

REPORT ON JULY MEETING

Mr Peter Poulton: The Boer War & Australia's Involvement.

The July meeting of the Society heard Mr Peter Poulton, President of Wollongong RSL, speak on general aspects of the Boer War (1899-1902), with specific reference to the role Australia played in this foreign conflict. It was noted that professional and voluntary forces from throughout the country were involved in this conflict in South Africa, and there was a great deal of initial enthusiasm for fighting on the side of the British against the Boers. Some 500,000 horses accompanied the soldiers across the Indian Ocean, and none returned. Approximately 256 Australian soldiers died in battle, with an equivalent number again falling from diseases picked up whilst on duty.

The Australians operated under the command of the British and these combined forces initially suffered setbacks, due largely to the guerilla style tactics of the Boer soldiers, and the inadequate, antiquated strategies of the British military. Despite these initial setbacks, the Empire forces, through sheer weight of numbers and armaments, eventually defeated the Boer. The campaign, during the latter stages, developed into a bitter and ugly conflict, with the British setting up concentration camps to house the captured families of the Boer soldiers, who were made homeless after a campaign of burning farms was implemented.

The Boer War was the first war to involve the forces of the Commonwealth of Australia, though initially it was fought by individual state regiments. It is a largely forgotten war, and pales into insignificance besides the more well-known and lauded campaigns of Gallipoli and the ANZACs between 1914-'18. Mr Poulton's entertaining speech brought out many of the military and strategic aspects of the campaign, with special reference to the involvement and skills of Australian soldiers.

Michael Organ