



The Second Anglo-Boer War Military Intelligence

By Jim O'Brien

General accounts of the war contain little comment on military intelligence and regimental histories have more or less ignored it. Yet there was considerable activity in the pre-war period and Intelligence Officers played a significant part with the columns during the guerrilla phase of the war.

Major-General Sir John Ardagh¹ was Director of Military Intelligence from 1st April 1896 until October 1899 serving on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Lord Wolseley.

His department was charged with the preparation of information relative to the defence of the Empire and the strategic consideration of all defence schemes; the collection and distribution of information relating to the resources and armed forces of foreign countries and of British overseas possessions as well as the compilation of maps and the translation of foreign documents. Total departmental staff was eighteen officers with some supporting clerks. War Office Military Intelligence B Section (Imperial Defence), which included South Africa, was limited to one officer at DAAG level, one staff captain and one military clerk². Total departmental expenditure was in the region of £20,000 per annum of which about £2000 per annum was spent on South Africa although it rose to about £6000 immediately prior to the war. Nonetheless a great deal of work was carried out on Boer intentions as well as surveys on railways and such roads as existed.

As early as 11th June 1896 Major E.A. Altham, DAAG Military Intelligence, in a memorandum entitled 'Remarks on the Present Strategical Situation in South Africa' warned of the increase in Boer military strength and of the possibility of the two Republics making a dash for Natal and the seaport of Durban. He also pointed out the necessity for specified troops, including the Aldershot Mounted Infantry, to be tasked with guarding railway bridges. Major Altham³ also reported on the railway bridges over the Vaal and Orange Rivers, providing detailed sketches and dimensions of each bridge⁴. In South Africa on 18th June 1896 Captain H.R. Gale, R.E., reported to Major-General G. Cox, Commanding Troops in Natal and Zululand, on the state of the Natal railways including cuttings, culverts, watering places and the measures necessary for their defence. Of crucial importance was the safeguarding of the supply of coal from the Dundee coalfields. A major problem in that respect was the fact that when reserves of coal stored in the open became damp, internal combustion developed and stacks eventually burst into flames. The proposed solution of building storage sheds was deferred on grounds of expense⁵.

Major-General Ardagh produced another memorandum, 'The Transvaal Boers from a Military Point of View', dated 13th November 1896, which, whilst stating his belief that the Boers would seek to maintain the status quo, nonetheless pointed out that the South African Republic had spent £1.5 million on military preparations and set aside a further £850,000 for the provision of artillery, rifles, ammunition and fortifications.

Ardagh claimed: '*As the Transvaal is almost entirely surrounded by British territory, this large expenditure can have no other explanation than an anticipation of war, or an intention of aggression against this country, and its supremacy in South Africa*'. His estimate of Boers available for military service was: Transvaal 23,000; Free State 13,000; Colonial rebels 11,000; Foreign volunteers 1,000. To give a total of 48,000⁶.

Thirty-nine reconnaissance's in 1897 resulted in a report on roads and railways in the Transvaal which included specifications of the railway from Pretoria to Portuguese territory. A further précis was prepared of forty-one roads in Basutoland. Similarly another report on communications in Natal north of Ladysmith was prepared by officers sent out from England. Thirty-five reconnaissance's had been carried out and included information on the most important roads and passes through the Brakenberg and a memo, examining the possibility of turning the Laings Nek position

During 1897-98 a report was prepared on 'Lines of Advance through the Orange Free State'. It was based on reconnaissance of the roads, including those between Standerton and Harrismith, and railways plus details of wells, watering arrangements and the drifts crossing the Vaal River⁷. 'The Present State of Preparation for Frontier Defence in South Africa in a War against the Dutch Republics', produced by Altham in September 1898, drew attention to the known unsatisfactory condition of political affairs in South Africa and the necessity for Imperial troops being ready for a sudden emergency. Altham provided a detailed resume of Transvaal, Free State, British Regular Army and Colonial forces currently in South Africa. Estimates of Boer forces varied as their Regular forces were small and whilst the total number of male Boers was available, question marks arose over how many were capable of sustained military capability⁸.

