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# BRITAIN AND THE BOER WAR 1899-1902 : ORGANIZATIONAL, TACTICAL, AND STRATEGIC ADAPTATIONS

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JCSP 44

*Exercise Solo Flight*

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## CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 44 – PCEMI 44  
2017 – 2019EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT***BRITAIN AND THE BOER WAR 1899-1902:  
ORGANIZATIONAL, TACTICAL, AND STRATEGIC ADAPTATIONS**

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## **BRITAIN AND THE BOER WAR 1899-1902: ORGANIZATIONAL, TACTICAL, AND STRATEGIC ADAPTATIONS**

*At first officers and men were very stupid about taking cover. I have seen men halt on a rise in full view of the enemy when a few paces forward or backward would have placed them in shelter, the reason being that to have taken this step would have broken the dressing of the line.*

*-Major General Sir Henry Colvile*

The Boer War from 1899 to 1902 spanned the spectrum of conflict from conventional to guerrilla warfare. It pitted the Boers, armed civilians of the Transvaal and the Orange Free state against Britain. What the British expected to be a short war, over by Christmas turned into a long-protracted conflict. Initially, Britain's military forces were woefully underprepared both in terms of training and equipment for the conflict and suffered a series of stunning defeats during 'Black Week' in December of 1899. This essay will explore the British military aspect of the conflict to prove that despite the initial failures and defeats, the British were able to successfully make adaptations to its organization, tactics, and strategy which eventually turned the tide and led to the British victory.

### **Historical Context**

The Boer War can generally be broken down into three phases. Phase one includes the initial invasion by the Boers into British held territory during which they laid siege to the British garrisons of Ladysmith, Kimberley, and Mafeking. The ensuing British counter offensives by General Buller to relieve the sieges culminated in the disastrous 'Black Week' which saw stunning defeats at Stormberg, Magersfontein, and Colenso.

Phase two commenced with General Roberts taking command of the British forces from Buller. He commenced an offensive which expelled the Boers from Natal

and Cape Colony. This was followed by the invasion of the Transvaal and the capture of Pretoria. The British had achieved strategic success by November 1900 and Roberts assumed that all that would be required to win the war was minor policing work and thus handed over command to Kitchener so he could return to Britain.<sup>1</sup> In André Wessels analysis on the conflict, he concluded that Roberts had “strategically outmanoeuvred the Boers, without defeating them tactically. His annexation of the republics was premature and in practice the British were only in control of the (former) republics as far as their guns could shoot.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the conditions were set for a long and expensive guerilla war.

Phase three was the longest phase of the war and lasted until 1902 and was characterized by mobile warfare and hit and run guerilla warfare tactics used by the Boers. The British developed and evolved their counter-guerilla warfare strategy during this time and were eventually able to slowly diminish the Boer ability to resist through a ruthless and coercive counter insurgency campaign. British numerical advantage, superiority in resources and supplies, and effective strategy combined to achieve success. With the Boers unable to continue to put up an effective resistance due to lack of resources and declining numbers, the signing of the Peace of Vereeniging on 31 May 1902 ended the war.<sup>3</sup>

### **Organization / Force Structure adaptations**

In Andrew Winrow’s book on British mounted infantry, he posited that “the conflict, fought over geographically extensive terrain against superlatively mobile Boer

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<sup>1</sup> André Wessels, "Boer Guerilla and British Counter-Guerrilla Operations in South Africa, 1899 to 1902," *Scientia Militaria - South African Journal of Military Studies* 39, no.2 (2011), 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Byron Farwell, *The Great Boer War*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2009, Kobo Edition, Ch. 39.

commandos... placed the availability and mobility of mounted troops at a premium.”<sup>4</sup>

During the initial phases of the war, the British lacked tactical mobility due to a shortage of mounted troops. The shortage also led to the poor ability of British forces to conduct effective reconnaissance and execute flanking manoeuvres against the Boers.<sup>5</sup> After realizing their initial shortcomings, Britain adapted by drastically increasing their strength in mounted infantry and cavalry. After Robert's took command, each infantry battalion was required to release one company for mounted infantry duties, an important step to increase mobility.

After the transition to phase three guerilla warfare, adaptations to the force structure were made by Britain. After the battalion, brigade, and divisional constructs proved to ineffective against the Boer guerillas due to their inherent lack of mobility, the mobile column force structure was created to conduct offensive operations. These columns had between 200 and 1,500 soldiers and were comprised mainly of mobile infantry, some cavalry, and a few artillery pieces.<sup>6</sup> From November 1900 until the end of the war, the British doubled the number of mobile columns from 38 to over 70.<sup>7</sup> The average number of miles covered by the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers during the war is testament to the mobile nature of the conflict. The Lancers averaged 255 miles a month 1900, 365 miles in 1901 and 315 miles a month in 1902.<sup>8</sup> The organization of forces into the column system provided British with much needed mobility to pursue and engage Boer forces across the veldt.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Winrow, *The British Army Regular Mounted Infantry 1880-1913*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Farwell, *The Great Boer War*, Kobo Edition, Ch. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Wessels, "Boer Guerilla and British Counter-Guerrilla Operations in South Africa, 1899 to 1902," 14.

