The South African War (1899–1902) posed an unprecedented challenge for the Victorian army and eventually involved the services of 448,435 British and colonial troops in a series of major battlefield engagements, sieges, relief operations and protracted counter-guerrilla campaigns. The volume of correspondence from British soldiers was prodigious, and some of these letters have been used in campaign accounts, regimental histories, local studies and an analysis of the Scottish military experience. If many of the letters were largely descriptive, they also testified to the immense difficulties presented by a well-armed and highly mobile adversary, operating over vast terrain and capable of mounting strategic offensives, conducting sieges, fighting from formidable defensive positions and engaging in guerrilla warfare. Although a single chapter, utilising largely unused correspondence, cannot review the entire war, it can shed light on how British soldiers responded and reacted to the unique demands of this conflict. It does so by comparing the experiences of a sample of soldiers, specifically those from Scotland and the west country (Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Dorset and Gloucestershire). Soldiers were chosen from these parts of the United Kingdom as they served in distinguished local regiments and other arms, and came from localities with strong military connections, ensuring coverage of their exploits in the provincial press. Some had served previously in Africa or on the North-West Frontier, so facilitating comparisons with previous wars; they also fought in many of the major battles of the war, thereby attracting the attention of metropolitan as well as local newspapers. Sometimes Scots and west countrymen fought together, as at Elandslaagte, Colenso, Paardeberg and the siege of Ladysmith, and, like others, they endured the demands of the counter-guerrilla campaign.

When war began on 11 October 1899, the Boers launched their invasions of Natal and Cape Colony and began the investment of the
strategic border towns of Mafeking and Kimberley (14 October). The 2/Gordons, 1/Glosters and 1/Devonshires were among the reinforcements sent from India and already deployed in Natal; further Scots and west country units would serve in the 47,000-man army corps sent from Britain under the command of Sir Redvers Buller. As Buller arrived in Cape Town on the day after ‘Mournful Monday’ (30 October, when Sir George White’s forces in Natal suffered defeats at Lombard’s Kop and Nicholson’s Nek, and fell back on Ladysmith), he decided to split his army corps. He led a relief force into Natal, sent a division under Lord Methuen along the western railway to relieve Kimberley, and another division under Gatacre with Major-General J. D. P. French’s cavalry division to repulse the invasion of Cape Colony. Although Scots and west countrymen served with all these forces, they were most prominent in Methuen’s command and in Buller’s relief force.

Even before they faced the new realities of warfare, especially fire-zones swept by smokeless fire from magazine rifles, British soldiers had to adapt to the rigours of campaigning in South African conditions. Apart from the small garrisons in Cape Colony and Natal, and the seasoned soldiers sent from India and the Mediterranean garrisons, many short-service soldiers and reservists from Britain were new to the demands of colonial service. They appreciated the welcome from the English-speaking community, particularly in Natal where ‘the people’, claimed Lieutenant George Smyth Osbourne (2/Devons), ‘are very loyal, much more so than at Cape Colony’, and, in Durban, added Private L. Graham (2/Somerset Light Infantry), they gave ‘us fruit, fags, tobacco, and made a great fuss of us’. Yet soldiers had to acclimatise, and they struggled when required to march, often on short rations of bully beef and biscuit, in the heat (and flies) of the day before enduring cold nights and periodically heavy fogs or severe storms. Corporal Devas (2/Somersets), posted with his heliograph on top of Mount Umkolomba, Natal, described how he had never ‘been in such a funk before; a thunderstorm is no joke on top of these mountains’.

The 1/Devons and five companies of 2/Gordons (formerly the 92nd Highlanders who fought at Majuba) were soon in action at Elandslaagte (21 October 1899), serving with half a battalion of the Manchesters and the Imperial Light Horse. Many of the Devons had recently fought on the North-West Frontier, and so appreciated the extended formation adopted by another Tirah veteran, Colonel Ian Hamilton. ‘We were advancing in single rank’, wrote Private J. Isaac (Devons), ‘about 15 paces interval from one another, so we could not form a big target for them.’ While the Devons with close artillery support launched a frontal attack across the veld, some 2 miles distant the Gordons and Manchesters advanced, again with artillery support, in ‘open column’
with intervals of ‘about 100 yards’ between companies round the horseshoe ridge towards the enemy’s left flank. Private S. Anstey (Devons) described how bullets rained ‘down on us like large hailstones’, but when they ‘were within 200 yards of their position . . . the order to charge was given, and every man rushed as for revenge into the enemy, who did not face the bayonet’. Devons and Gordons then recalled bitterly how the Boers waved the white flag, prompting a British cease-fire, before launching another charge ‘with an awful fire, killing a lot of our chaps’. Having rallied his men to repulse these ‘treacherous marksmen’, Captain (then Lieutenant) Matthew F. M. Meiklejohn (Gordons), who lost an arm in the action and earned the VC, observed that two squadrons of cavalry (5th Dragoon Guards and 5th Lancers) completed the rout.

Like others, Meiklejohn reflected on the difficulty of seeing any Boers during the advance and the futility of volley-firing: ‘Men fired as they saw something to fire at.’ Equally significant were the differential casualty rates, with far fewer injured (about thirty-four) and none killed in the Devons compared with five officers and three rankers killed in the Gordons, eight officers and ninety-eight other ranks wounded. A Teignmothian suspected that the Gordons must have got ‘too close together’, and Meiklejohn confirmed that it had proved difficult to restrain the supporting soldiers, eager to avenge Majuba, from running into the firing line. The officers of the Gordons, wielding claymores and wearing distinctive uniforms, had also proved far too conspicuous. In the aftermath of battle a Devonian colour-sergeant reckoned: ‘The sight would turn you cold – headless bodies, limbs lying around everywhere . . . I found one young fellow badly wounded, talking about his mother and his home, and it touched me, for the enemy are white people like ourselves.’ Nevertheless, Devonians were proud of their regiment’s achievement at Elandslaagte; some insisted that they had gained ‘a very good name, better than the Gordons did at Dargai’.