A handbook 'Military Notes on the Dutch Republics in South Africa' was produced by Altham, assisted by Major Northcott and Captain Wemyss, for use by officers proceeding to South Africa. It was first issued as a secret publication in April 1898 with a revised edition in June 1899. It dealt with the general physical features of the two Republics; gave a brief description of the districts, principal towns and villages; detailed Boer military forces, armaments, forts as well as Boer tactics and organisation and indicated the attitude of the native population. There was also information on the railway and telegraph systems in addition to the text of Transvaal and Free State military law. The paper concluded: '*... it would be necessary to effect local mobilisation within a few hours but there is reason to fear that from lack of organisation and insufficient transport, there would be considerable delay in mobilisation*'.

He set out a survey of the frontiers to be defended and recommended a detailed defence scheme should be drawn up locally for Cape Colony and Natal with enquiry to be made of the High Commissioner as to whether defence schemes had been prepared for Southern Rhodesia and for Mafeking in Bechuanaland. Finally, he suggested arrangements should be made for the despatch of reinforcements from England and the provision of supplies and transport. During 1899 a report was prepared on 'Lines of Communication in Cape Colony' including specifications of the ports and their facilities, railway capacity, the list of existing rolling stock and places suitable as advanced depots⁹.

Still busily engaged, Altham provided a 'Selection of a Line of Advance against the Transvaal' in June 1899 setting out the probable strength of the enemy, the probable result of the defensive phase of the campaign and the objectives which appeared most suitable for attack once sufficient troops had arrived in South Africa. He was remarkably accurate in his estimate of Boer resources, reckoning Transvaal artillery at 83 pieces and Orange Free State at 24 pieces. The actual in September were 71 and 28 respectively. Transvaal machine-guns were estimated at 31; Free State at 3 with the actual being 24 and 3. Transvaal rifles were estimated at 64,950 and Free State at 22,314 with the actual being 70,091 and 26,570¹⁰.

A key intelligence source was Sir Conygham Greene, British Government Agent in Pretoria, who reported regularly to the Colonial Office in London on military preparations in the Transvaal. He also sent details of imported armaments direct to the War Office. Information

Was also forthcoming from the British Consul at Lourenco Marques in what was then Portuguese East Africa and the only port in South Africa which was not in British hands. A railway, completed in 1895, ran from Lourenco Marques to Pretoria and was the route by which the Boers imported most of their armaments. British agents maintained a close watch on the port and within three days of the outbreak of hostilities Britain concluded a secret treaty with the Portuguese to prevent any trade in munitions.

Overall responsibility for planning was divided between the C-in-C, Field Marshal Lord Wolseley, in London and the GOC in South Africa, Lieut-General William F. Butler who had taken up that post when Lieut-General Goodenough died in August 1898. Regular and detailed telegrams and letters passed between the military authorities in Cape Colony and Natal, the Colonial Office and War Office and on 21st December 1898 a War Office letter to Butler called his attention to the preparations being made by the Boer Republics which had the effect of placing British forces in Cape Colony and Natal in an inferior position. Butler was asked to forward at an early date detailed proposals as to how he would distribute his forces to defend the frontiers and also to consult with the Cape Colonial and Natal civil authorities as to the extent of co-operation available from local forces. A scheme for the defence of Natal had already been sent to the Colonial Office in London by Natal civil authorities without

reference to Butler. It contemplated the Boers occupying Northern Natal as far as Newcastle. The War Office sent the paper to Butler requesting the immediate submission of his own defence proposals. Butler replied on 14th June 1899 but in preparing the report he was hampered by King's Regulations requirements that any defence scheme should be based on the number of men actually available in the area rather than the number actually required. Soon afterwards differences of opinion with High Commissioner Sir Alfred (later Lord) Milner forced his resignation.