<sup>8</sup> Winrow, *The British Army Regular Mounted Infantry 1880-1913*, 187.

Following the ‘Black Week’ defeats in December 1899, the British government quickly realized it had to drastically increase its combat power and implemented a plan to send 45,000 reinforcements to South Africa.<sup>9</sup> Changes to recruiting and overseas service rules were made; this enabled twelve militia battalions and 20,000 Yeomanry volunteers to go to South Africa.<sup>10</sup> The middle class was now brought into the fighting force. The use of ‘citizen soldiers’ on one to two-year contracts to participate in the war helped to mitigate some of the issues Britain was facing from recruits from the lower class being medically unfit for service. Increased use of volunteer soldiers from Britain’s colonies and dominions also helped to support Britain’s war effort. This saw over 29,000 soldiers from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand involved by the end of the war.<sup>11</sup> Colonial soldiers helped lend legitimacy to the conflict but more importantly, they provided much needed mounted troops. The “Colonial troops were valued for their ability to shoot and ride, and in many ways performed well in the open war on the veldt.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Tactical adaptations**

British infantry suffered greatly at the outset of the war by using parade square style frontal attacks into prepared Boer defenses. British tactics had not evolved sufficiently at the outset of the war to account for the effectiveness of modern rifles. Initial battles saw the use close-order formations, with volley fire while advancing against Boer positions. During Battle of Colenso, Major-General Fitzroy Hart, the Brigade Commander advanced his entire brigade in quarter columns into battle and even

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*, London: Abacus, 1979. Kobo Edition. Ch. 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch.17.

<sup>11</sup> Farwell, *The Great Boer War*, Kobo Edition, Ch. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Government of Australia, “Australia and the Boer War, 1899-1902,” Australian War Memorial. <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/boer> (Last Accessed May 21, 2019.)

countered an instruction from one of his battalion commanders to spread his men into extended order.<sup>13</sup> The battle was a stunning defeat for the British and was “a clumsy frontal attack without having properly identified the location of the main Boer position.”<sup>14</sup> Minimal use of terrain to cover movement was used; this resulted in the densely packed soldiers becoming excellent targets for the Boers.

Following the ‘Black Week’ disasters, change was needed. Roberts issued formal tactical instructions to his commanders, leading to the abandonment of close order formations when within 1800 yards of the enemy, increasing extension between men to six to eight paces, and maximizing the use of cover.<sup>15</sup> In addition to this, the development of ‘rush tactics’ for small groups to move from one position of cover to another position of cover to cross open ground under fire was solidified. The use of suppressive fire to support movement during the advance was also further developed. One of its first uses was seen during the Battle of Landauite. During this battle, sections used volley fire to support other soldiers during the advance.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the war, the increased use and evolution of cover, dispersion, and fire and movement, was a stark contrast to the frontal advance tactics used at the outset.

Artillery also made significant adaptations during the war. Initial tactics saw British artillery lined up parade ground fashion in the open without gun-shields, and as close to the front line of infantry as possible. Years of colonial conflict against forces without comparable guns had left the artillery ill-prepared to face a foe who did not

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<sup>13</sup> Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902–1914*, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 2013, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.



conform to the British artillery doctrine which was based on the Franco-Prussian war. Boer artillery proved to be highly resilient, firing from multiple entrenched positions at range. It was extremely difficult for the British to conduct effective counter battery fire. The Battle of Colenso is a good example of the initial shortcomings of the artillery. Lacking any infantry support, two batteries of field artillery were brought into action against an entrenched Boer position at close range. Effective fire by Boer rifleman led to the abandonment of the guns, with only two of the twelve guns able to be recovered by the British despite numerous rescue attempts.<sup>17</sup>

To improve the effectiveness of the artillery and prevent any future disasters, Roberts issued this formal tactical guidance to the artillery following ‘Black Week’: “At the commencement of an action, artillery should not be ordered to take up a position until it has been ascertained by scouts to be clear of the enemy and out of range of infantry fire.”<sup>18</sup> Tactics were adapted which saw the guns deployed further to the rear with more dispersion in order to increase their survivability. The early tactics favoring short range engagements, with open sights against visible targets evolved to make use of longer-range indirect fires.

