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The Long, Long Trail

The British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918

South African forces in the British Army

In 1902, just twelve years before Great Britain declared war, the armies of Britain and the Boer Republics (Transvaal and Orange Free State) had been fighting each other in the Second Boer War. There had been an extraordinary transformation in relationships between the countries in the intervening period and the Union of South Africa was to prove a staunch and hard-fighting Ally. Here is a summary of their story:

South Africa enters the war on British side; some Boer conservatives rebel

In August 1914 Louis Botha and Jan Smuts took the Union of South Africa into the war in support of Great Britain.

Louis Botha, former member of the Transvaal Volksraad and an accomplished leader of Boer forces against the British in 1899-1902 had been elected the first President of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Jan Christian Smuts, another former Boer military leader, was his Minister of Defence.

Both men had worked for increased harmony between South Africa and Britain since the end of the war in 1902. They now considered that South Africa, as a British dominion, must support the British side. They quickly ordered troops into German protectorate of South-West Africa.

Many Afrikaners opposed going to war with Germany, which had aided them during the war against Britain (and continued a quiet propaganda war ever since). An attempted Boer coup against Botha's government failed in September 1914 when Christiaan Beyer - an Afrikaner hero from the earlier war - was killed by police, and a large armed uprising in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal later in the year was also held. The continuing revolt was finally defeated by the middle of 1915, a year when Botha's National Party only narrowly held on to power in a general election.

The South African military contribution to the war effort

The Union Defence Forces (UDF) were formed after the passing of the South Africa Defence Act in June 1912. The Permanent Force was established in the following year. Five army regiments, known as the South African Mounted Rifles (SAMR), were organised and given police and military duties.

The expansion of the Army was taken a step further with the creation of the Active Citizen Force (ACF), the Coast Garrison Force and the Rifle

Associations in July 1913.

Over 146,000 men served in South African units during the war, fighting on three principal fronts. The first engagement was to enter and capture German South-West Africa, a venture that required the raising of an expeditionary force of 67,000 men. An infantry brigade and various other units moved to France (see below), and the wide-ranging conflict in East Africa kept many more men occupied throughout the war. In addition, it is estimated that about 3,000 South Africans joined the Royal Flying Corps. Total South African casualties during the war reached 18,600 with more than 6,600 losing their lives.

The South African Brigade and other units

South Africa raised a Brigade of four infantry battalions for the Western Front, in addition to 5 batteries of Heavy Artillery, a Field Ambulance, a Royal Engineers Signal Company and a General Hospital. This was a substantial undertaking, given the other demands on the Union, and the fact that these units once on active service would require 15% replacements per month.

The infantry battalions were raised with men from the four provinces of the Union: the 1st Regiment troops were from the Cape; the 2nd Regiment from Natal and the Orange Free State; the 3rd Regiment was from Transvaal and Rhodesia. The 4th Regiment was rather different: it was the South African Scottish, raised from the Transvaal Scottish and the Cape Town Highlanders, and wearing the Atholl Murray tartan. An infantry depot was established at Potchefstroom.

The Heavy Artillery was recruited in July 1915. 1st Battery came from West Cape; 2nd from East Cape; 3rd from the Transvaal, 4th from Kimberley and the 5th from Natal. The War Office in London decreed that it should be a 6 inch Howitzer Brigade. Later on the Batteries were renumbered. 1st became 73rd Siege Battery; 2nd became 74th; 3rd 71st; 4th 72nd and the 5th Battery became 75th Siege Battery.

The South African Field Ambulance was mobilised at Potchefstroom in August 1915, attached to the infantry Brigade (which was unusual, as FAs were regarded as Divisional Troops).

The General Hospital, staffed from military facilities at Wynberg and Maitland, eventually provided the staff for both the South African Military Hospital at Richmond near London, and the No 1 South African General Hospital in France. In addition, a small detachment was formed at Cannes in 1914, providing medical facilities for the French forces.

Most of the recruits already had military training or experience. They were, in general, middle class, well educated and well bred men. The units were all led by serving officers of the UDF, the whole Brigade coming under the command of Brigadier-General Henry Lukin DSO, who up to this point had been Inspector General of the UDF.

Short-lived move to England

The new force embarked at Cape Town between 28 August and 17 October 1915, and all units were in England by November. The infantry moved to camp at Bordon, the Ambulance to Fleet, and the Artillery to Bexhill.

Some of the officers moved to France for 3 days on 21 November, where they were at first attached to the **16th (Irish) Division** for familiarisation.

But there was a change of plan at high level, and on 30 December the South Africans were on their way back to their own continent.