Conversely, there was deep despair after the six-hour battle at Nicholson’s Nek when 850 soldiers surrendered from five-and-a-half companies of 1/Gloucesters and six companies of Royal Irish Fusiliers (another 33 ‘Glosters’ were killed and some 80 officers and men were wounded). Surviving ‘Glosters’ said little about the feasibility of their mission [a night march into the rear of Boer forces who were beginning to invest Ladysmith] or their maldeployment when they occupied Tchrengula Hill overnight or the folly of constructing sangars (stone breastworks) that served as targets for covering fire while other Boers scaled the hillside. Rather they dwelt on several misfortunes, including the stampede of their mules on the previous evening removing
much of their ammunition and rendering the mountain guns useless, and how the surrender of an isolated and heavily wounded advance party triggered the wholesale surrender of the entire force. Inevitably some exaggerated the numbers of casualties and of the Boers who attacked from three sides: a soldier asserted, ‘if we had not given in then we would all have been slaughtered’. As inquiries were made into the raising of the white flag, and recriminations persisted between the Fusiliers and the ‘Glosters’, Captain Stephen Willcock (1/Gloucesters) praised the Boers for their ‘devilish’ fire, ‘wonderful’ use of the ground and generous treatment of the prisoners.

Unable to break the Boer lines, some 12,000 soldiers withdrew into Ladysmith which, along with Kimberley and Mafeking, would endure protracted investment. When the soldiers retreated into Ladysmith, Dr Harry H. Balfour saw ‘men wandering in, so tired that they could hardly crawl and had to fall out to have a rest, sitting or lying on doorsteps . . .’. Soldiers could not dwell on their misfortunes as they had to fortify outposts along an 11-mile perimeter. A sergeant of the Gordons described this work as harder ‘than would have been necessary under normal circumstances’, labouring ‘for several days from four to six hours a day, and then most part of the night amongst rocks and cactus trees of a horrible kind tearing your hands and legs, breaking off nails, etc.’. Many of these untreated sores tended to swell and fester amid the heat, sweat and flies, so making life ‘miserable’: ‘Scarce a man escaped suffering from diarrhoea and dysentery, and some pitiable sights were to be seen.’ Under regular shelling from the Boers (other than on Sundays), men kept in their trenches by day and worked building or repairing the fortifications by night.

The besieged took comfort from information gleaned by their balloon and signallers (other than in periods of torrential rain), from the odd sortie against the Boer positions, and retaliatory fire from their own artillery, especially the naval 4.7-inch guns, but morale soon flagged. By 16 November, Lieutenant-Colonel Cecil W. Park (Devons) confirmed that ‘everyone is most deadly sick of the monotony of the siege’, and later that his men had hardly been encouraged by news of Buller’s defeat at Colenso. Yet the defenders fought off the enemy, particularly during the seventeen-hour attack on Wagon Hill and Caesar’s Camp (6 January 1900). Once again the 1/Devons had the dramatic, if costly, privilege of launching the final bayonet attack to clear the Free Staters from Wagon Hill. ‘The gallant Devons’, wrote Private Lyons, ‘showed how we could fight with fixed bayonets’, an achievement relished by Private W. Parminter because ‘before our regiment charged, the Gordons and the Rifles had a go at it, but failed in the attempt, losing many killed and wounded’. The defenders suffered heavy
losses in this close-quarter fight (17 officers and 158 men dead, 28 officers and 221 men wounded), but in the hospital throughout the siege only 59 of the wounded died compared with 510 deaths from typhoid and dysentery.26

Men clearly weakened as the siege dragged on and provisions became increasingly scarce. By February 1900 Devonshire soldiers recorded both the escalating prices at auction – £25 for a bottle of whisky, 10s (50p) to £10 for tins of condensed milk, 22s 6d (£1 12.5p) for a dozen potatoes – and the cuts in their own rations: sometimes bread and horse meat per day, or biscuit and bully beef, ‘very old and nasty’ porridge, and ultimately a daily allowance of some 3oz of mealie bread and over 1lb of horse meat.27 The horse flesh, added a Gordon, was ‘very often putrid . . . crawling with maggots and stinking, of course’.28 With the siege lifted on 28 February 1900, the relief column subsequently marched through the town and the beleaguered garrison provided a guard of honour: ‘The poor fellows’, wrote Gunner H. Lambert, ‘were too weak to stand up and so they sat down, looking thin and haggard, not a smile to be seen except when they happened to see a face they knew’.29

If protracted sieges were a rarity in the African experience of the Victorian army [other than in conflicts with the Boers], so were the three major defeats in the ‘Black Week’ of 10–15 December 1899. Scots and west countrymen were involved in two of these defeats. At Magersfontein (11 December) the Highland Brigade incurred the vast majority of some 948 killed, wounded and missing, and many survivors vented their spleen on the generalship of Lord Methuen. Anonymous claims of a mutinous spirit within the brigade may have been far-fetched,30 but soldiers, aggrieved at the death of their own commander Major-General Andrew Wauchope, denounced Methuen’s ‘blundering’, ‘bad generalship’ and ‘almost criminal negligence’.31 Corporal W. G. Bevan (1/Argylls), a veteran of an earlier, costly ordeal at Modder River (28 November), and Private Walter Douglas (2/Black Watch) were more specific: they berated the lack of reconnaissance, a laborious night advance in quarter-column formation [which made an ideal target for the Boers before it could deploy in intervals of five paces], and an inability to cross an open field of fire against an unseen, entrenched and well-armed enemy: ‘It was not fighting’, wrote Bevan, ‘it was simply suicide.’32 Some conceded that the brigade, after several thwarted attacks and ten hours pinned to the ground under a fierce sun, compounded its predicament by retiring in daylight. An HLI soldier admitted that after the shout ‘Retire!’ a ‘stampede’ ensued – ‘4,000 men like a flock of sheep running for dear life’ – and many soldiers were shot in the retreat.33 Methuen, though revered by many of his Guardsmen,34
deeply alienated the Highlanders by sympathising with ‘their terrible loss’ in his post-battle speech, and Lord Roberts, the new commander-in-chief, quickly removed the brigade from his command.35