The role of the artillery evolved from simple counter battery and preparatory bombardments to effective combined arms cooperation displayed during the February 1900 battles which broke the siege of Ladysmith. Artillery fire began to incorporate the ‘rolling barrage’ to support the infantry advance to keep Boer rifleman suppressed during the assault. In fact, Pakenham went so far as to say, “the Artillery’s role was being

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

revolutionized.”<sup>19</sup> In particular, during the Battle for the Tugela Heights on 27 Feb 1900, British guns fired until the infantry was fifteen yards from the Boer line. The combination of high angle fire from howitzers and the shrapnel from field guns forced the Boers to be “practically confined to their trenches by the severity of artillery fire.”<sup>20</sup> Another example of the British ability to adapt was in response to the Boer significant advantage in artillery range afforded to them by their 155mm artillery pieces. To counter this, the British placed in 4.7 inch naval guns on improvised carriages which proved to be highly successful. Through constant tactical adaptations during the conflict, was the artillery able to provide effective supporting fires to the infantry and recover from its initial failures.

### **Adaptations to Strategy**

As the war evolved during phase three into a guerrilla warfare campaign, Britain continued to adapt to the changing nature of the conflict. Through deliberate changes to their strategy, the British were able to force the surrender of the Boers by 1902. During the guerilla war, they adopted a multi-faceted strategy to separate the Boers from their base of support while continuing an aggressive attrition campaign to engage and destroy Boer forces.

The concept of blockhouses was implemented to degrade the Boer ability to manoeuvre and prevent them from escaping British offensive operations. Blockhouses were small fortifications built using dirt or shingle, sandwiched between corrugated iron and reinforced by sandbags and barb wire. Each blockhouse was connected to another

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<sup>19</sup> Pakenham, *The Boer War*, Ch. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army*, 137.

blockhouse about 1,000 yards away with barb wire. Eventually, over 8,000 of blockhouses garrisoned by 66,000 troops crossed the veldt and enclosed over 31,000 square miles of territory.<sup>21</sup> By the 1902, the density of the blockhouses and their mutually supporting fires made it difficult for Boers to breach the lines without being detected.<sup>22</sup> In Pakenham's book on the war, he commented that the blockhouses "served as offensive, not defensive weapons; not as cordons to keep out the enemy, but as cages in which to trap them, a guerilla-catching net stretched across South Africa."<sup>23</sup> This strategic adaptation reduced ability of the Boers to conduct surprise attacks and take advantage of the manoeuvre provided by open terrain of the veldt.

Britain also adapted its approach to the guerilla conflict by pursuing a heavy-handed scorched earth policy to deny food and grazing land to the Boers. After Kitchener took command, he implemented an aggressive campaign against the Boer support base. He destroyed crops and farm buildings, killed animals, and eradicated grassland for grazing. It was estimated that 3,600,00 sheep were killed and 30,000 farms were burned.<sup>24</sup> The following excerpt from a letter to his mother written by Lieutenant Miller, a British soldier in Sept 1901 describes the results of the policy: "The country is now almost entirely laid waste...you might march for weeks and weeks and see no sign of a living thing, nothing but burnt farms and desolation."<sup>25</sup> Rotting animals were also placed in water sources and in dams to make water undrinkable. Though barbaric by today's standards, the scorched earth policy made it increasingly difficult for the Boers to

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<sup>21</sup> Judd and Surrige, *The Boer War: A History*. London: I.B. Tauris & CO Ltd, 2013, 214.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Pakenham, *The Boer War*, Ch. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Farwell, *The Great Boer War*, Kobo Edition, Ch. 37.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

sustain and feed their forces and animals.

Kitchener expanded the concentration camp system in early 1900 to compliment to scorched earth policy. This saw the relocation of civilians into guarded camps after their farms were burned in an attempt to separate the Boers from their base of support. It was also thought that these camps would influence more Boers to surrender in order to be reunited with their families. Unfortunately, due to poor administration of the camps and unhygienic conditions, over 48,000 perished in the camps.<sup>26</sup> This led to major international condemnation of the harsh British methods. This reached its peak after the Fawcett Commission Report on concentration camp conditions was released at the end of 1901. Political pressure forced Kitchener to once again change his policy. Women and children were no longer brought into concentration camps and were instead left to fend for themselves. Fortuitously, this became “the most effective of all anti-guerilla weapons.”<sup>27</sup> Boer guerillas were forced to take care of their own families on the veldt, putting even more strain on their dwindling supplies of food. The adaptation in policy, though forced upon the military, played an important role in the eventual Boer surrender.