On Egypt's Western Frontier

The Brigade landed at Alexandria between 10 and 13 January 1916 and moved to Mex Camp. First 2nd Regiment, and then the remainder, were then moved to join the **Western Frontier Force**.

In the the trenches in France

The Brigade sailed from Alexandria between 13 and 15 April 1916 and landed at Marseilles. By 23 April, the leading units had detrained and were arriving at Steenwerck in Flanders. The entire Brigade came under orders of the 9th (Scottish) Division, in which it replaced 28th Brigade.

First major engagement during the Battle of the Somme. On 2 July 1916, moved up from Grovetown to Billon Valley, relieving 27th Brigade which had been ordered up to the battle. Moved up to relieve 89th Brigade of 30th Division in Glatz (Glatz Redoubt / Chimney Trench) sector of front line near Montauban. Came under heavy shellfire. 4th Bn involved in fighting for Trones Wood. Entire Brigade attacked at Longueval (Delville Wood) in afternoon of 14 July 1916. Fighting of the most severe kind in the wood, in which Private William Faulds of 1st Regiment won the Victoria Cross. Only some 750 of the 3153 officers and men that entered the wood mustered when the Brigade was finally relieved on 20 July. The casualties included every officer of 2nd and 3rd Regiments and of the Machine Gun Company attached to the brigade.



Part of "The Sixth Day", a panel at the Delville Wood memorial depicting the remnants of the South African Brigade coming out of the wood after being relieved

The Division was rebuilt with new drafts and spent most of the summer of 1916 in the Arras and Vimy areas. It re-entered Fourth Army area on the Somme in early October. The SA Brigade moved back into the front line there at High Wood on 9 October. Three days later an attack was made against Snag and Tail Trenches, just short of the Butte de Warlencourt, in appalling conditions and weather. Again, there was severe fighting that was continued with a renewed attack in the same area on 18 October. The cost to the South Africans in this dismal affair was 1150 casualties.

The commander of the brigade, Brigadier-General Lukin, was appointed to command of 9th (Scottish) Division on 2 December 1916.

In 1917 the brigade took part in the Battle of Arras and in the Third Battle of Ypres. In the latter battle, in a successful advance at Bremen Redoubt near Zonnebeke, Private William Hewitt of 2nd Regiment won the VC.

Possibly the most impressive feat of arms by the South African forces in the war took place in March 1918, when the Germans attacked in Operation Michael. The brigade fought a staunch defence on the first morning of the attack - 21 March 1918 - at Gauche Wood, near Villers Guislain. By 24 March they had carried out a fighting withdrawal to Marrières Wood near Bouchavesnes and there held on, completely unsupported. They fought on until only some 100 men were left, yet it was only when ammunition ran out that the remnant, many of them wounded, surrendered.

When the enemy launched their second major offensive of 1918, on the Lys, the South African brigade - now in Flanders - was ordered to counter

attack at Messines. It did so, with some success, but the enemy attack was overwhelming and over the next days the fight continued with the South Africans being pushed back from the Messines ridge and up the gentle slope to Vierstraat.

The old brigade was effectively destroyed. 1st, 2nd and 4th Regiments were temporarily merged, while other, British, units were attached to carry on the fight. The composite battalion took part in further defensive fighting, at Mount Kemmel. Later in the summer, it took part in the capture of Meteren, as the British Army executed a successful advance in Flanders.

On 11 September 1918, the brigade finally parted from 9th (Scottish) Division and moved to join the 66th (2nd West Lancashire) Division. The best known event while with this Division was the recapture of Le Cateau on 17-18 October 1918.

By the armistice, the South Africans had suffered some 15000 casualties in France, of whom one third were dead.

Senior officer casualties

Lt-Col. **Frank A. Jones**, killed in action at Trones Wood on 11 July 1916.

Lt-Col. **Frank H. Heal**, killed in action at Marrieres Wood on 24 March 1918.

Sites to see

In France: Delville Wood, near Longueval, is the site of the most impressive national South African memorial and museum. A "must see" on even the shortest trips to the Somme.

Did you know?

The Afrikaans-speaking units had their unit titles and ranks inscribed in their language - rather than English - on medals and military gravestones.

Further reading

The official history is "The History of the South African Forces in France", written by John Buchan. He worked during the war for the British War Propaganda Bureau and as a war correspondent for "The Times", and eventually joined the Intelligence Corps. It was during the first few months of the war that, whilst confined to a bed and recovering from illness, Buchan wrote his most famous novel, "The Thirty-Nine Steps", which was subsequently published in 1915. The history, originally published in 1920, was reprinted by the Imperial War Museum in association with The Battery Press in recent years.