Buller had never encountered such difficulties in Natal, despite his relief force suffering an even heavier defeat at Colenso, a disaster at Spion Kop (24 January 1900) and another reverse at Vaal Krantz (5–7 February 2000) before eventually breaking through the Tugela defences. Scholars have speculated on how he retained the enduring affection of his troops, whether it was respect for his personal bravery and endurance; or his attention to the comforts of the men, including their food, supplies and mail from home; or his readiness to withdraw rather than push on recklessly; or recognition that the campaign in Natal was extremely daunting.36 Soldiers’ letters support all these claims, but those written immediately after Colenso – a failed frontal attack across open ground against an unseen enemy – reflected the shock of young soldiery, many of them in their first battle. Soldiers of the 2/Devons described how they survived a ‘hailstorm’ of bullets, lying behind anthills for eight hours under a blazing sun before withdrawing in daylight ‘under a murderous fire’ or managing to evade capture.37 If some grossly exaggerated the enemy’s numbers (‘22,000’ rather than 3,000) and their casualties (‘2,000’ killed rather than 38), and described their positions as ‘impregnable’,38 others were more perceptive. Scots Fusiliers, who escorted the guns forward, testified to the lack of reconnaissance: ‘we got a surprise, as they hid in their trenches until we came near them’, and the ‘mistake’ of taking the ‘artillery so near the enemy’s position’.39 A Cameronian, who observed the battlefield from high ground in the rear, where he escorted the naval guns, saw the target presented by Hart’s brigade as it advanced in a ‘close mass of columns’, the heavy casualties caused by withdrawing in daylight, and the vulnerability of Barton’s more extended brigade when it advanced without artillery support.40 Soldiers tended to blame Colonel C. J. Long for losing the ten guns and Major-General Fitzroy Hart for his choice of formation rather than Buller, who was lauded for remaining in the firing line.41

Similarly Buller evaded much of the blame for Spion Kop but earned plaudits for breaking off the attack, a decision repeated at Vaal Krantz. Sergeant A. Kean (2/Somerset Light Infantry) affirmed:

There is no doubt General Buller deserves the greatest praise for the way in which he has manoeuvred the troops about from one place to the other . . . I think it is General Buller’s great motto to manoeuvre and take the positions with as few casualties as possible and not to rush a position which means sure death, especially against such positions and fortifications as our enemy possessed.42
Inevitably there was grumbling about the withdrawals and sarcasm about Buller’s claim to have found the ‘key’ to the road to Ladysmith, but many soldiers resented the domestic criticism of Buller, arguing that their commander had the toughest task in breaking through the Tugela line, showed ‘bull-dog tenacity’ in that, ‘checked three times, he yet went for them a fourth’, and deserved every credit for the relief of Ladysmith. Devonians, identifying with one of their own, were probably more supportive than most, but Sergeant-Major William Young (2/Dorsets) was delighted by Buller’s praise of the Dorsets after Spion Kop as ‘our Regt was the only one that did not run away’. Soldiers appreciated, as Private H. Easterbrook (2/Devons) argued, that Buller had shared their hardships: ‘where the fighting was the fiercest there he was to be found’ and ensured that they lived ‘very well; even better than I ever lived in barracks. Plenty of biscuits, tinned meat, cheese, jam, fruit and bread, and fresh meat whenever it is possible to get it.’ Some lauded his tactics in the final push on Ladysmith with a sustained onslaught, and heavy use of artillery and Maxims, over eleven days (16–27 February); many remained fiercely loyal to him thereafter.

Veterans of previous wars were equally forthright: ‘My Soudan experiences’, wrote Father Matthews, ‘were mere child’s play in comparison’; any action in the Tirah, argued Private H. Worth (2/Devons), was eclipsed by Colenso; and ‘Omdurman was a picnic’, claimed Private Louis Wilshaw (2/Lancashire Fusiliers), by comparison with Spion Kop. Egyptian veterans told Private F. Hughes (2/Black Watch) that this campaign was far more stressful as they were always on the march or look-out, while Tirah veterans praised the supply services in South Africa inasmuch as rations (and presents from home) were far more plentiful than in India. They observed, too, that their khaki kit served as excellent camouflage in South African conditions, and that the wounded could be left on the battlefield, as they were at Magersfontein, ‘in the knowledge that they will receive the best treatment at the hands of their enemies and not the “coup de grace” from the Afridis’. Yet soldiers recognised that they were being tested as never before: after Magersfontein Private Bain (1/Argylls) admitted that ‘a lot more troops from home’ were ‘badly’ needed; many gunners, drivers and troopers complained that ‘our horses are badly in want of rest’ or ‘are dropping down like dead sheep every day as they can’t stand the heat’; and some protested that the army needed ‘more modern and quick-firing guns’ as well as a rifle to match the Mauser. Soldiers acknowledged, nonetheless, that the army was adapting to the constraints of modern war. Modifications of kit aroused intense debate as Highlanders placed aprons over their kilts, while officers, as Smyth...
Osbourne described, discarded their swords and dressed ‘as much like the men as possible’ to make themselves less conspicuous.51 Another officer in Natal indicated that the soldiers were developing new skills in field-craft to beat the Boer at ‘his own game’, adding: ‘What a lot they are teaching us, these farmers! When we have settled them we shall be the most magnificent army in the world.’52

Meanwhile Scots and west countrymen would be involved in the worst day’s fighting of the war, the assaults launched by Kitchener on Cronjé’s beleaguered forces at Paardeberg (18 February 1900). Soldiers recalled the gruelling marches over several days that preceded those attacks. ‘Some days’, wrote Bandsman P. Kelly (Argylls), ‘we did 18 miles, and went off at night, marching by moonlight, and for about four days we never had four consecutive hours’ sleep’; Colour-Sergeant G. Fry (2/Gloucesters) recollected ‘marching day and night, on half rations . . . Of course we had no tents; we simply lay on the ground, just where we halted . . .’.53 Barely recovered from such exertions, the Highlanders were thrown into an early morning attack on the Boer trenches. While other assaults were launched from upstream and against the front of the Boer positions, with gunners pounding the Boer positions from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m., the Highlanders and later the ‘Dukes’ attacked from the south-east. The Highlanders were soon halted by Boer fire-power across open ground, whereupon a company of Seaforths accompanied by two companies of the Black Watch forded the river and charged to within 300 yards of the Boer trenches. ‘When I got across’, recalled Lance-Corporal Wallace Maxwell (2/Seaforths), ‘I had to advance, soaked through as I was, and with 150 rounds of ammunition in my pouches, I was not very comfortable.’ Unlike 155 Seaforths (the largest number of casualties suffered by any battalion on that day) Maxwell avoided injury, but ruefully observed: ‘Our regiment is once more reduced to very small numbers, so there will be some more gruesome reading at home’.54 On the other bank of the river, Major-General Hector Macdonald ordered the Argylls, who had been guarding the guns, to join the firing line and ‘give a good account’ of themselves: as Bandsman Kelly recalled, once bullets began whistling ‘round our ears’, the infantry were soon pinned to the ground; and another Argyll, Private William Johnston, admitted: ‘It is cruel work lying in the sun all day.’55 At least they did not panic and remained prone, desperate for water and tantalisingly close to the Modder River until dusk.

