

# BOER WAR FOES

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

James H. Hillestad musters a look at the opposing forces, uniforms, weapons and tactics of the Second Anglo-Boer War

**D**uring the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, the British Army could have drawn on more than 200,000 native troops (Indians, Egyptians, East and West Africans) in South Africa itself. But the empire chose not to do so for fear of alienating South African whites. It was to be a "white man's war."

Not since Agincourt had Britain sent out an expeditionary force composed exclusively of Britons, augmented by Commonwealth troops from Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Offers of volunteers by Commonwealth countries were welcomed by the British. But the preference was for "unmounted infantry." This when the enemy was wholly mounted (only 10 percent of the British Army was mounted)! The concept of mounted infantry was viewed by the British War Office as a newfangled absurdity. This was to change dramatically as the war progressed.

There were Americans and Irish fighting on both sides. Dutch, French, Germans and Russians fought alongside the Boers.

Cor van Gogh, brother of painter Vincent van Gogh, joined the Boers. So did a nephew of Pope Leo XIII.

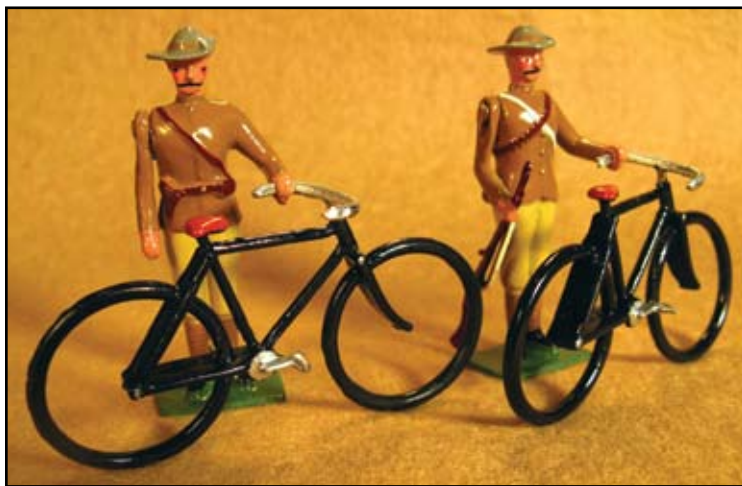
**“The Boers embodied the spirit and tactics of Russia’s Cossacks. Mounted like them, they covered long distances, attacked unexpectedly and caught the enemy by surprise.”**

## RUSSIAN SYMPATHY FOR BOERS

With the exception of the Netherlands, where the Boers had their ancestral roots, Russia was the most helpful of the non-belligerents to the South African republics.

Still smarting from Russia's defeat by the British and their allies in the Crimea War, the Czar's subjects saw the conflict as strife between good and evil, with the "commercially minded" British waging an unjust war of aggression on the personification of a good, God-fearing, peasant-brother Boer.

It should be noted that there were no ulterior motives in the Russian attitude toward the South African republics. Russia had no commercial dealings with them, no investments in their gold or diamond industries, and no desire to establish any kind of political or economic sphere of influence over them.



The City of London Imperial Volunteers, a famous British unit, was known for its slouch hats called "smashers." These figures come from a CIV cyclist detachment set by The Toy Soldiers of Wm. Hocker, Proprietor. The maker offers an extensive series based on the Boer War.

The appeal which drew the Russians to the Boers was based on a need for hero worship. Russians pictured the Boers as fearless knights of olden days, to whom their country's freedom mattered more than anything else on earth, including their own lives.

