



NAC/PA-173029

Second Canadian Mounted Rifles in the Transvaal, February or March 1902. This photograph shows something of the fatiguing, mostly fruitless work involved in chasing down the small bands of elusive Boer guerrillas.

CANADIAN TROOPS AND FARM BURNING IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR

by Doctor Chris Madsen

The Present and the Past

Canadian military personnel involved in overseas deployments to foreign lands have been and will undoubtedly continue to be confronted with difficult choices between what is legally expected and their individual sense of morality. Unfortunate events in the African nations of Somalia and Rwanda during the previous decade highlighted the consequences upon the reputation of the Canadian Forces (CF) as a whole and individuals in particular. Whether the tragic hero of General Roméo Dallaire or the disgraced killers from the subsequently disbanded airborne regiment, Canadians in the field, through their decisions and actions, directly influenced the smooth conduct of operations, the attainment of national and coalition objectives, relations with civilians under Canadian care or influence and public perceptions of the armed forces.¹ Operations in Bosnia and Afghanistan set a pattern for the future, at least in the near term. Significant numbers of Canadian troops, although small in comparison to contributions from other countries, will be sent to unstable parts of the world in crisis to preserve peace and impose order for defined periods of time, occasionally in a lead role and usually subordinated within a larger command and force structure. Canadian national authorities still retain final say over policy, but the dictates of operational requirements and collaboration or integration with allies and other like-minded nations remain important. Such work is hard, thankless, and very quickly forgotten.

Whatever reason or national interest for going on deployments in the first place, military members live with the experiences garnered and the legacy of what they did or did not do in given situations. Legitimacy and the conviction simply to have made a positive contribution rest on reconciling potential internal conflicts, such that if they are left unresolved, they will deepen emotional scars. General Dallaire made public what many returning Canadian soldiers feel on a personal level or attempt to hide out of shame or embarrassment. Extraordinary circumstances, most often traumatic in character, have changed the ways individuals thought about and rationalized their experiences. Military personnel, though foremost instruments of national policy, remain human beings with different modes of coping and feeling. It is likely small consolation to today's Canadian troops engaged in peace support operations and low-intensity conflict to know that the phenomenon is far from new. Indeed, Canadian troops deployed in similar operations in the past reacted in much the same fashion, especially when called upon to implement unpopular and questionable policies affecting civilians on official orders from higher superiors. A notable example is the farm burning conducted during the South African War, Canada's first major overseas deployment.

Doctor Chris Madsen is an Associate Professor in the Department of Defence Studies at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto.



South Africa, circa 1900.

farmsteads in counter-insurgency operations. Since the Canadian Forces will undoubtedly continue to deploy to various parts of the world in the future, the experience that can be garnered from this small, under-studied colonial war deserves some serious reassessment. And the focus here will be on the legal, psychological and ethical dimensions of Canadian participation in British-directed farm burning in South Africa during the year 1900.

The struggle in South Africa escalated into a tough and protracted war, both for the civilian populace and the troops deployed there from Canada and elsewhere. Far from unthinking and uncaring instruments of destruction, Canadian officers and soldiers felt reservations about burning

farms. And yet, they obediently obeyed lawful orders and grudgingly performed what was asked of them for the sake of eventual military success. Perceptions of right and wrong were left to moral judgment. No matter how technically legal under British interpretations of international law and how operationally justified these actions were, the psychological impact and accompanying ethical tension exacted a lasting emotional toll on those involved. The immediate manifestation was extreme reluctance on the part of most Canadian troops to stay after expiry of the voluntary one-year enlistment period, and, concomitantly, there were consistent demands to go home. The long-term effect was a strong sense of group identification among South African War veterans, who found it difficult to explain their experiences to others. Individuals who left and expected to return as heroes for a good cause instead became haunted by the anguish of the distasteful acts and experiences in pursuit of victory in what they viewed as an unsatisfactory war. Farm burning and similar acts turned the perpetrators into victims as much as the women, children and old people they dispossessed and left to starve in the inhospitable climate of inland southern Africa.

The burning of farms during the conflict in South Africa started gradually as a matter of official British policy. Following surrender of large Boer conventional forces under General Piet Cronjé at Paardeberg in late February 1900, the British military operational commander, Field Marshal Lord Roberts, planned and