The ‘Dukes’ only arrived at the battlefield in early morning and had one company posted on outpost duty and the other six guarding the baggage. At 10.30 a.m. Lieutenant-Colonel William Aldworth was required to send the right half of the battalion to support the Highland Brigade on the southern bank of the river, and, three hours later, to
launch the other three companies in a direct attack from the northern bank. The colonel, as Lieutenant Hugh Fife recalled, gave an inspirational speech to the officers and men, assuring them that their first action would take the form of a ‘Cornish charge’: it would earn them lasting fame, and he would give £5 to the first man who bayonet a Boer. Officers and men were allowed some food, and then forded the river, using a rope, with water ‘up to our waists’. By about 4.45 p.m., they formed three extended lines with intervals of 150 yards between each company and then charged with fixed bayonets across open ground into a ‘most terrific hail of bullets, pom pom fire and shrapnel’. Forced to take cover behind ‘a goodly sprinkling of ant-hills’, some claimed that the ‘Dukes’ made a second charge [covering about 300 yards in all, or barely half the requisite distance]; but few disputed that once their colonel fell mortally wounded, ‘the men’, as one private asserted, ‘acted more for themselves, rushing to the front one at a time for about 50 yards or so and getting under cover’. The fighting ceased about 7.30 p.m., whereupon soldiers began ferrying the wounded across the river: ‘their groans’, claimed Private D. James, ‘were sickening; he would not have ‘cared so much’ had he been able ‘to see some Boers to fire at’ and had the ‘Dukes’ received any support. In their first action the two parts of the battalion had lost 3 officers and 24 men killed and 74 wounded, a ‘very heavy loss’, in Fife’s opinion, for which Kitchener was responsible. Their brigadier, Major-General H. L. Smith-Dorrien, ‘knew nothing of it’, further testimony of the poor staff work and lack of communications during the attack.

Soldiers were certainly relieved when Lord Roberts resumed command on 19 February and replaced the costly attacks on Cronjé by siege operations. Lieutenant Lachlan Gordon-Duff, whose 1/Gordon Highlanders had observed the battle on the previous day, regarded the mission set for the DCLI as an ‘impossible feat’, while Private H. Haughton described the Canadian charge, over a distance similar to that attempted by the ‘Dukes’, as ‘ridiculous’, since ‘after running 700 yards, a man would hardly push a bayonet through a sheet of paper’. During the ensuing siege Haughton, like his Cornish comrades, had horrible memories of nights in the muddy trenches, with an all-pervading stench of dead men and animals, or on outpost duty often in torrential downpours. Conditions were even worse in the Boer laager, and when Cronjé surrendered on the anniversary of Majuba Day [27 February] soldiers were able to inspect the Boer defences. Lieutenant R. M. S. Gardner [2/Gloucesters] found a ‘wonderful collection of rifles’ in the laager, a less pleasant sight in soft-nosed [or explosive] ammunition and ‘marvellous’ trenches, explaining how they held out so ‘well behind them’.

[ 167 ]

Edward M. Spiers - 9781526137913
Downloaded from manchesteropenhive.com at 05/28/2019 04:41:29AM
via free access
After the loss of Cronjé’s wagon laager with over 4,000 men, women and children, a joint council of the two republics resolved on 17 March 1900 to rely thenceforth on mounted commandos, a new method of warfare in which the Boers exploited their increased mobility. Although they abandoned both capitals without resistance (Bloemfontein on 13 March and Pretoria on 5 June), they engaged in fixed battles until the end of August 1900 before embarking on a protracted guerrilla war. At first British soldiers seemed unaware that they would have to adapt once again to altered conditions of warfare. When they captured Bloemfontein, and received a hearty reception from the British inhabitants, many were convinced that Lord Roberts had decisively transformed their fortunes. They now had a chance to rest and re-equip: ‘We are nothing but a bundle of rags now’, wrote Private Tom Wood (2/DCLI), ‘our clothes are nearly dropping off us; we have not had them off since January . . .’, while Private W. James (2/Gloucesters) was even more relieved, thinking that the war was nearly all over, ‘for we have been on the march this last five weeks, and we are all half-starved and ragged – just like a lot of tramps’.65

The optimism proved short-lived: as Private Wood described, typhoid soon swept the large encampment at Bloemfontein and British forces, though re-equipped, were required to mount ‘long and tedious marches into the surrounding country on look-out for the enemy’.66 The ‘hit-and-run’ tactics of the Boer commandos, led by Christiaan de Wet, Louis Botha and Koos De la Rey, increased their frustration. Even those soldiers, like Private Stinchcombe (2/DCLI), who had enrolled in the growing ranks of the mounted infantry, complained that his company never got ‘much rest’, was ‘nearly roasted in the day’ and had ‘to keep on all the time’.67 Others were exasperated by de Wet’s ability to harass convoys, burn farms, attack trains and still elude his pursuers. After de Wet captured a major convoy en route to Heilbron (4 June 1900), and then attacked the railway, destroying the mails at Roodewal station (7 June), Sergeant William Hamilton (1/HLI) emphasised ‘how disgusted and wild we we all felt on receiving this news’.68

Roberts resolved to assume the initiative when he left Bloemfontein on 3 May, advancing in concert with forces from Kimberley in the west and Buller’s forces from Ladysmith in the east as they drove towards Pretoria. A Tauntonian gunner, Harry Verrier (82nd Battery, Royal Field Artillery) chronicled his exhausting itinerary:

action on 4th of May; captured Wynburg 10th May; Zand River in action the whole of the day; 12th of May captured Kroonstad; 18th of May captured Lindley; 20th of May had a rearguard action with De Wet . . . 23rd of May captured Heilbron; 26th of May crossed the Vaal River into the Transvaal; 29th of May in action at the battle of Doornkop; 30th of May

[ 168 ]
in the gold district of Florida; 31st of May captured Johannesburg; 5th of June captured Pretoria after some fighting, had a grand march past for Lord Roberts; 11th and 12th of June had a severe battle at Diamond Hill, which I shall never forget: I worked like a slave that two days fixing and setting fuses, but we kept them at bay.