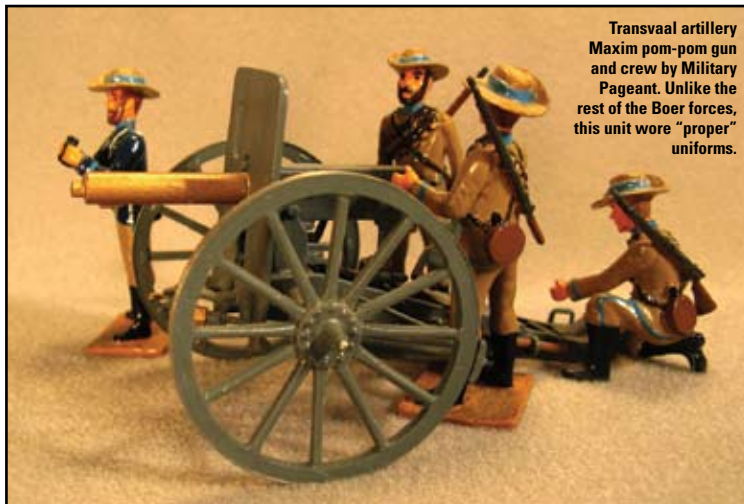
To the Russians, that such a small nation should have taken on the British Empire was beyond comprehension and deserved unreserved support. The Boers embodied the spirit and tactics of Russia's Cossacks. Mounted like them, they covered long distances, attacked unexpectedly and caught the enemy by surprise.



Boer War British Yeomanry bugle. (Writer's Collection)



British Bulldog set depicting Boers firing a 75-mm Creusot gun.



Transvaal artillery Maxim pom-pom gun and crew by Military Pageant. Unlike the rest of the Boer forces, this unit wore "proper" uniforms.



Royal Scots Fusiliers on the march by Drill Square. Note that the British unit's flag is encased. Unfurled colours were no longer carried into battle.



Gordon Highlander wearing the recently adopted khaki uniform. Note the khaki leather apron. Figure by Trophy.

necessary, and to provide their own horses and rifles.

There was, however, a uniformed corps of artillery. Transvaal Republic President Kruger, anticipating a conflict, bought the most modern artillery that Germany and France could supply.

The Transvaal Statsartillery was equipped with 75-mm and 155-mm Creusot guns, the latter known as "Long Toms," which could fire a 96-pound projectile more than 10,000 yards. From Germany, the Boers purchased 120-mm Krupp howitzers.

From England -- yes, England -- the Boers obtained 37-mm Maxim automatic, quick-firing guns called "pom-poms" for the sound they made. These fired a belt of 10 1-pound shells to a range of 4,000 yards. The Boers also used .303-inch Maxim machine guns.

The Boers were armed with the highly regarded 7-mm Mauser rifle, which used



Walter Dineen made these figures of Boers. They went into action in the same clothes that they wore on their farmsteads.

smokeless powder, rendering a marksman in the distance almost undetectable.

Like the British Lee-Enfield and the Lee-Enfield, the Mauser had a five-cartridge magazine. But there was an important difference. The magazine of the British rifle had to be loaded one cartridge at a time, and soldiers carried their bullets loose in ammunition pouches. The Boers carried their cartridges in clips, which could be inserted quickly by a push of the thumb. Thus, while both types of rifles could fire five initial rounds at the same speed, the Boers could reload and fire 50 rounds to the British 20.

Moreover, the Mauser was accurate at 2,200 yards (22 American football fields). It was discovered that the new British Lee-Enfields fired 18 inches to the right at 500 yards!

## BOERS FIGHTERS & WEAPONS

The Boers did not have an army as such, but all males between the ages of 16 and 60 were expected to fight in commandos if and when



A 6-inch, 30-cwt howitzer in action by Trophy. This was the heaviest type of gun employed by the British.



British Maxim gun and crew by Trophy.



## SPECIAL SECTION: SECOND ANGLO-BOER WAR

### TOMMY IN UNIFORM

The typical British private was called a "Tommy," short for Tommy Atkins. The name has its roots in an Army paybook introduced during the Napoleonic Wars. To guide those filling in the blanks, the Duke of Wellington suggested that a pro forma version contain the name and particulars of a veteran of his old regiment, the 33rd Foot. So it was that Thomas Atkins, No. 6 Company, 1st Battalion, born in Odilham, Hampshire, secured a perpetual place in British history.

The Tommy wore a khaki uniform adopted by the Army in 1897, replacing the long-cherished scarlet. The regulation foreign service helmet lacked sufficient shade from the sun, which led to it being worn back-to-front, with the longer, rear-neck guard acting as a sun visor for the eyes. The trade-off was that the soldiers' necks were now exposed to the sun -- a situation which prompted the Boers to call them "red necks."

