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Call the Hands

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Sailors, Soldiers and Two Wars

From HMCS protector to South Africa

The following story was written by Dr Anthony Stimson BA Hons B Ed PhD, who has extensively researched the history of the Boer War including the South Australian men that volunteered. He is a frequent visitor to Australian battlefields in South Africa and President of the South Australian Boer War Association, an association for descendants of men who served and anyone interested in the war in South Africa.

Dr Stimson was a co-founder and principal of Eynesbury Senior College, Institutes of Business and Technology and international English language academies in Adelaide until stepping down in 2007. He then consulted to schools and chaired the academic boards of tertiary education providers, but is now preoccupied with two books on South Australia's involvement in the Anglo-Boer War.

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For a short time in 1900 South Australians were involved in wars on different sides of the globe. Remarkably, six men served in both wars and both services, navy and army. Five seamen enlisted in the 5th South Australian Imperial Bushmen (5SAIB) for service in South Africa two days after they returned from duty on the China Station on the gunboat HMCS Her Majesty's Colonial Ship *Protector*. The sixth enlisted a few weeks later in 6SAIB.

When the anti-European protest known as the Boxer Rebellion erupted in Beijing the South Australian Government promptly offered the gunboat for service. A heavily armed vessel of 920 tons, she had been ordered after the Russian war scare of 1882 and had served uneventfully in South Australian waters since 1884. Her shallow draught persuaded the Admiralty that she might be useful for operations in coastal waters and the offer was gratefully accepted.

There were two sticking points. The Admiralty wanted the gunboat to be commanded and crewed by Royal Navy personnel as she was to be commissioned as a ship of the RN for the term of her deployment. The Holder Government conceded on command; Capt. James Clare stepped down and Capt. James Creswell RN took command. But Holder would not bend on crewing. When *Protector* sailed on 6 August 1900 she was crewed by South Australian Naval Reservists.

Her service was uneventful and she returned to Port Adelaide on 6 January 1901. Among the reservists on board were Harry Beare, Jacob Davis, Louis Deers, Charles De Longville, George Lockett and Thomas Malloney. We will never know why each man immediately put

his hand up to serve in South Africa but it probably came down to adventure and the frustration of not having seen real action on the *Protector's* deployment.

Harry Beare was the youngest of the six. A keen member of the Naval Reserve's fife and drum band, and the son of a senior constable, he sailed as Boy 1st Class, presumably after badgering his parents for permission. He returned home an Able Bodied Seaman. While the others enlisted in 5SAIB two days after docking at Port Adelaide he did not. Most likely it took him a few weeks to persuade his parents to let him enlist. At any rate, he was proudly wearing his naval uniform when he enlisted in 6SAIB in March. He came from a family of crack shots.

If his parents had forebodings they were well placed. As far as we know, Harry Beare is the youngest South Australian to die in South Africa. He was 16 when he died of enteric fever in Kroonstad in April 1902, only weeks before the end of the war. He is buried somewhere in the sprawling ruins of the Kroonstad cemetery.

Jacob Davis, 24, a baker, had the unusual distinction of being profiled in *The Jewish Herald*, London, as the only Australian Jew serving in the Royal Navy. The shortest man in 5SAIB at 5'3", he had two main claims to fame in South Africa: he had a lucky escape when accidentally shot in the thumb by one of his mates (the bullet went on to kill Tpr. Bruce May); and he stole Col. De Lisle's horse, dyeing its coat overnight with coffee and Condy's crystals, and docking its tail. To no avail – De Lisle's servant recognized the horse. It was an open secret that Davis was responsible but there was no evidence to contradict his claim that the horse had strayed into the Australian lines. He was let off. 'Give an Australian half an hour with a horse and tails are changed, manes are hogged and brands disappear as if by magic,' a Tasmanian said wryly.

Baker, horsebreaker and amateur boxer, Davis lived life on the wild side. 'He is the most reckless man God ever put breath into,' a witness told a coronial inquest into the death of a mutual friend in 1899. The coroner was taken aback. After the war there were convictions for breaching the peace and – in 1927 - brandishing a revolver in Grote Street and threatening to kill one Frank White. Davis claimed the gun was simply a souvenir he had brought back from South Africa. He said he carried it for protection against rival West End pushes or gangs. It is not inconceivable. Born in Grote Street, he lived his life in the West End and when he died in 1939, bankrupt, was living on West Terrace. It was a tough area.

To the end, Jacob Davis was proud of his naval and military service, and served briefly on the committee of the South African War Veterans Association. Two years before his death he could still fit comfortably into both wartime uniforms. He had thrown nothing out – bandolier, bayonet, medicine kit, brush were still there. There was even a pigtail from China. Asked how he came by it, Davis was unusually coy: 'I usually get what I want.'

Louis Deers enlisted in 5SAIB with Davis and if anything his background was even tougher. He was six years old when in 1882 his widowed mother surrendered him to the care of the Destitute Board. He was admitted to the Industrial School at Magill and became a labourer. But his life took a turn for the better, perhaps because of his time in the Naval Reserve. When Capt. Clare, Naval Commandant, farewelled Deers, Luckett, Malloney and De Longville on the eve of their departure for South Africa, he said they had been 'the flower of the crew of the Protector on her visit to China.'

Deers met a tragic end but not from a Boer bullet or fever. A certificated diver employed by the Fremantle Harbors Authority, he was diving to retrieve an anchor in March 1910 when he suffocated. An inquest found that his diving gear was operating perfectly and that no blame attached to anyone. The most likely explanation was that he had stumbled over a rock, his feet ending above his head. Deers left a wife and three children.

Charles De Longville was lucky to survive South Africa. The 22 year old carpenter from Port MacDonnell served as an Able Bodied Seaman on the *Protector* but on 11 October 1901, in close fighting outside Harrismith, took two bullets in the leg and one in the arm. Invalided home, he was hailed as a hero and presented with an inscribed medal by friends 'as a token of their admiration of his pluck.' The family still has the medal. He was granted a lifetime pension of 1/6 per day.

At 30, George Luckett was the oldest of the six men. Birmingham born and a mariner, he had been awarded the Bronze Medal of the Royal Humane Society for saving his captain's life when the steamer *You Yangs* was wrecked off Cape Willoughby in 1890. Luckett served as an Able Bodied Seaman on the *Protector* and bizarrely found himself a sergeant in 5SAIB only days after the gunboat docked at the Port in January. He was promoted to sergeant-major in South Africa. In 1914, 43 years old, he went off to another war.

Thomas Malloney, 28, had served in the Naval Reserve for 12 years when he volunteered for the 3rd South Australian Bushmen in January 1900. He claimed to be a good horseman and a good shot but did not make the final cut. In August he sailed for China as a petty officer but did make it to South Africa with 5SAIB on return. His service there seems to have been uneventful.

Further Reading:

Australia and the Boer War, 1899–1902, AWM, available at <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/boer/>



The Australian Boer War Memorial, Anzac Parade, Canberra, NHSA image