New units and tactics were employed to overwhelm Boer positions. At Doornkop (29 May 1900) Hamilton launched his assault with the City of London Imperial Volunteers (CIV) and the Gordons, supported by the Cornwalls, up sloping ridges burnt black by the Boers to remove any cover and render the khaki uniforms more easily targeted. The Gordons included a Volunteer company in their second line, and attacked in extended order, covered partially by artillery fire. Many of the casualties occurred near or at the crest where there was a fierce fire-fight among the rocks before the Boers withdrew. While the ‘Dukes’ suffered only two casualties, including Lieutenant Fife who was fatally wounded, the Gordons incurred 97 (about 20 of whom would die from wounds caused by explosive bullets). Even so, Lieutenant Gordon-Duff thought: ‘Luckily they were not first class shots, otherwise not so many of us would have come off, Scot free’.

On 11 June 1900, the 2/Dorsets undertook their first major action at Alleman’s Nek, where they were required to seize two hills overlooking the pass. After languishing in Natal where many had succumbed to fever, the men were reportedly jubilant at the prospect of action. They were deployed in the centre of the advance (flanked in a wedge-shaped formation by Middlesex soldiers on the left and Dublin Fusiliers on the right). Under Major-General J. Talbot Coke’s instructions, companies had to advance across the open plain without firing in a succession of lines, each occupying 120 yards in width and with 150 yards in depth between each line. Supported by naval guns and artillery, the Dorsets, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Cecil Law, stormed Conical Hill before pursuing the Boers onto Alleman’s Hill, and during this pursuit, as Corporal A. E. Robinson observed, ‘we lost most of our men’. Given the lack of cover and the height of the hills, the loss of 2 officers and 10 men killed and 52 wounded (2 of whom would die of their wounds) testified to the value of a rapid assault. A Boer prisoner described the Dorsets as not men but ‘devils’ since they had moved so quickly past their range markers and had not stopped to fire in the assault; even more gratifying, added Corporal R. Abbott, was the fact that the enemy not only evacuated Alleman’s Nek but fled from their positions on Laing’s Nek and Majuba, thereby enabling Buller to break through the rear of the Boer defences.

Capturing Pretoria unopposed did not, as Lord Roberts hoped, bring the war to a ‘rapid conclusion’. His extended lines of communication and dependence on the railway left British forces vulnerable to attacks.
in the renamed Orange River Colony, the Transvaal and, later, Cape Colony. Countering these attacks proved difficult, as Private George C. Fraser (1/Royal Scots Mounted Infantry) conceded, because ‘the marvellous energies and skilful tactics of Christian De Wet’ were ‘leading our men a dance and no mistake . . .’. He believed, nonetheless, that the mounted infantry were becoming more proficient as horsemen, skirmishers and snipers, and claimed: ‘The Dutchmen have taught us many useful military lessons since the commencement of the war.’

Infantry and artillery were also involved in chasing the Boers, and, after a fortnight’s action in July 1900, Robert McClelland (chaplain, 1/Cameron Highlanders) described how the Camerons, as part of the 21st Brigade, had become proficient in the use of cover, in extended operations, and in fire and movement with artillery support. ‘The Cameron Volunteers’, he noted, ‘particularly distinguished themselves, advancing at the double up the face of almost inaccessible cliffs’. However, the futility of infantry chasing commandos soon became apparent: ‘it is impossible’, wrote Private Ross (2/Seaforths), ‘for infantry to follow them up’, and packing soldiers into carts, as described by Lieutenant John Bryan (2/Gloucesters), ‘had no luck, as usual . . .’ Even mounted patrols floundered in pursuit of de Wet, with a Truro soldier in Lieutenant-Colonel H. C. O. Plumer’s column acknowledging: ‘It’s a marvel how he gets about so rapidly. We are all mounted, and it takes us all our time to keep up with him’.

Facing repeated attacks on detachments, patrols and convoys, the British forces had to protect their lines of communication. Battalions, already depleted by mounting tolls of sick, were often split up, with companies assigned to garrison duty in towns, stations and depots, while others manned armoured trains, guarded bridges and escorted convoys. These duties varied considerably: in some garrisons and rear-area postings, officers and men enjoyed, as Captain F. M. Peacock (Somersets) remarked, ‘fairly easy times’, with hospitality from friendly civilians and opportunities for shooting; but, in more isolated posts, men endured extremes of temperature, restricted rations and often monotonous duty. Patrolling was often arduous, and after four companies of the Somersets completed 240 miles of marching from Vryburg ‘through blinding dust, scarcely any water, and often only half rations’, Sergeant Edward E. Husband was pleased that ‘the Somersets have pulled through, and had only three men fall out the whole time’.

The engineers, as a Devonian sapper, C. Bowden, affirmed, were particularly busy: his company not only engaged the enemy periodically but built redoubts and roads, cleared dynamite from bridges, repaired railway tracks and marched on to Komati Poort, covering 800 miles in 6 months. There they built huts
and roads in temperatures of ‘110 degrees in the shade all through the fever months’. 80

Small detachments, too, were vulnerable to enemy attack. Three companies of the unlucky ‘Glosters’ were among 480 soldiers mounting a garrison at De Wetsdorp when de Wet’s forces surrounded them, captured their two guns, and killed or wounded some 96 soldiers. When the widely dispersed and poorly fortified garrison surrendered (23 November 1900), Private Bray reflected: ‘We had been in the trenches three days and two nights without rest, and thirty hours without water, so you can guess what state we were in . . .’.81 By February 1901 Private E. Eyers was delighted to learn that another 30,000 soldiers were due to arrive in South Africa: ‘They are badly wanted, for this is a great country, and it takes a lot of men to fight, while others hold all the towns and look after the railway lines and escort convoys, etc.’82 Despite the reinforcements, including imperial troops and auxiliary forces, regular units still struggled to operate effectively: by May 1901, Peacock admitted: ‘The companies are not strong now; in fact, very weak, and as we had to find a detachment of twenty men, under Harrison, to guard the railway bridge, we cannot muster much more than eighty men for duty, and as thirty men is the minimum we can do with for picquet and outpost duty, the nights in bed are few’.83