Popular among the colonial forces was the slouch hat,



British 4.7-inch naval gun pulled by a team of oxen. The gun was 16 feet long, weighed almost 4 tons, and had a range of 6 miles. Set by Les Miniatures.



A British pom-pom gun team gallops into action. Set by Wm. Hocker Toy Soldiers.

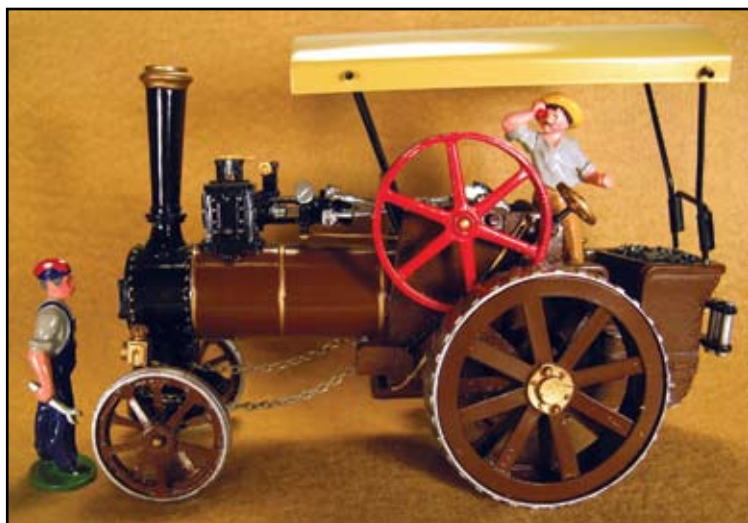
colloquially called the "smasher." The wide brim was usually upturned on the left side and lent itself to regimental decorations. A turned up right brim was thought to indicate Boer sympathies.

As the Boers were keen on picking off officers, much was

done to eliminate distinctions. Officers replaced their Wolseley pattern helmets for the rank and file version. Most officers discarded their useless swords and acquired carbines. Sam Browne belts were abandoned. All bright metal objects, such as buttons, were painted khaki.

As the war progressed, Scottish Highland regiments took to wearing khaki aprons to conceal their colorful tartan kilts. The advantage

“ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle called the Boers the ‘most rugged, virile, unconquerable race ever seen upon earth.’ ”



Initially, steam traction engines that inspired this detailed Trophy model were used by the Royal Engineers to drive dynamos to provide electricity. However, they soon saw double-duty as a means of towing heavy artillery, though this use was hampered by the need to be near a water source.

suffered, however, when the men lay down to fire, baring the backs of their legs to the burning South African sun. Lowland regiments exchanged their tartan trews for khaki trousers.

Unfurled colours were not carried into battle. The last time that occurred was in 1881 at the Battle of Laing's Nek during the First Boer War. The regiment involved was the 58th Northamptonshire.

The Second Anglo-Boer War was the first in which a form of "dog tag" was introduced. This was formed of strips of tape carried in the pockets. Four years later identification discs made of tin

Royal Horse Artillery "Under Fire" set by All the Queen's Men.



## ANGLO-BOER WAR COMMUNICATIONS



British field telegraph party by Potsdammer Tin Soldiers. Though an invaluable method of communication, it could easily be interrupted by the Boers cutting the wire.



The British use carrier pigeons to send messages in a vignette made by W.C. Stanton.

### OBSERVATION BALLOONS

Observation balloons for military purposes were first used by the French army in the late 18th century, but were deemed less than successful by Emperor Napoleon I. Balloons reappeared in the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War prior to the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

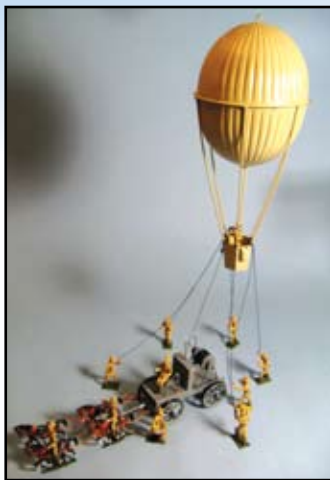
Hydrogen gas, the most efficient lifting agent, was transported in welded steel cylinders carried on wagons. In South Africa, the wagons

were pulled by teams of oxen, though mules and horses were also employed.