How the Burning Evolved

Fire is among the oldest weapons of war. Simple and effective in application, combustion needs only sufficient fuel, air and heat. It is a method used by conventional and unconventional forces alike across continents and different situations. Commonly in the military context, burning is a deliberate act of destruction, terror and retribution against civilian populations involved in particular conflicts.² During the early 20th Century, Canadians sent to South Africa to uphold the imperial interests of Empire took part in the crueler side of British policies conducted against the disaffected Boers. Canadian and British soldiers burned living dwellings, destroyed crops and forcibly relocated civilians into internment camps.³ Farm burning arose as a reaction to the decision on the part of some Boers to prolong the conflict by adoption of guerrilla warfare and then the ensuing counter-response from senior military commanders in the field. While some books have dealt extensively with the recruitment, despatch, and fighting performance of the South African Field Force, Canadian participation in destructive activities and treatment accorded civilian property under military occupation has received only casual mention.⁴ Nonetheless, available letters, diaries and published accounts, written before the self-censorship of the world wars, disclose substantial evidence to show that fire was a regular, and, at times, integral feature of the Canadian war in South Africa. Under official British orders, Canadian troops burned

“Military personnel, though foremost instruments of national policy, remain human beings with different modes of coping and feeling.”

prepared a general advance, first to Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, and then onward to Pretoria in the Transvaal.⁵ The two Boer population centres and seats of political authority were identified as the key operational centres of gravity within the military campaign. This was in keeping with the guidance provided by strategist Carl von Clausewitz: i.e., defeat the enemy's armed forces first and then capture the enemy's capital cities. Roberts fully expected Boer resistance to collapse once these objectives were achieved and the seeming inability of the Boers to counter seriously the advancing forces by conventional means reinforced this view. Instead, the British encountered opposition from irregular forces, commonly the remnants of larger formations reconstituted into smaller commandos, as well as sporadic resistance in inhabited areas along the line of march. As the battlefield became non-linear, the Boers adopted the tactics of ambush and sniping behind the main British forces, striking at weak and vulnerable points. The mobility afforded by healthy horses, the familiarity of home ground and the advantage of being able to blend into the civilian population favoured guerrilla warfare. Corporal A.S. McCormick, an infantryman in the 2nd (Special Service) Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment, was surprised "to be on outpost near a town and have a Boer farmer drive up on his way to market, stop for a chat and tell us he was taking a month off at his farm before going back to fighting."⁶ At the time, Lord Roberts considered guerrilla actions as more a nuisance and distraction from his main effort than a really serious threat. His response was to issue the first of several proclamations in the coming months, warning Boer civilians to refrain from hostile actions. And he promised punishment for those actively supporting the Boer commandos in any manner.

Matters Intensify

As Boer opposition continued unabated, proclamations from the British high command grew more severe in tone and explicitly stated that farms would be burned under certain circumstances. The Boers had already formally protested in previous months that the British were destroying farms, to which Roberts replied that troops under his command respected private property. Dwellings were only burned in cases when the laws of war were flagrantly violated, such as for misrepresentative use of the white flag signifying surrender.⁷ Numerous farms were burned in and around Bloemfontein when Boer commandos dynamited railway lines and cut telegraph wires to disrupt the British lines of communication. Eleven days after the capture of Pretoria, on 5 June 1900, following renewed Boer attacks on railroads, Roberts issued an edict that

"Far from unthinking and uncaring instruments of destruction, Canadian officers and soldiers felt reservations about burning farms."

declared any farms or houses nearby attacks would be burned and families evicted on short notice, although the exact geographical limit of the threatened actions remained unspecified. Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle, a contemporary witness to farm burning in South Africa and author of the popular Sherlock Holmes mystery novels, empathized: "A General who was cut off from his base thirty times in a month was bound to leave the argument of legality to the jurists, and to adopt

the means which seemed most likely to stop the nuisance. The punishment fell with cruel injustice upon some individuals. Others may have been among the actual raiders."⁸ Subordinate commanders received delegated authority from Roberts to make the determination of Boer culpability and to carry out destruction on their own initiative. Thereafter, the tempo of farm burning increased in areas proximate to resistance and fighting. On 13 July 1900, a patrol in force from the Royal Canadian Regiment, backed up by field artillery, burned a farmhouse where up to thirty Boers were reported to have been the day before.⁹ The Canadian officer commanding, Lieutenant-Colonel William Otter, was responsible for protection of the advance logistics base located at Springs and its surrounding district in the Transvaal. In mid-August 1900, another proclamation covering the region advised that any Boers found to have taken up resistance or to have deployed on commando raids after signing oaths of neutrality subjected their farms to destruction.

The next wave of farm burning was indiscriminate. Organized columns of troops descended upon areas still offering resistance and destroyed farms in those vicinities on the slightest pretext. On 6 November 1900, a troop from the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles engaged in burning farms as part of a column. They narrowly missed a confrontation with a group of armed Boers when Lieutenant D.C.F. Bliss rode to warn them and was in turn captured: "They took his revolver, spurs and cigarettes, and endeavoured to secure information from him with regard to the strength and object of our



A Colt machine gun and galloping carriage of the Second Canadian Mounted Rifles. Each of the Canadian mounted units was armed with two of these weapons. Transvaal, March 1902.

