to Australia and the Empire.

Anzac Day is often described as Australia’s “baptism of fire”, however, it was the Boer War in which the creation of an Australian Defence Force and its strong history of volunteer service was born.