British balloons were made from "Goldbeater's" skin prepared from the lower intestine of the ox and so-called because of its other use in the production of gold leaf. The skin was lighter and more gas-tight than any other material available, and eminently suitable for use in temperate climates.

The balloons were capable of lifting two men in a cramped wickerwork basket, connected by landline to a field headquarters. Twenty balloons were in service in the Boer War, but they never realized their full potential.

For example, at the disastrous (for the British) Battle of Spion Kop Jan. 23-24, 1900, had a competent observer ascended in a balloon and made a sketch of the area to be attacked and the Boer defensive positions, the British would have been forewarned of insurmountable difficulties that lay ahead.



British observation balloon and ground crew by Potsdammer Tin Soldiers.



Quartermaster Corps items depicting British officers signaling with a heliograph.

### ELECTRIC TELEGRAPH

The British Army had an excellent field telegraph system. Invaluable at times, it was subject to interruptions caused by the Boers cutting the wire.

### HELIOGRAPH

The heliograph, invented by Henry Mance in 1875, was first

taken into British service in India in 1877.

The device, mounted on a tripod stand, reflected the sun's rays. When the sun shone, a heliograph signal could be seen from a distance of 50 miles!

It was widely used in the Boer War.

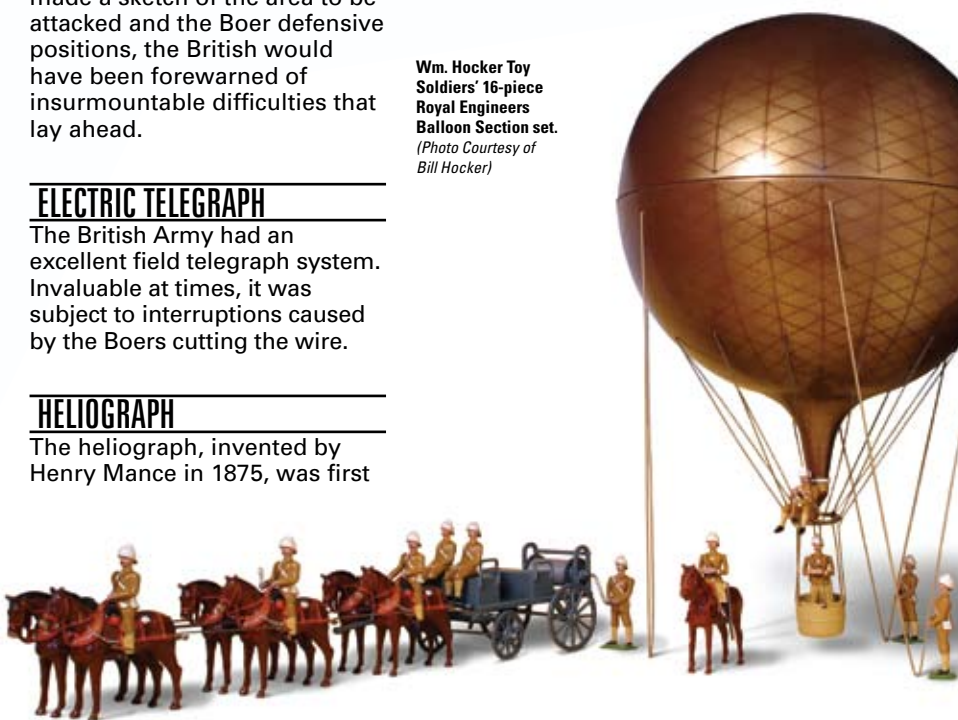
### CARRIER PIGEONS

At the outset of the Boer War, there was a strong society of pigeon fanciers in Johannesburg. The founder was an Englishman who, at the outbreak of hostilities, clipped one wing of each pigeon, thus destroying the birds' ability to fly. For this action, he was taken prisoner by the Boers.

Meanwhile, the Durban Poultry and Pidgeon Racing Club offered their pigeons to British Lt. Gen. George White for military use at Ladysmith. On Nov. 9, 1899, a pigeon named Royalty carried a message from White congratulating the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, on his 58th birthday. The pigeon flew from then besieged Ladysmith to Durban, where the message was forwarded to England.