NAC 173030



South Africa 1900. Camping in Transvaal. Note clothes drying on the ground.

by Major-General Lord Kitchener, who assumed operational command in South Africa from 30 November 1900 onwards.

Legal justification for the proclamations and exceptional actions in the field rested in international and military law. The laws and customs surrounding land warfare were based upon several centuries of practice among armies and states, primarily within the European context. As such, they generally favoured conventional combatants, but were not silent on the rights and obligations of civilians in arms or under military occupation.¹² The Duke of

column, and the owner of the house which was being burned appeared anxious to have him shot. The remainder of the party treated him very civilly and he was allowed to go. He rejoined the Battalion on foot about an hour later.”¹⁰ The magnanimity displayed by the Boer combatants toward an enemy destroying a fellow neighbour’s private property on this occasion was indeed praiseworthy. The Canadian could have been shot, but the Boers decided not to emulate escalating ruthlessness from the other side. However, when in doubt, senior British officers burned in keeping with the official orders. The practice became so widespread and shocking that Roberts reassessed the policy and issued new orders on 18 November 1900:

No farm is to be burnt except for an act of treachery, or when troops have been fired on from the premises, or as punishment for breaking of railway or telegraph line, or when they have been used as bases of operation for raids, and then only with the direct consent of the general officer commanding, which is to be given in writing; the mere fact of a burgher being absent on commando is on no account to be used as a reason for burning the house. All cattle, wagons, and foodstuffs are to be removed from all farms; if that is found to be impossible, they are to be destroyed, whether the owner be present or not.¹¹

Although brigade commanders were clearly the responsible authorities, conflicting proclamations and orders caused confusion in actual implementation. Roberts admitted that perhaps too much license had been given to subordinates, and, therefore, made clear the acceptable basis for farm burning. Roberts still viewed the burning of farms as an *exceptional* occurrence forced upon the British high command, in contrast to the *systematic* destruction and relocation policy later embraced

Wellington, a great inspirational source of British military law, had fostered and supported guerrilla warfare against the occupying French in Portugal and Spain during the Napoleonic Wars. On the other side, experience with irregular forces and civilians during the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War had established recent legal precedents of value to the conflict in South Africa. In his proclamations, Roberts followed the example of Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke and the Prussians in 1871, although the severity they handed out to French *franc tireurs* was seldom matched in South Africa.¹³ Preliminary codification of written rules governing conduct of war on land took place in 1899 when delegates invited to an international conference agreed upon the Hague Regulations. This was a treaty ratified by the British government on behalf of the component parts of the Empire on 4 September 1900 and thus not formally in effect before Roberts directed the burning of farms. The Boers, one historian has argued, possessed, at best, either non-existent or sketchy knowledge of the 1899 Hague Regulations, but they generally respected existing customs in keeping with their religious beliefs and within the limits of their resources.¹⁴ The transition from conventional to guerrilla warfare pushed interaction between the Boers and the British into a more ambiguous area of legality, where neat distinctions between combatants and non-combatants were harder to determine. Roberts and the British, however, still insisted that the Boers adhere to legal standards of acceptable conduct and they followed the legal procedures necessary to punish established transgressions.

“Dwellings were only burned in cases when the laws of war were flagrantly violated, such as for misrepresentative use of the white flag signifying surrender.”

The Canadian Connection

Published British military law furnished direction and guidance to troops with respect to treatment of Boer civilians and property. Canadians sent to South Africa received the status and pay of imperial troops and they fell under the disciplinary

provisions of the British Army Act. Although battalion or unit commanders were generally Canadian, Canadian formations came under divisions and brigades commanded by British officers.¹⁵ The chain of command and responsibility went up to Roberts and the War Office in London. The Canadian government, in effect, placed Canadian troops under British orders and authority with certain qualifications, particularly those pertaining to duration in country and their employment in nationally distinct lower tactical formations.¹⁶ Canadian officers and soldiers were compelled to obey lawful commands in keeping with existing military law and international law. The 1899 edition of the British *Manual of Military Law* set out possible punishments to the individual soldier for not following lawful orders, and, in Chapter XIV, explained the rights and obligations of civilians to stay out of the fighting.¹⁷ Civilians who chose to take up arms or support combatants in an active manner forfeited the protections under the laws of war and became subject to drastic measures, including possible trial by military court, confiscation, imprisonment or execution.