Soldiers also engaged in active counter-guerrilla operations: farm-burning, the destruction of Boer livestock and the removal of Boer families into concentration camps – policies begun under Roberts and continued under Kitchener.84 Soldiers had mixed feelings about these tasks: some, like Captain Boyd A. Cunningham (4/Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Militia), regarded ‘orders to ravage some farms . . . [as] great fun’;85 others regretted the destruction of livestock or emphasised that they only burnt farms from which they had been fired upon. Whereas an Australian officer of Cornish stock found it ‘very disagreeable work’, another officer justified farm-burning as necessary because the Boers used ‘their women and children’ as cover and their farms as arsenals.86 The implacable hostility of many Boer women only compounded these difficulties: ‘The women’, wrote Peacock, ‘are at the bottom of the war.’ ‘They loathe us’, added a Bristolian officer, ‘the first thing they teach their children is to hate the British.’87

The bitterness of the guerrilla engagements, coupled with the seemingly endless conflict, exacerbated feelings towards the enemy. Soldiers and chaplains retold accounts of the Boers using explosive bullets, firing on ambulance wagons, destroying loyalist farms, killing wounded men at Vlakfontein and shooting blacks.88 Some soldiers attributed this resistance to the lenient policies adopted by Roberts when he first entered the republics and allowed Boers who surren-
dered, and took an oath of ‘neutrality’, to return to their homes (where-upon some resumed combat). Reverend C. E. Greenfield (acting chap-lain with the Scots Greys) maintained that the British should have grasped the nettle ‘strongly’ from the outset: ‘our weak efforts have only resulted in us being grievously stung’.  

Soldiers adapted to Kitchener’s more systematic methods of counter-guerrilla warfare; they constructed, with native assistance, a vast network of blockhouses and barbed wire entanglements within which to mount drives against the Boers. Sergeant H. Hurley (2/DCLI) was impressed with the ‘craze’ of ‘hemming ourselves in with barbed wire and also building blockhouses, which are great things in guarding the line . . .’. If blockhouse duty was less onerous than trekking, soldiers had to stay alert, particularly at night, despite a daily routine which Lance Corporal G. Hill (Somersets) aptly described as ‘very quiet and monotonous . . .’. The drives yielded variable returns: after a seven-day trek in May 1901, F and H companies of the Argylls brought in ‘24 prisoners of war, 8 surrenders, 3 undesirables, 36 rifles, 2,300 rounds of small ammunition, 37 women, 124 children, 80 wagons, 26 Cape Carts, 200 horses, 12 mules, 1,300 cattle, 5,500 sheep’. 

Despite the mounting number of surrenders and the assistance afforded by blacks (both armed and unarmed) and Boers who joined the British as scouts, soldiers despaired of an end to hostilities. ‘The “war”’, argued Major Mackintosh (Seaforths), ‘may go on forever at this rate’, a fear that partly explained the intense resentment of the pro-Boers at home. As Lieutenant-Colonel Law (2/Dorsets) commented: ‘I am sorry to say the war drags on, our greatest enemies being the size of the country and the traitors at home who give the Boers every encouragement to continue this struggle with a view to getting their independence.’ Many soldiers deplored the expression of pro-Boer opinions in Britain. Private W. Willis (2/Devons) reckoned that the pro-Boers knew ‘nothing’ about the war: ‘They want to come here and see what is going on. It is perfectly disgraceful.’ Corporal Chin (2/DCLI) reported that his regimental chaplain, Reverend H. K. Southwell, vicar of Bodmin, was planning to send samples of explosive bullets to Leonard H. Courtney, a local Member of Parliament and prominent pro-Boer. 

Soldiers were even more incensed by criticisms of their counter-guerrilla operations, especially of the concentration camps where, according to a Gordon Highlander, ‘every facility’ was offered to the Boers and they were ‘treated as well, if not better, than Tommy Atkins himself’. This was a recurrent military refrain, and those more directly acquainted with the camps ascribed much of the ‘distressing’ mortality rate to the insanitary habits of the Boers in confined quarters.
and their lack of co-operation with the medical authorities. Reverend F. J. Williams insisted that there was ‘no cruelty, no neglect, no unkindness’ in the management of the camps, while Dr H. A. Spencer of the Middelburg camp praised his nursing sisters who were trying to ‘convert some scores of irresponsible and careless women into better mothers’. Just as Spencer deplored the criticisms of Emily Hobhouse, Trooper Lambert argued:

It is very annoying for us poor fellows, who have been out here just two years and have been in the stiffest of battles, to have to read in English papers that so-called English gentlemen have the soft headedness to stand up before the British public and say that it has been a most barbarous war, accusing British Generals and Tommy Atkins of the same.

Whether these fulminations reflected more than momentary outbursts of anger, triggered by incidents in the field, articles in the press or frustrations over the length of the war, is difficult to discern. At least one officer admitted being ‘a bit rabid on this question’, but others proffered more considered judgements: Lieutenant M. H. Grant (2/Devons) would not overlook the ‘many white flag incidents’ but insisted that the Boers were not cowards but ‘brave men’, capable of acts of ‘collective heroism . . . astonishing in a soldiery brought up in a school of pure individualism’. A Dorset Lancer conceded: ‘The Boers are awfully clever, though . . . both deceitful and treacherous’, adept at the use of cover; several engineers commended the trenches of the Boers and their long-range shooting; and Corporal Philip Littler (2/Gordons) insisted that ‘it is a mistake to look upon the Boers as poor ignorant farmers . . . They will take some beating’. A Devonian officer agreed, describing fighting that began at 3,000 yards:

You never see your enemy, even at 900 or 500; and the Boer is a busy fellow if he feels so inclined. He will stay and fire 300 shots at you before you can clap your hands. If he wants to go to a better place he will go, but you can’t see him move. Taking one consideration with another, the Dutchman is a fine enemy, and if he did not misuse the white flag he would be universally respected.