--James H. Hillestad

Wm. Hocker Toy Soldiers' 16-piece Royal Engineers Balloon Section set. (Photo Courtesy of Bill Hocker)





## SPECIAL SECTION: SECOND ANGLO-BOER WAR

were issued to be worn around the neck.

As for the Afrikaners, author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle called the Boers the "most rugged, virile, unconquerable race ever seen upon earth."

The Boers went to war much as they went to work as farmers, wearing their broad-brimmed hats, corduroy pants and bandoliers of ammunition slung over their shoulders. Their shoes were homemade of leather.

### TACTICS

The British fought as platoons -- large groups of 50 men who moved in densely packed columns and discharged their rifles in volley fire at targets designated by their commanding officers.

The Boers, on the other hand, fought as individuals. Dashing from one bit of cover to another, crouching low to avoid detection, the Boers were generally invisible.

Their stealth and mobility frustrated the British, who felt that they weren't "playing the game" by the rules. This was reflected in a propaganda piece aimed at discrediting the Boers written by S.A. Forrest:

*Seven little Boer boys,  
Full of naughty tricks,  
One abused the white flag,  
And then there were six.*

Gen. Redvers Buller, commander of the British forces at the beginning of the war, was loath to consider new tactics. In a memorandum to officers at Aldershot, he asserted that battles were won not by "jacks-in-boxes," but by resolute, enthusiastic men who kept on their feet.

Though available, telescopic sights that would have been very effective in the clear South African air were seldom issued by the British. In the cavalry, the sword and the lance were favored. In the infantry, the bayonet was accorded high value. And all of this while the Boer enemy was firing from long distances with highly accurate rifles!

This latter point became even more "troublesome" when it came to the British artillery. For centuries, artillery was positioned out in the open, alongside exposed infantry. Again, like their stand-up infantry counterparts, the artillerymen became sitting ducks for the Boers, who fired



Heading off to the war in South Africa is the British Infantry Marching 1890s set by Wm. Hocker Toy Soldiers. (Photo Courtesy of Bill Hocker)

at long range from concealed positions.

This impossible situation was eventually rectified when the British adopted new, mobile tactics and introduced "mounted infantry" accompanied by mounted artillery. Even so the British suffered a disadvantage as one in every four men was assigned to be a horse holder. Thus, the unit lost 25 percent of its effective strength. Boer horses were schooled to stand still when their riders dismounted.

The Boers also changed tactics. Rather than occupy positions on top of a hill, they began to use slit trenches dug at the foot of the hills. The trenches protected them from shrapnel. In addition, the ground-level position made their firing even more effective, as their bullets traveled parallel to the ground instead of plunging down into it. This increased the likelihood of hitting an opponent. ■

### MILITARY MEDICINE IN THE BOER WAR

Despite the harsh lessons of the Crimean War, British medical facilities were rudimentary during the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

Few precautions were taken to reduce the spread of typhoid fever and dysentery. Animal carcasses were everywhere, attracting hordes of infection-spreading flies.

Sanitary conditions at hospitals and camps were shameful. Medical staff were in short supply as were medical supplies. More British soldiers died from disease -- more than 13,000 -- than as a result of wounds suffered in battle.

It was at the 1900 Battle of Spion Kop that Mohandas Gandhi's South African Indian Ambulance Corps took away the British wounded on stretchers to springless ambulances. Their destination: a field hospital (perhaps manned by physician Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) and possible transfer to a hospital ship.

The latter had been

conceived by the American wife of a South African mining executive. She had interested the American-born mother of Winston Churchill in the project. Named the Maine, the hospital ship flew both the British Union Jack and the U.S. Stars and Stripes flags, which was unprecedented. It also flew the flag of the recently recognized Red Cross. One of the first patients taken aboard was Winston Churchill's brother, Jack, who had received a leg wound.

The Russian Red Cross offered both sides medical staff and medicines. The British declined the offer. The Boers accepted it with "great gratitude." During its stay in South Africa, the Russian Red Cross treated 1,900 patients in three hospitals and give first aid to 5,700 others in the field.

--James H. Hillestad

Tending the wounded before loading them onto a British springless field "ambulance." Items made by W.C. Stanton.