The British also instituted martial law, a body of regulations used for the occupation of a conquered territory as well as in times of insurrection or extreme emergency. In policing a far-flung Empire, the British army possessed considerable recent experience through the application of martial law in India, Jamaica and Ireland, although European settlers from another foreign country posed certain peculiarities.¹⁸ Burning of farms, legally allowed if circumstances warranted, was considered an expedient and less intrusive form of punishment to set an example for Boers who were still resisting. The tailored provisions of martial law, as applied to the civilian population in occupied

territory, enforced British control and authority.¹⁹ Legal writers have questioned whether British occupation authority was absolute in the face of significant resistance and if Roberts merely issued paper proclamations to far-from-subdued civilians in a still-contested struggle. A Canadian who was close to the field operations frankly remarked: “Boers are a liberty-loving people and Martial Law sticks in their crop. (sic)”²⁰ Nonetheless, the British believed and acted as if martial law applied under their legal interpretation of military occupation. Roberts left the contours of British martial law in South Africa and the building of the legal structure to support it to Kitchener’s ruthless hand over the next two years.²¹ Once caught, Boer leaders and their followers faced trial before special military courts and terms of imprisonment or exile. Dispossession through legal means was often a necessary precursor. Canadians presumably took for granted that any orders received through the established chain of command conformed to the legal requirements of international, military and martial law.

Farm burning did not come naturally to most Canadian troops in South Africa. Looting and unofficial requisitioning were far more commonplace activities. Roberts actually advised his brigade commanders of the problem on several occasions and ordered all measures possible to prevent troops from misappropriating Boer property on the threat of severe punishment under military law.²² Canadians worked in mixed sections or detachments, usually as or in conjunction with mounted troops. The Strathcona’s Horse, a mounted unit recruited predominantly in Western Canada, burned farms around Helvetia in late August 1900.²³ The official line was that a living dwelling was to be emptied before being burned, and the dispossessed would be left to deal with protecting or transporting possessions. That soldiers helped themselves in



Canadian cavalry supply column, South Africa.

NAC PA 113025

the process no doubt happened, particularly in terms of small valuables and money. Trooper Albert Hilder, serving with the Royal Canadian Dragoons, recorded in his diary: "Burning every house and commandeering all the sheep and cattle we could lay our hands on. Also taking all the poultry we wanted and looting the houses."²⁴ In such work, there existed ample opportunity for personal gain and these actions clearly exceeded Roberts's orders. The labour and effort involved in moving furniture and personal belongings a safe distance while protesting and visibly upset inhabitants looked on put strains on Canadian troops and their allies. On one occasion, a nearly-hysterical woman told an officer commanding a body of soldiers sent to burn her house that she would have shot him "like a dog had she a gun."²⁵ The affected persons occasionally attempted to intervene, and the use of force became necessary in order to subdue them.

The Sordid Details

In a time prior to the widespread availability of gasoline and other accelerants, an empty house was a somewhat-difficult proposition to ignite since the main fuel sources, such as bedding, wood articles and paper products normally had been removed. Thus, troops customarily brought bundles of hay or straw to throw into the house and then they waited for favourable weather conditions. Rain could dampen fires, whereas dry winds on hot days generally assisted combustion. Depending upon its size and location, a farm took hours and even as much as a day to burn, and longer if the burning of crops was involved. Some troops always remained until the job was finished in case the residents tried to put out the fire or the flames died of their own accord. Livestock such as cattle, swine and sheep that could not be carried off alive were slaughtered on the spot in front of Boer families and then left to rot in the sun.

Soldiers may have considered the first time these activities occurred an exciting novelty, but farm burning quickly turned into a tedious and all-too-frequent subset of military operations. By the close of Roberts's tenure as operational commander, British accounts officially claimed more than 600 farms burned, although unreported burnings in the late summer and early fall period probably place that number on the low side. Winter and summer months are reversed in South Africa from North America. Stored foodstuffs necessary for subsistence and seed stocks were confiscated or destroyed. Several thousand people, mostly women, children and the elderly, were thrown onto an inhospitable countryside without secure sources of shelter and food during an inclement weather period. Canadian troops were among the direct purveyors of Boer misfortune at the hands of the British.

"Farm burning did not come naturally to most Canadian troops in South Africa. Looting and unofficial requisitioning were far more commonplace activities."

The farm burning ordered by Roberts and carried out by Canadian troops was a form of effects-based operation, based upon flawed assumptions about the intended psychological response expected from the Boers. The British believed that the sight of farms and crops in flames would throw the civilian population into despair and demonstrate to the remaining Boer commandos the pointlessness of further resistance.

Roberts wrote to Lord Lansdowne: "I have recognized this change in the condition of affairs for some time past, and have taken much more severe measures. The people are beginning to understand this war."²⁶ The targeted nature of farm burning reinforced the consequences of personal choices and actions for individuals. In simple terms, the British were hard on a few for the sake of peaceful co-existence with and subjugation of the majority. The problem was that resistance against British power continued to the point that farm burning was part example and part punishment for an ever-growing number of people situated within entire geographical areas.

