



Anglo Boer War 1899 - 1902

# PRACTICALLY OVER ROBIN SMITH

Lord Roberts went back to England in December 1900, saying the war was 'practically over' - but it wasn't!

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## Practically Over

### The Anglo Boer War

The Anglo Boer War of 1899-1902 was a war that was to some extent thrust upon an unwilling British Government. The British Army in the colonies of the Cape and Natal was not prepared for war. They were poorly placed to resist armed incursions into the Cape and Natal, British self-governing colonies after being presented with an ultimatum by the Kruger government of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek<sup>1</sup> which the British continued to call the Transvaal. An 1897 mutual assistance pact oilied the Republic of the Orange Free State, which had no dispute with Britain, to support their northern neighbour.

The British forces in the two colonies were inadequate to stem the Boer advances. Sir Alfred Milner the British High Commissioner and Governor of the Cape promised his Natal counterpart, Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson, that Natal would be defended by the whole might of the Empire. It took some time to assemble the whole might however. British soldiers came from Britain, India, Malta, Crete and other Empire outposts while the Dominions, Canada, Australia and New Zealand lent a hand too. But it was several months before they arrived in South Africa. South African Colonists from the Cape and Natal and ultimatum from Johannesburg enlisted in considerable numbers as well.

It needed some time to organise and equip the necessary Army Corps, so that the Boers were able to occupy northern Natal and hold further south. They penetrated a short distance into the Cape Colony at Colesburg and further east at Stormberg. A further drive southwards was held up by their forces settling into besieging Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith. It was unlikely that Boer disaster forces could see the inevitable casualties that would have resulted from silent assaults, so that all three towns easily held out until the reliefs arrived.

Once war was declared there was no going back. The two bearded patriarchs, Kruger and British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, both knew that this was a struggle about regional paramountcy. Salisbury would have "preferred a peaceful outcome but I was sweeping away the shame of Miljoux took a war - then so be it." In a letter that Salisbury sent to Secretary for War, Lord Lansdowne on 30 August 1899, wrote, "I see before us the necessity for considerable military

<sup>1</sup> The full text of the ZAR ultimatum is given below. It was to have been much shorter but the Orange Free State President, M.T. Steyn insisted on more preamble to the four demands. An original copy can be found in No 53 in C9530 of the British Parliamentary Papers.

effort - and all for people whom we despise and for territory which will bring no profit and no power to England."<sup>2</sup>

It was not about gold and diamonds. It was about the fact that Britain could not countenance a situation whereby the southern part of Africa was in the hands of a hostile power. A political climb-down, as happened in 1881 after the first bout of hostilities with the Boers, was not going to happen this time. The Boer republics were not of sufficient importance to warrant any of the other Great Powers going to war on their behalf. It was firmly believed that the Cape Afrikaners would heed a call to arms from the two republics. Quite a number of them did, risking execution for treason if captured, but not nearly enough to tip the balance in favour of the Boer Republicans.

Once reinforcements were in place the conventional war was quickly over, but not before the British suffered tactical defeats at Magerfontein, Stormberg and Colenso. These setbacks did not affect the ultimate outcome, the Boers were driven out of the Cape and Natal and the three besieged towns were relieved. With the capture of the capitals of the two republics, Bloemfontein and Pretoria, the surrender of the Boers was anticipated. Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief, decided that the war was practically over, and said as much in a speech in Durban at a private dinner<sup>3</sup> after handing over command to General Lord Kitchener in November 1900. Further operations would be a police action - only some mopping up was needed. His departure for England was delayed by the illness of his daughter but he was just in Christmas.

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### Mafeking! - lifting the siege

Field-Marshal Lord Roberts' strategy was to capture the capitals of the Boer Republics as well as many of their principal towns. With these in British hands the Boers, he concluded, would be obliged to surrender or, at least, come to some arrangement to cease hostilities.

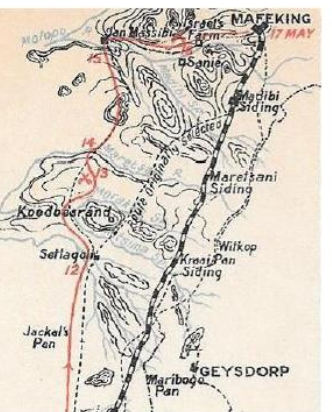
Boer strategy was clearly based on the false premise that, just as in 1881 after Mafeking, the lack of political will to continue the struggle would cause the British to abandon the campaign. Hence, instead of a thrust for the coast, Pieter and Colesburg, the two senior Boer generals, settled down to besiege three important towns in British territory, Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking. None of the three ever looked like being overwhelmed. Their elderly politician

not the Boers) <sup>4</sup> From the diary of Lieutenant National Army Museum, I Mafeking, formerly and still commonly known as Mafikeng and historically Mafeking in Afrikaans, is the capital city of the North-West Province of South Africa.

25 leadership could not countenance the inevitable heavy casualties that would have been the inevitable result of storming the towns' defence lines.

Relief of the three besieged towns would allow Roberts to take the initiative. By the end of February 1900 Boer forces had been driven away from Ladysmith and Kimberley but Mafeking was still surrounded. Access to the town from the south was not possible, the road from Kimberley vulnerable to incursions from Transvaal Boer commandos. The road and railway line from Kimberley ran close to the border of the Transvaal and what was then British Bechuanaland, annexed to the Cape in 1895. Boer command of the road was problematical in any relieving force and there was damage to the rail line.

About the only way into Mafeking was to land a force in Marsdenville in Rhoosia. Thence to Bulweroy's territory to Maribou's Pan and further south. Much of the infrastructure was inadequate for rapid movement of large



Colonel Bryan Mahor's approach to Mafeking - 12 to 17 May 1900.