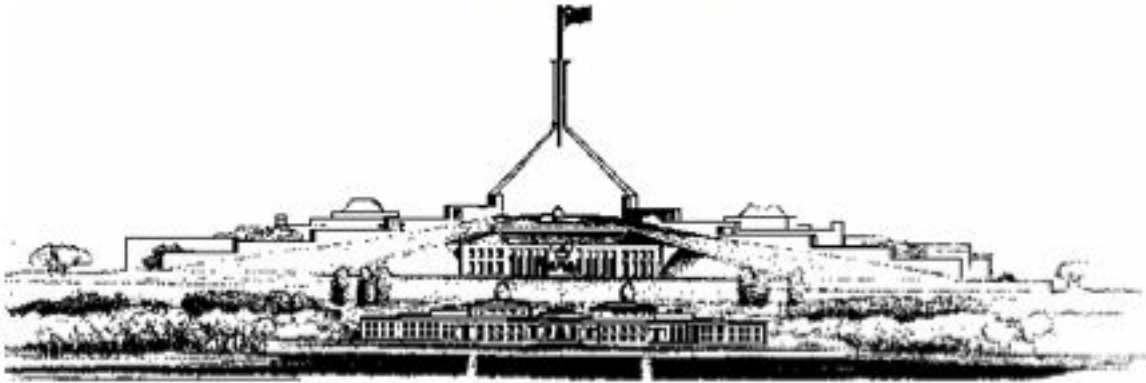




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MOTIONS

Boer War

SPEECH

Monday, 1 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 1 September 2014
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Questioner
Speaker Prentice, Jane, MP

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Mrs PRENTICE (Ryan) (11:49): I second the motion. I commend the member for Chisholm for bringing this motion about the Boer War to the parliament. While the current generation's knowledge of the Boer War is largely based on movies such as *Breaker Morant*, like many families I have a special connection as my great-uncle, Major Edmund Righetti, volunteered as a private to join the Victoria's first contingent to go to the Boer War in 1899. He was severely wounded, invalided home and after convalescence returned to South Africa and rose through the ranks to Captain. His revolver, stamped with a 'Q', is the only one of its kind in the Australian War Memorial.

By way of background, diamonds were discovered in the Boer Republics in 1869 and gold in 1886. This discovery and subsequent exploitation of the mineral resources was the ultimate trigger for the conflict. On 10 October 1899, the British government received an ultimatum from the Boers demanding that additional British forces be removed from the British colonies of the Cape and Natal. The ultimatum gave the British 48 hours to act or the Boers would declare war. The British then sent out an appeal to their colonies for 'Manageable numbers of dutiful military apprentices, company-sized units, preferably foot soldiers that could embark by 31 October 1899 and be attached to regular regiments on arrival.'

Australia contributed more than 16,000 out of the total 448,000 combat forces from the United Kingdom and other colonies for the duration of the war from 1899 to 1902.

Lieutenant Colonel John Howells RFD recounted earlier this year at a presentation to the Royal United Service Institute, New South Wales, the story of one particular tragedy with consequences that possibly saved many Australian lives in subsequent wars. In June 1901, a newly arrived contingent from Victoria, the 5th Victorian Mounted Rifles, under the command of a British officer Major Morris with no South African experience was tracking a party of Boers. On 12 June, they camped for the night but, unbeknown to the Victorians, they too were being tracked by another party of Boers. Major Morris personally placed guards up to a kilometre away from the encampment where, in accord with King's regulations and consistent with his experience in India, he ordered the soldiers to erect their bell tents, stack their weapons outside their accommodation and bed down for a good night's rest.

In the dimming light of sunset, the tracking Boers, dressed in salvaged British khaki, easily passed the sparsely placed guard parties, crawling to within 30 metres of the main camp. The result was a massacre.

They ran along the line of saddles and shot men in their beds.

Eighteen were killed and 42 were wounded, the largest casualty list of an Australian contingent in that war. The action ended when an order given by a well-spoken Boer to the detachment's bugler resulted in 'cease fire' being sounded. This saved lives but resulted in unfounded accusations of cowardice being levelled at the Victorians.

Australian troopers James Steele, Arthur Richards and Herbert Parry, who objected to fighting under the orders of a man who called the Australians 'cowards', were given a summary court-martial and sentenced to death. Lord Kitchener intervened, commuting the sentences to 10 years' jail before a speech in federal parliament pronounced that this was a disgraceful way to treat men who had volunteered to go to war. The men were ultimately released.

This motion also has a great deal of local significance for my electorate. In May 2013 I received a petition delivered to me on horseback adjacent to Federation Stone. My colleague, Senator Ronaldson, the now Minister for Veterans' Affairs, and I were the recipients of a petition with more than 10,200 signatures calling on the then federal government to support a national Boer War memorial on Anzac Parade. More than 500 Australians lost their lives in that conflict. The men and women involved in this conflict deserve to be remembered with a lasting and fitting memorial.

I would also like to acknowledge the ongoing work of Miles Farmer and Queensland Committee Chairman Ron McElwaine from the Sherwood/Indooroopilly RSL sub-branch. The Sherwood Boer War cemetery was restored with Centenary of Australia funding and support from the then member for Moreton, Gary Hardgrave. The names on the Boer War Memorial are also reflected in many of the local street names. Students from Corinda State High School take part in the Sherwood/Indooroopilly RSL's now annual Boer War commemorations on 4 February each year at the cemetery. The students also exchange messages with students from the Emelo High School, with whom they now have an ongoing linkage. I commend the motion to the House.