The farm was the main productive unit in Boer economic and social life, and it was central to the sense of family, community, and religion. It represented years and sometimes decades of toil, investment and sacrifice over a lifetime, and even for future generations. *The Times* history written shortly after the war was vehemently critical of Roberts and his selected course of action:

...the policy fitfully adopted after the beginning of June of burning down farmhouses and destroying crops as a measure of intimidation had nothing to recommend it, and no other measure aroused such deep and lasting feelings of resentment. The Dutch race is not one that can easily be beguiled by promises, or moved by threats; farm-burning as a policy of intimidation totally failed, as any one acquainted with the Dutch race and Dutch history could have for seen.²⁷

Canadians, some of whom came from ranches and farms themselves, appreciated the hard work done by the white farmers of Dutch descent in South Africa. That the fruits of their labour could be taken away by arbitrary military action so quickly and a family's entire world thrown into disarray made many Boers more determined to fight the British, if only for the sake of revenge. Charles Clarke, a Canadian supply clerk with the Army Service Corps, described a vengeful Boer named Haasbroek, "...whose burned house he says cost him £700, but it will cost the British a million pounds before he is through."²⁸ The Boers naturally became increasingly hateful of the British and their perceived colonial puppets for loss of property and livelihood as news from friends and family members reached the fighting commandos.

The Ramifications

Deaths of children and parents from starvation or disease after dispossession further enraged Boer fighters or convinced others to take up the struggle against the invaders. The Boer guerrilla leader, Christiaan De Wet, in his post-war memoirs, chastized the British for the deprivations and inhumanities visited on civilians: “that such direct and indirect murder should have been committed against defenceless women and children is a thing which I should have staked my head could never have happened in a war waged by the civilized English nation.”²⁹ The ranks of the so-called ‘bitter-enders’ such as De Wet swelled in proportion to the farms burned by the British and Canadians. Stripped of property and any stake in normal family life, these Boers lived and fought as if they had nothing, save their cause against British hegemony. The British military theorist and historian John F.C. Fuller questioned the efficacy of burning farms: “Had the farms been left standing and the women allowed to live in them, each one would have become a standing trap. All that this devastation did was to drive the enemy into the hilly country, where generally he was inaccessible, and to continue into the peace which followed the war a spirit of bitterness which is not yet dead.”³⁰ Soldiers rarely think about the long-term effects of their immediate actions. From a psychological perspective, farm burning polarized Boer attitudes toward the British and stymied feelings of reconciliation. General Ian Hamilton, an officer who served closely with both Roberts and Kitchener, later wrote: “Militarily speaking, the burning was a blunder... To a farmer it is an immense inducement towards peace to see his farm standing idle, his gear going to pieces and sowing time coming round again. But, if the farm has been burnt and the implements destroyed he becomes desperate. There is nothing to make peace for.”³¹ The legacy of these burnings would be two more years of war and decades of hatred and contempt toward the British.

The psychological impact on Canadian troops engaged in farm burning was equally profound. Striking out at the civilian population was at first a temporary release, exceptionally hard to resist, from the frustration associated with losing the initiative to the Boer irregular forces. Although fielding numerically superior forces in the theatre of operations, the British

suffered the classic weakness of an occupying army, that of being strong in some places but vulnerable everywhere. The Boer commandos enjoyed the element of surprise and chose where to strike next on a non-linear battlefield. Weaker garrisons and supply columns were subject to unexpected attack by locally superior Boer forces. As late as September 1900, large numbers of troops, including Canadians, surrendered and entered into Boer captivity until released by the commandos onto the *Veldt* or were liberated by relief columns.³² Despite outward displays of strength and bravado, troops shut up in towns or strung along railway lines felt both afraid and exposed. Punitive expeditions organized against surrounding areas served the purpose of taking the offensive to the Boers directly, neutralizing potential threats, and lashing out at someone. Lieutenant E.W.B. Morrison, who served with a Royal Canadian Artillery battery attached to Major-General Horace Smith-Dorrien’s brigade, described operations in early November 1900: “We moved on from valley to valley ‘lifting’ cattle and sheep, burning, looting, and turning out the women and children to sit and cry beside the ruins of their once beautiful farmsteads... It was a terrible thing to see, and I don’t know that I want to see another trip of the sort, but we could not help approving the policy, though it rather revolted most of us to be the instruments.”³³ Even



After the fall of Pretoria, the Boers refused to surrender as the British expected, but adopted irregular, ‘guerrilla’ tactics. Their small and mobile ‘Commandos’ excelled at hit-and-run tactics. This train was destroyed by Boer guerrillas in 1900.

NAC/PA 73034

this destruction could not draw out the Boer combatants, who either remained afar or disappeared after offering brief resistance. Farm burning practised in this way took on an indiscriminate character.

The wretched conditions of the families left behind contributed to dehumanization of them as enemies.