Also during June the Intelligence Division submitted proposals to the C-in-C which, once approved by Secretary of State for War, the Marquis of Lansdowne, resulted in Colonel

R.S. Baden-Powell, 8th Dragoon Guards, being ordered out on 7th July to take command of all forces in Southern Rhodesia. Under the authority of the Cape Colonial Forces act he was to raise a corps of Mounted Infantry at Bulawayo with secret instructions that in the event of war he was to make demonstrations across the Transvaal border. With the exception of *'six gentlemen of Colonial experience'*, officers were to be regimental officers sent out from England¹¹. A second corps was to be raised in the Mafeking area.

Pre-war there were only two staff officers, one in Cape Colony and one in Natal, with responsibility for field intelligence operations. As both officers also had administrative responsibilities, they could devote only limited time to that task. At the end of June 1899 ten Special Service officers were despatched from England. Of these, Major David Henderson, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, was assigned to Cape Colony and Lieut-General Sir George White selected Lt-Colonel Archibald Murray as Head of Intelligence in Natal where 45 white British subjects and 50 natives were organised into a Corps of Guides. The 45 men came from Natal, Transvaal and the Free State, could exist on the veldt for periods of time, were fluent in Dutch and native languages, could ride and shoot and had wide-ranging local knowledge. The Corps enabled Murray to keep Major-General Sir W. Penn Symonds aware of Boer movements as they crossed the Transvaal and OFS into Natal. Unfortunately Penn Symonds was to discount this intelligence and failed to post piquets on the hills outside Dundee with dire results, including his own death. In Cape Colony, Major M.F. Rimington, 6th Inniskilling Dragoons, formed some two hundred Colonials into Rimington's Guides (The Tigers) who were to operate not only in conjunction with Field Intelligence but also as a fighting unit.

Once hostilities commenced in October 1899 the War Office followed standard practice and devolved military strategic decisions to the field commander.

There was, however, no reserve of staff officers trained for field intelligence operations. The fifth edition of Lord Wolseley's Pocket-Book for Field Service (1886) provided detailed

Instructions for the field commander and his staff on how to choose an intelligence officer and how to set up a field intelligence organisation. All three phases of intelligence work were covered: collection, analysis and reporting.

Reconnaissance was considered to be the most reliable method of obtaining information as to the enemy's location and movements and the book stressed the role of individual soldiers and mounted units in gathering intelligence. Scouting by very small parties was recommended as economising on the use of men and horses.

When Field Marshal Lord Roberts assumed the chief command he created a Headquarters Intelligence Staff. Colonel George F. R. Henderson, York & Lancaster Regt., was transferred from the Staff College to become Director of Intelligence with the then Captain W. R. Robertson on his staff¹².

Henderson organised Roberts' military intelligence with Regular Army staff officers and an Intelligence Officer (IO) was attached to every column in the field with local people employed as scouts and guides. Intelligence was also gathered from Boer deserters where possible. In mid-March 1900 he was also responsible, on Roberts' instructions, of disseminating false information to mislead the Boers as to the details of the advance on Kimberley. Taken seriously ill, Henderson was replaced by Lt-Colonel C.V. Hume in the spring of 1900. Hume produced a paper in July 1900 in which he confirmed the requirement for IO's to be deployed with each independent column and for their activities to be coordinated by central headquarters. Each column should have its own small, specialised staff, including interpreters and scouts.

General Lord Kitchener, who became C-in-C when Roberts returned home, appointed David

Henderson, now a lieut-colonel, Director of Military Intelligence for the counter-insurgency guerrilla phase from February 1901 until May 1902. He established precise requirements for IO's at different levels, including a standardised format for regular reports and that information should not only go up the chain of command but also down to subordinate units. South Africa was divided into four main areas of Cape Colony, Orange River Colony, Transvaal and Western District for intelligence purposes with an IO responsible for each district. Daily reports were telegraphed to the DMI with a weekly summary sent every Sunday evening. Duties included hiring agents, scouts and interpreters, distribution of maps and ciphers; censorship, collection on information of routes, stores and ammunition, Boer casualties and suchlike. Accounts were to be kept of all expenditure including that spent on clandestine operations.