Whatever their feelings towards the enemy, many tired of the war and yearned to go home. Neither news of Boer surrenders nor reports of convoys capturing large numbers of refugees, animals and wagons deflected the desire of Corporal F. Hawkins (Somersets) and others to leave ‘this miserable place’. Once the peace conference at Vereeniging began, hopes of a complete Boer surrender rose and a sergeant in the South Wales Borderers was delighted to see Kitchener ‘in particularly good spirits. He actually smiles, and that is a thing he does not often do.’ Relief was certainly the overwhelming sentiment when the
peace was signed on 31 May 1902, but soldiers had expressed hopes that lessons would be learned from the new methods of warfare. As a Gordon Highlander claimed after Paardeberg: ‘Our generals have learnt their lesson in the harsh school of adversity. The dangers attending misdirected strategy and antiquated tactics have been recognised.’

Notes


2 Even in Cornwall, where the ‘Dukes’ struggled to raise men for two battalions and so recruited heavily from Birmingham and London, Lt-Col. Aldworth had taken a portion of the 2nd Battalion on a lengthy tour of the county in early 1899 and so ‘nearly all Cornishmen are now acquainted with their territorial regiment and regard it with feelings of pride and affection’: ‘The Departure of the ‘Dukes’, Cornish Times, 4 November 1899, p. 4; ‘Cornwall & the War’, Cornish Telegraph, 9 May 1900, p. 5, and 3 October 1900, p. 6; ‘Where Are the Cornishmen?’, Cornish Telegraph, 18 September 1901, p. 3; and A. W. Rose, The Diary of 2874 L/Cpl. A. W. Rose 2nd D.C.L.I.: His Experiences in the South African War 9th October, 1899–28th December 1901, ed. H. White [Bodmin: DCLI Museum, n.d.], p. 2.

3 ‘Letter from the Front from a North Devon Officer’, Western Times, 18 December 1899, p. 4.

4 ‘Interesting Letters from a Somerset in South Africa’, Somerset County Gazette, 10 March 1900, p. 2.

5 Ibid.; see also ‘News from the Somersets at the Front’ and ‘Yeovil Men at the Front’, Somerset County Gazette, 30 December 1899, p. 9, and 13 January 1900, p. 3; ‘A Letter from Estcourt’, Reading Mercury, 6 January 1900, p. 4; ‘From One of the “Cornwalls” at the Front’, Launceston Weekly News, 3 February 1900, p. 4.


7 ‘A Torrington Soldier’s Letter’, Devon Weekly Times, 24 November 1899, p. 5; GHM, PB 182, Capt. M. F. M. Meiklejohn, ‘Rough Account of the Action at Elandslaagte 21 October 1899’, 23 February 1902, p. 10; and PB 175, Lt-Col. Sir N. Macready, diary, October 1899, p. 3.

8 ‘With the Devons at Elandslaagte’, Western Times, 22 November 1899, p. 4; see also ‘A Crediton Man in a Bayonet Charge’, Western Morning News, 24 November 1899, p. 8; ‘Wounded Devons’ Story of Elandslaagte’, Devon Weekly Times, 12 January 1900, p. 7; ‘A Wounded Shaldon Man’s Experiences’, Mid-Denon and Newton Times, 23 December 1899, p. 3; GHM, PB 175, Macready, diary, p. 3.

9 ‘Wounded Devons’ Stories of Elandslaagte’, Devon Weekly Times, 5 January 1900, p. 5; GHM, PB 175, Macready, diary, p. 5.

10 GHM, PB 182, Meiklejohn, ‘Rough Account’, p. 10.

11 Ibid., p. 5.

12 Ibid., pp. 5, 7; GHM, PB 175, Macready, diary, p. 4; ‘Teignmouth Man at Elandsloegte’, Western Morning News, 24 November 1899, p. 8.


15 ‘Nicholson’s Nek Described by a Gloucestershire Officer’ [Capt. S. Willcock; see n. 20], Gloucestershire Chronicle, 16 December 1899, p. 7; L. S. Amery (ed.), The
RE-ENGAGING THE BOERS


20 SGM, Capt. S. Willcock, letter, 9 November 1899.

21 GHM, PB 605, Dr H. H. Balfour, ‘A Diary Kept During the Siege of Ladysmith’, p. 33.

22 ‘Letters from a Ladysmith Defender to Friends in Crieff’, Strathearn Herald, 21 April 1900, p. 3.


24 Park, Letters from Ladysmith, pp. 6–8, 20, see also GHM, PB 66, ‘War Diary of Cunyngham’, p. 4; SGM, 55, Chapman MSS, Maj. G. N. Chapman to his father, 13 December 1899.

25 ‘Letters from the Front’, Western Times, 11 April 1900, p. 4; ‘A Barnstaple Soldier on the Boer Repulse’, North Devon Herald, 12 April 1900, p. 2, see also Devonshire and Dorset Regimental Headquarters, Box 18, letter of Drummer E. Boulden, 24 March 1900.

26 L. Childs, Ladysmith: The Siege [Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1999], pp. 120, 136.


28 ‘Letters from a Ladysmith Defender to Friends in Crieff’, p. 3; see also ‘A Brave Regiment’, Manchester Evening Chronicle, 4 April 1900, p. 3.

29 ‘Interesting Letter from a Bristolian’, Bristol Observer, 7 April 1900, p. 4.


34 ‘A Scots Guardsman’s Defence of Lord Methuen’, Glasgow Evening News, 15 March 1900, p. 3; ‘Methuen and His Guards’, Morning Leader, 23 April 1900, p. 2; ‘A Tribute to Lord Methuen’, Somerset County Gazette, 26 May 1900, p. 3; ‘Home from the War’, Crediton Chronicle, 8 June 1901, p. 5.


10 February 1900, p. 5.


47 ‘The Relief of Ladysmith’ and ‘With General Buller’, Somerset County Gazette, 7 and 14 April 1900, pp. 2 and 11; ‘Letter from an Ashburton Man’ and ‘The Devons at the Front’, Totnes Times, 5 May and 10 November 1900, pp. 3 and 8; ‘Incidents of the War’, North Devon Herald, 30 August 1900, p. 3; ‘The Devons at the Front’, Mid-Devon and Newton Times, 10 November 1900, p. 8; ‘Letter from a Devonian at the Front’, Credton Chronicle, 1 February 1902, p. 5.