The Boers, once held in high esteem as honourable, rural opponents whose fighting abilities bested superior forces earlier in the war, were cast as stubborn and contemptible stalwarts whose abandonment of their families and refusal to engage in a fair fight reduced their status. The burning of farms was perceived as deserved punishment, no matter how much the British and Canadians hated doing it.³⁴ The exaggerated chauvinism of the late Victorian age reinforced the sense of Anglo-Saxon superiority over an inferior and ignorant breed of Boer, reduced to stereotypical bearded patriarchs, shrew womanfolk and dirty children. Farm burning and dispossession made reality fit the image. Civilians suffered, and Canadians lost a little bit of themselves in the process.

The nasty nature of farm burning and the concomitant pressure it placed upon the civilian population contributed to the widespread desire among most troops to leave South Africa and return to Canada at the earliest opportunity. The arid landscape was also a terrible and far away place for young men with futures to sacrifice their lives. For those incapacitated by wounds or disease, release from operational duty came sooner, while the rest counted down days to the end of voluntary one-year terms of enlistment.³⁵ The climax of British farm-burning policies coincided with the end of the deployment time commitment for soldiers of the first Canadian contingent. Troops from the Royal Canadian Regiment turned down a personal request from Roberts to re-enlist and stay in the country: “[Officers Commanding] Companys [sic] report that all their men object to re-engaging for the war or even 3 months. They all desire to be in CANADA before Xmas. Two or three weeks more in the country is all they would possibly agree to.”³⁶ Collectively and individually, they decided that their part in the war was finished, the work was disagreeable and the attractions of home and renewed civilian careers were preferred. Someone else could burn farms and chase Boer commandos for the sake of the Empire. Besides requesting more troops from reluctant, self-governing colonies, the British increasingly enlisted loyal South Africans and black auxiliaries in the fight against the Boer guerrillas. American Alfred Thayer Mahan predicted that British victory in South Africa was assured by late 1900: “Mounted men under De Wet and Botha may protract the sufferings of the war, and add to the close of the struggle a certain luster of persistent resistance; but, barring events now unforeseen and scarcely to be anticipated, they cannot change the issue, which has become simply a question of endurance between contestants immeasurably unequal in resources.”³⁷ The ruthless military campaign and civilian relocation plan

“Legal justification for the proclamations and exceptional actions in the field rested in international and military law.”

pursued by Kitchener to win against non-linear warfare made his predecessor almost appear to be a humanitarian by contrast. Like the first Canadians, Roberts abandoned Boer civilians to their fate, and this was a decision fraught with ethical complications.

Leaving the scene only partly absolved Canadian troops from the ethical dilemma posed by the farm burning and their conduct

against civilians in South Africa. Fundamentally, ethics involve a deep-seated sense of right and wrong. In the military context, ethics work at several levels. There are national ethics, or the expectations placed upon soldiers by the country they represent, group or professional ethics of the military institution and formation to which they belong, and, finally, personal convictions, such as individual morality, religious beliefs and social morals. The pull between conformity and independent thought has dictated how soldiers behave in given circumstances. The burning of farms was much easier to carry out when other members in a unit or formation acquiesced, since voices of dissent were ignored or marginalized by group dynamics. The waging of war against innocents such as women and children was ethically problematic, although the supposed support and sympathy non-combatants gave to Boer guerillas went a long way towards rationalizing exceptional actions in the minds of Canadian troops. The British and Canadians had convinced themselves that the Boers were deserving of the drastic and severe measures forced upon them.

Likewise, Canadian soldiers compartmentalized the ethics of what had happened in the field from public and private perceptions of the Canadian contribution to the war in South Africa. It is ironic that the same men who performed such non-Christian deeds against the religious God-believing Boers could be celebrated through prayers and hymns once back in Canada.³⁸ As husbands, fathers and heroes, they were different persons. Only individual memories, tempered by the filter of time and reflection, contained the truth. In order to balance out ethically the terrible things done near the battlefield, returning veterans found solace in routine, camaraderie and in generally becoming good citizens. Farm burning and the mistreatment of civilians was the secret few veterans talked about when they got together at reunions or get-togethers in the coming decades. Beyond troubled dreams, what happened in South Africa stayed in South Africa...

Was the ethical responsibility of Roberts as operational commander higher than the ethical obligations of his troops who had directly participated in farm burning at the tactical level? By virtue of rank and authority, Roberts determined courses of action in the military campaign, issued specific orders and proclamations and set the general tenor of the war in those months leading up to November 1900. He was legally and ethically accountable for the evolving farm-burning policy, which represented a series of broken promises and veiled threats toward Boer civilians. His directions were dressed up in strong language, but, in reality,

they reflected a futile search for a winning strategy when military success had failed to deliver expected results and the Boers continued the fighting in an irregular fashion. Farm burning became a poor alternative. The ethical corruption of the lawful orders issued by Roberts left subordinate officers and soldiers trying to interpret their commander's intent. Not knowing exactly why farm burning was necessary, Canadian troops relied upon the judgment of Roberts, and, in turn, the division and brigade commanders under whom they operated to determine the appropriateness of waging this type of war against civilians. Ambiguity encouraged troops to burn more farms than intended. This was a result that Roberts later acknowledged and then retreated from in his official orders.