Blockhouses and the scorched earth policy came together into an effective counter guerilla system through mobile ‘flying columns’ which conducted ‘drives’ to pursue and attack Boer forces. These systematic drives swept the countryside to kill or capture Boer fighters much like a game hunt. The drives destroyed anything that could help sustain the guerillas, with success defined as the ‘bag,’ the number of Boers killed, captured, wounded as well as the amount of captured equipment, ammo, and livestock. The highly

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<sup>26</sup> Fransjohan Pretorius, "History - The Boer Wars," BBC. March 29, 2011.  
[https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/boer\\_wars\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/boer_wars_01.shtml) (Last Accessed May 25, 2019.)

<sup>27</sup> Pakenham, *The Boer War*, Ch. 44.

mobile columns were supported by armoured trains and used the blockhouse lines to pen the Boers in and decisively engage them. In his book, Winrow explains “the principle of methodical and slow-moving convoys screened by traditional mounted patrols gave way to the combination of fast-moving raiders targeting farms and enemy encampments and flying columns strung out over a wide distance undertaking prolonged broad sweeps of territory.”<sup>28</sup> The constant attrition from the drives diminished the number of Boer fighters and also limited their freedom of manoeuvre.

Adaptations to British strategy throughout the all phases of the conflict proved to be ultimately successful. Boers were under constant pressured to feed and equip their forces, the Boer advantage in mobility was degraded, and guerrilla strength was systematically reduced through ‘drives’. Though heavily coercive in nature with little regard to the population, the strategy was effective and forced the Boer surrender on 31 May 1902.

## **Conclusion**

The British ability to successfully adapt its organization, tactics, and strategy against an evolving adversary led to their eventual victory. The willingness to make change was increased followed the stunning defeats during the first phase of the war. Organizationally, Britain adapted its forces to the mobile nature of the conflict by increasing the strength of mounted soldiers and creating task tailored combined arms columns to conduct offensive operations. Tactically, the war exposed a British military that was initially ill-prepared to fight against a well-armed opponent. Major changes were made to infantry tactics, and by the end of the conflict, infantry fire and movement,

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<sup>28</sup> Winrow, *The British Army Regular Mounted Infantry 1880-1913*, 173.

dispersion, and use cover were effectively being practiced. Artillery tactics evolved to provide better coordinated support to an infantry assault through the rolling barrage. Britain's strategy also evolved to meet the challenges of a guerrilla war through coercive measures. Eventually, the British strategy to control the battlespace and limit Boer mobility through blockhouses, a ruthless scorched earth policy, and execution of drives was effective in achieving victory.

If the British had failed to adapt, and continued with their initial tactics, strategy, and organization, the war would have likely been more costly in terms of British blood and treasure. The lessons learned by the British during this conflict were significant and helped to prepare the future British Expeditionary Force for the outbreak of the First World War. The war also led to the modernization of British artillery in both equipment and doctrine. The guerrilla campaign served as a model for future British Counter insurgency campaigns. Many of the strategies developed during the Boer war were used in future such as during the Malayan conflict.

### **So What?**

Even though the conflict occurred at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of the lessons learned are still relevant to modern day campaign design. The conflict emphasized the importance of flexibility in force structure and strategy. The success of the British mobile columns highlights the effectiveness of joint operations and task tailoring of forces. The value of incorporating other nations into a joint task force to increase credibility is as true today as it was in 1900. The use of irregular and colonial soldiers during the conflict showed that niche skillsets and capabilities possessed by other nations can also be great asset to contemporary operations.

The importance of preparing and setting the conditions for the transition to a counter insurgency or peace support campaign during combat operations is another key lesson. The groundwork to prevent a counter insurgency needs to be considered from the start of operations. Once involved in a guerilla conflict, limiting guerilla freedom of manoeuvre, denying their support, and reducing their strength are some valuable lessons from the Boer war. The conflict showed that possessing adequate combat power to control key terrain while retaining enough strength to conduct offensive manoeuvre was critical for success. The fact that more soldiers were required during the guerrilla phase of the war to achieve victory should serve as warning to modern campaign designers that a draw-down of combat power immediately following combat operations could be a major risk.

The British achieved success through a combination of blockhouses, population control, and aggressive offensive operations. Modern day campaign designers will likely have to accomplish similar objectives, albeit within the laws of armed conflict in order to achieve success. The effectiveness of the multi-faceted approach used by the British, shows the importance of targeting an adversary across multiple domains. Thus, the centre of gravity analysis becomes crucial in order to determine critical vulnerabilities that can then be subsequently targeted. The Boer War remains a useful study of a war spanning the spectrum of conflict. The successful adaptations made by Britain during the conflict serve as a good historical example for planners when faced with a contemporary counter-insurgency scenario.

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