48 ‘War Letters’, Cornishman, 1 February 1900, p. 4; ‘Newton Soldier’s Letter’, Totnes Times, 10 March 1900, p. 5; ‘Soldiers’ Letters’, Manchester Evening Chronicle, 3 March 1900, p. 3; see also ‘A Scots Guardsman with Lord Roberts’, Somerset County Gazette, 26 May 1900, p. 3; ‘An Ashburton Man at Ladysmith’, Mid-Devon and Newton Times, 25 November 1899, p. 3.


53 ‘Letters from the Front’, Falkirk Herald, 24 March 1900, p. 5; ‘Lord Roberts’s March
54 'A Tauntonian in the Royal Field Artillery', Somerset County Gazette, 13 October 1900, p. 3; 'Letters from the Front', Falkirk Herald, 24 March 1900, p. 5.


56 'The Cornish Charge', Western Morning News, 3 July 1900, p. 8; 'On the Field', Evening News, 5 April 1900, p. 2; Diary of L/Cpl. Rose, p. 10.

57 'Paardeberg Described by a Sergeant of the D.C.L.I.', p. 5.

58 'Cornish Charge', p. 8.

59 Ibid. Fife, who is the most authoritative source, mentions only one charge, but he fell injured in the first line. See also 'The Charge of the Cornwalls', Cornish Telegraph, 28 March 1900, p. 3; 'One of "The Dukes" at Paardeberg', North Devon Herald, 17 May 1900, p. 3; Amery (ed.), The Times History, vol. 3, pp. 440–1.

60 'Their First Fight', Morning Leader, 6 April 1900, p. 2.

61 These parts of his letter to Colonel Aldworth's daughter were edited out of the published version: compare DCLI Museum, 'Memorials of Lt-Col. Aldworth', Lt H. Fife to Miss Aldworth, 26 March 1900, with 'Cornish Charge', p. 8.

62 Lt.-Col. L. Gordon-Duff, With the Gordon Highlanders to the Boer War & Beyond (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2000), p. 73; and 'A Graphic Narrative', Manchester Evening Chronicle, 12 April 1900, p. 3.

63 'A Graphic Narrative', p. 3; and Diary of L/Cpl. Rose, pp. 12–13.


65 The “Somerset County Gazette” at the Front', Devon and Somerset Weekly News, 17 May 1900, p. 6; 'A Galmington Man in the D.C.L.I.', Somerset County Gazette, 28 April 1900, p. 3; Second Gloucesters at Bloemfontein, Cheltenham Chronicle, 28 April 1900, p. 3; Pretorius, The Anglo-Boer War, p. 24.

66 'A Tauntonian in the Duke of Cornwall's', Somerset County Gazette, 2 June 1900, p. 3; Diary of L/Cpl. Rose, pp. 16–19.

67 'Mounted Infantry Everywhere', Morning Leader, 17 April 1900, p. 2.

68 'Letter from the Front', Argyllshire Herald, 29 September 1900, p. 3; see also 'Letters from the Front', Southern Guardian, 25 August 1900, p. 3; 'Letter from a Seaforth', Inverness Courier, 31 July 1900, p. 5.

69 'A Tauntonian in the Royal Field Artillery', p. 3.


71 'The Battle of Almond's Nek', Southern Times, 14 July 1900, p. 3; 'Letters from the Front', Southern Guardian, 28 July 1900, p. 3; 'The 2nd Dorsets in South Africa', Dorset County Chronicle, 26 July 1900, p. 12.


75 'The Cameron Highlanders', Inverness Courier, 2 October 1900, p. 3.


77 'Chasing De Wet', Western Morning News, 18 March 1901, p. 8.

78 'Letter from Captain Peacock', Somerset County Gazette, 22 December 1900, p. 8;


81 ‘Graphic Description of the Fall of Dewetsdorp’, Stroud Journal, 18 January 1901, p. 3; see also Amery (ed.), Times History, vol. 5, pp. 29–32.


85 ASHM, N-D4.CUN.B., Diary of Capt. Boyd A. Cunningham, 29 December 1900; see also Spiers, ‘The Scottish Soldier in the Boer War’, p. 156.

86 ‘Instances of Boer Atrocities’, Dorset County Chronicle, 7 March 1901, p. 12; ‘Experiences at the Front’, Cornish Guardian, 30 August 1901, p. 3.


90 ‘From a Sergeant of the “Dukes”’, Cornish Guardian, 26 April 1901, p. 3; see also ‘Devons at the Front’, Totnes Times, 20 April 1901, p. 8.


92 ASHM, N-DI.MacD, Pte J. MacDonald, diary, 24 June 1901, p. 21.


95 ‘Comforts for the 2nd Dorsets’, Dorset County Chronicle, 24 October 1901, p. 8; see also ‘Evil Done by the Pro-Boers’, Western Gazette (Yevill), 29 November 1901, p. 2; ‘At the Front’, Argyllshire Herald, 9 November 1901, p. 3, and ‘A Soldier on Pro-Boers’, Ayr Advertiser, 5 September 1901, p. 7.


97 ‘A Letter from a “Cornwall”’, West Briton, 31 May 1900, p. 4.

98 ‘A Soldier’s Reply to the Pro-Boers’, p. 3.


100 ‘Concentration Camps’ and ‘Medical Work in Boer Camps’, Bristol Times and Mirror, 16 January 1902, p. 8, and 21 September 1901, p. 8.

104 ‘Letters from the Front’, Poole, Parkstone and East Dorset Herald, 15 March 1900, p. 8; ‘Back from the Front’, Bradford Daily Argus, 12 January 1900, p. 4; ‘Letters from the Front’, Northern Scot and Moray & Nairn Express, 6 July 1901, p. 3; ‘Somerset and the War’ and ‘Langport Men at the Front’, Somerset County Gazette, 9 December 1899, p. 10, and 21 April 1900, p. 3.
105 If there were pro-Boers among this sample, they were not particularly conspicuous: K. Surridge, ‘“All You Soldiers Are What We Call Pro-Boer”: The Military Critique of the South African War 1899–1902’, History, 82 (1997), 582–600.