In the meantime, Canadian troops on the ground faced the hard work of implementing these orders and then dealing with the ethical challenges they raised. Turning out families onto a harsh countryside without food and shelter was an unpopular sideline to the struggle against Boer irregular forces, and it verged upon being inhumane. It was probably not the side of war most Canadians anticipated when they enlisted for service in South Africa, but the task was performed out of duty and sense of service in a difficult war. Although never automatons, Canadians followed orders in keeping with their moral judgment, no matter how seemingly ethically suspect were the orders from higher superiors. These troops took neither pleasure nor pride in burning civilian farms.

In Conclusion

If South Africa was a new war for a new century, Canadians left disillusioned with the burning of farms and the related operations against civilians. The hardships and suffering inflicted on women, children and old people were perceived as being out of proportion to the immediate military objectives that needed to be achieved. In fact, haphazard destructive policies merely made the Boers fight harder and longer, which was not what Roberts reported

back to London. Kitchener, in turn, was determined not to repeat the mistakes of 1900. Henceforth, destruction of farms and crops was done systematically and with purpose in a coordinated anti-guerrilla campaign until early 1902. While colonial confidence in the high command barely survived, the protracted struggle magnified the perils of placing national formations under the operational control and direction of foreign commanders in a coalition context. Canadians from subsequent contingents indirectly aided Kitchener's 'scorched earth' measures, offensive sweeps and relocation of civilians into squalid internment camps, or they arrived too late to take part in operations before the formal end of hostilities. The legal, psychological and ethical challenges faced by Canadian troops in the first contingents were real and should not be discounted. Evicting families and burning down houses were emotional events for both combatant sides. For the most part, the Canadians involved would never again meet their victims, but they must have always remembered the downtrodden faces of the dispossessed people left beside the blackened remains of once prosperous and thriving farms. The hardness of war lived on in their memories through the stages of guilt, denial and remorse. In their own minds, some South African War veterans undoubtedly must have danced with General D'Alaire's same demons.

This paper was presented at the Inter-University Seminar (IUS) on Armed Forces and Society Canada Conference in Toronto on 3 October 2004. The author thanks Professor Walter Dorn, Professor Eric Ouellet, and Chief Librarian Cathy Murphy at the Canadian Forces College and Professor André Wessels at the University of Free State, Bloemfontein for input and helpful suggestions, as well as Arthur Manvell at the Royal Canadian Military Institute Library for access primary research sources.



NOTES

1. Roméo A. Dallaire with Brent Beardsley, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2003). David Bercuson, *Significant Incident: Canada's Army, the Airborne and the Murder in Somalia* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996).
2. Recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Africa, South-East Asia, and South America featured widespread use of fire against civilians and their property.
3. S.B. Spies, *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics, January 1900-May 1902* (Cape Town and Pretoria: Human & Rousseau, 1977).
4. Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War 1899-1902* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993). Brian A. Reid, *Our Little Army in the Field: The Canadians in South Africa 1899-1902* (St. Catherines, ON: Vanwell, 1996). J.L. Granatstein and David J. Bercuson, *War and Peacekeeping: From South Africa to the Gulf - Canada's Limited Wars* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1991), p. 75. J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 43. Brereton Greenhous, *Dragoon: The Centennial History of the Royal Canadian Dragoons 1883-1983* (Belleville: Guild of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, 1983), p. 121.
5. Major-General E.K.G. Sixsmith, "The South African War: Roberts in Command," *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* 98 (1969), pp. 211-215. Report, Officer Commanding 2nd Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment to Chief of Staff Militia and Defence Ottawa, 18 March 1900, RG 9 Series II A3 Reel T-10404 Vol. 32, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa (hereafter NAC).
6. A.S. McCormick, "The 'Royal Canadians' in South Africa 1899-1902," p. 6, Robarts Library, University of Toronto, Toronto.
7. Owen Coetzer, *Fire in the Sky: The Destruction of the Orange Free State, 1899-1902* (Wetvevreden Park, SA: Covos-Day Books, 2000), pp. 78-79.
8. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The War in South Africa: Its Cause & Conduct* (Toronto: George N. Morang and Company, 1902), p. 77, Arthur Conan Doyle collection, Special Collections Baldwin Room, Toronto Reference Library, Toronto.
9. War Diary, 2nd Battalion (Special Service) Royal Canadian Regiment, 13 July 1900, RG 9 Series II A3 Reel T-10405 Vol. 34, NAC. Desmond Morton, *The Canadian General Sir William Otter* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974), p. 22.
10. War Diary, 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles, week ending 8 November 1900, RG 9 Series II A3 Reel T-10404 Vol. 33, NAC.