Overall the system worked reasonably well but the ad hoc nature and flexibility of Boer tactics ensured it could never be totally effective. The ability of an IO to organise his native scouts and guides was crucial to the column's success. Generally the column's commanding officer decided where he wished the column to go and responsibility then lay with the IO to identify the best route. Maps were in short supply and those available were not necessarily accurate. Depending on the information gleaned from scouts or deserters, the IO could in fact influence the CO as to the target area. In that respect, (Honorary) Colonel Woolls-Sampson was outstanding. Attached to the then Colonel Rawlinson's column he paid his African scouts from his own pocket and was remarkably successful in targeting Boer laagers and catching them unawares. Woolls-Sampson was a South African who had at one time commanded the Imperial Light Horse and nearly fallen foul of Kitchener who objected to his eccentric ways¹³.

On the other hand, the then Subaltern Fuller was tasked in December 1901 with keeping track of Boer activities in an area of some 4,000 square miles. He had at his disposal seventy 'Kaffir', Basuto and Hottentot scouts who had previously worked for Boer farmers. They achieved only moderate success and Fuller¹⁴ was to complain he would have done better with five 'Kaffirs'¹⁵ and thirty Mounted Infantry. Nevertheless during September 1901 Field Intelligence was able to identify Boer units operating in Cape Colony not only by their commanders' names, including Malan, Schleepers and Smuts, but by the number of men in each unit¹⁶.

With increased expertise came expansion and towards the end of the war the Field Intelligence Department included 132 officers, 2321 white subordinates and a large number of native scouts. However, as usual, once the war ended the inevitable run down began.

References and Sources.

¹ John Charles Ardagh R.E. was Director of Military Intelligence 1896-1901 having previously held a series of intelligence and diplomatic assignments including that of private secretary to the Viceroy of India (1888-94) also that of commandant of the School of Military Engineering at Chatham. He served as Director of Military Intelligence until 30th June 1901 when he was succeeded by Lieut-General Sir W.G. Nicholson who then served as Director-General on Mobilisation and Military Intelligence with a slightly larger staff.

² Royal Commission on the War in South Africa (The Elgin Report) Appendix 4 p.46.

³ Major, later Lt-Col. Altham, joined the W.O. Military Intelligence Dept. as an attached officer in April 1896. In July 1896 he was sent out as Military Secretary to Lt-Gen. W.H. Goodenough, Commanding Troops in S.A., under instructions from Lord Wolseley to carry out certain intelligence tasks. He remained in S.A. for 8 months and then rejoined.

W.O. Military Intelligence on a permanent basis. In September 1899 he went back to S.A. with Lt—General Sir George White but was shut up in Ladysmith during the siege. He was recalled to the W.O. at the end of 1900.

⁴ His full report is set out in the Elgin Report App. B p.162

⁵ Elgin Report App. C pp. 182-3

⁶ Elgin Report App. B pp.163-166

⁷ Elgin Report App. A pp.158-9

⁸ Elgin Report App. A p.155

⁹ Elgin Report App. B pp.168-174

¹⁰ Elgin Report App. B pp.174-177

¹¹ Elgin Report App C p.210

¹² (Field Marshal Sir William) Robertson joined the Intelligence Dept. in April 1899, served in South Africa from January to October 1900 when he returned to the War Office, was a lieutenant colonel by 1903 and Chief of the Imperial General Staff by 1915.

¹³ Pakenham, Thomas The Boer War p.540 London 1992

¹⁴ Fuller, Maj-Gen. JFC The Last of the Gentleman's Wars pp.149-151 London 1937.

¹⁵ 'Kaffir' was the term used by the Boers, and adopted by the British, to designate a black (African). It was commonly used in contemporary documents and is used here in the interests of historical accuracy.

¹⁶ Pakenham, Thomas The Boer War p.526

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