11. "Proclamations of Field Marshal Lord Roberts," *Parliamentary Papers (Cmd. 426)*, p. 23. Brigade Orders, Major-General Horace Smith-Dorrien, 19 November 1900, RG 9 Series II A3 Reel T-10404 Vol. 32, NAC.
12. Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare: The Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflicts* 2nd ed (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 63-67.
13. J.M. Spaight, *War Rights on Land* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1911), pp. 324-331.
14. S.B. Spies, "The Hague Convention of 1899 and the Boer Republics," *Historia* 15 (March 1970), pp. 43-48.
15. Diary, 12 May 1900, Major John Andrew Birney papers, M96 file 1, Glenbow Museum and Archives, Calgary [hereafter GMA]. Desmond Morton, "Colonel Otter and the First Canadian Contingent in South Africa, 1899-1900," in Michael Cross and Robert Bothwell, eds., *Policy by Other Means: Essays in honour of C.P. Stacey* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, and Company, 1972), pp. 103-104.
16. John Stirling, *The Colonials in South Africa 1899-1902* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1907), p.298.
17. Great Britain, *Manual of Military Law* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1899), pp. 290-292, Royal Canadian Military Institute Library, Toronto (hereafter RCMI).
18. W.F. Finlason, *A Treatise on Martial Law: as Allowed by the Law of England, in Time of Rebellion* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1866), Part II, RCMI.
19. Staff College lecture notes, "Martial Law," 4 November 1909, Brigadier Sir Bernard Edward Fergusson papers, file 3, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, University of London, by permission.
20. Diary, 16 October 1900, Charles A. Clark papers, M223 diary 2, GMA.
21. Keith Surridge, "Rebellion, Martial Law and British Civil-Military Relations: The War in Cape Colony 1899-1902," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 8 (Autumn 1997), pp. 42-47.
22. South Africa Army Order, 15 February 1900, RG 9 Series II A3 Reel T-10403 Vol. 30, NAC. Special Field Army Order 105, 7 June 1900, Lance Corporal R. Moore and Private Williams scrapbook, 8110-117, National Army Museum, Chelsea.
23. Diary, 31 August 1900, Corporal Ivor Edward Cecil Rice-Jones papers, M1037, GMA. Militia Order 26, 1 February 1900, Boer War collection, M6 6 F1, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg.
24. A.G. Morris, ed., *A Canadian Mounted Rifleman at War, 1899-1902: The Reminiscences of A.E. Hilder* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2000), p. 109.
25. Diary, 8 November 1900, Clark papers, M223 diary 2, GMA.
26. André Wessels, ed., *Lord Roberts and the War in South Africa 1899-1902* (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: The Army Records Society, 2000), pp. 119-120.
27. Basil Williams, ed., *The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902* Vol. IV (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1906), p. 494.
28. Diary, 28 August 1900, Clark papers, M 223 diary 1, GMA.
29. Christiaan Rudolf De Wet, *Three Years' War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), pp. 192-193.
30. Major-General J.F.C. Fuller, *The Last of the Gentlemen's Wars: A Subaltern's Journal of the War in South Africa 1899-1902* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), pp. 171-172.
31. Victor Sampson and Ian Hamilton, *Anti-Commando* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931), p. 26.
32. W. Hart-McHarg, *From Quebec to Pretoria: With the Royal Canadian Regiment* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1902), p. 227.
33. E.W.B. Morrison, *With the Guns in South Africa* (Hamilton: Spectator Printing Company, 1901), pp. 277-278. Great Britain, *History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1908), pp. 443-444. Martin Marix Evans, *The Boer War: South Africa 1899-1902* (Botley, Oxford: Osprey, 1999), pp. 130-131.
34. Keith Surridge, "'All You Soldiers are What We Call Pro-Boer': The Military Critique of the South African War, 1899-1902," *History* 82 (1997), pp. 591-593.
35. Letter, Corporal W.L. McGiverin to father, 4 March 1900, William McGiverin papers, RCMI.
36. War Diary, 2nd Battalion (Special Service) Royal Canadian Regiment, 16 October 1900, RG 9 Series II A3 Reel T-10405 Vol. 34, NAC.
37. Captain A.T. Mahan, *The War in South Africa: A Narrative of the Anglo-Boer War from the Beginning of Hostilities to the Fall of Pretoria* (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier and Son, 1900), p. 208. Also published in a British edition: *The Story of the War in South Africa 1899-1900* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1900), p. 316.
38. "Thanksgiving Service: For the safe return from South Africa of the Vancouver Contingent of the Royal Canadian Regiment - Christ Church, Vancouver, Sunday, January 6th, 1901," Pamphlet 1901-1, City of Vancouver Archives, Vancouver.