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# Nordic Volunteers in the Anglo-Boer War

*By Alfred F. Kugel*

## Historical Background

Europeans first inhabited South Africa in 1652 when the Dutch East India Company sent out a ship to establish a supply depot to service its trading vessels passing the Cape of Good Hope. Some of these Dutch personnel became farmers and gradually expanded into the hinterlands to the north and east. In 1806 during the Napoleonic Wars, Holland was allied with the French, and the area was invaded and annexed by Great Britain.

Later, as more British settlers arrived and conflicts ensued, many of the Boers (whose name means “farmers” in Dutch) went on the “Great Trek” further inland in 1838, founding two new independent entities – the Orange Free State and Transvaal Republic. The British later moved to annex the Transvaal in 1877, but the settlers managed to achieve a limited independence by defeating local Imperial forces in what is sometimes called the First Anglo-Boer War of 1880-1881.

However, near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, major fighting broke out between the British and the descendants of the original settlers. The stakes were high, involving not only land, but diamonds and gold, which had been discovered in the area. In addition, there were the issues of imperial prestige for the British and the desire on the part of the Boers to retain their political independence. (See Figure 1 for a map of the war theater.)

## The Progress of the War

Once war became inevitable, the Boers realized that any chance for victory (by which they sought a British guarantee of their sovereignty) depended on early and deep strikes into the nearby Cape and Natal Provinces before large-scale reinforcements could arrive by sea from Great Britain and elsewhere. Unfortunately, the Boers were not well organized and most of their units operated as semi-independent “commandos” ranging in size from 500 to 2,000 men, generally with each having its own equipment and officers. In addition, the high commands of the Transvaal and Orange Free State were largely uncoordinated. Thus, considerable time was lost while strategy was decided and implemented.

At the beginning of hostilities on October 11, 1899, the forces that could be mobilized in the Boer republics substantially outnumbered the British troops stationed in South Africa. One theory behind the plan for quick invasions of Cape of Good Hope and Natal Provinces was that they would encourage the Afrikaners living in those areas to rise up in revolt, thus discouraging the British from continuing the war. This plan was frustrated by two primary factors: the stubbornness of the British resistance and the lack of organization of their own forces.



Figure 1. French postcard showing the war theater with portraits of President Krüger and General Joubert of the Transvaal.



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In due course, British strength increased substantially as troopships arrived from the home islands and India, as well as Imperial troops coming mostly from the Australian colonies, Canada, and New Zealand. The British forces then broke the Boer sieges of Kimberley, Ladysmith, and Mafeking and mounted a successful invasion of the Boer republics, capturing the respective capitals of Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State on March 13, 1900 and Pretoria in the Transvaal on June 5.

Once the railroads and major towns were in British hands, the fighting took on a different complexion, with the Boers adopting a type of hit-and-run guerilla warfare. In response, the British created concentration camps, forcing Boer women and children off the farms (which they then burned) and into detention areas so that they could no longer provide support to the men in the field. In time, the Boers were simply worn down and forced to agree to a peace agreement finally signed at Vereeniging on May 31, 1902.

## The Foreign Volunteers

Although a number of foreign countries were sympathetic to the Boer cause and others simply would have liked to see the British get a “bloody nose,” none gave official support to the Orange Free State and Transvaal. However, a substantial number of volunteers, especially from Northern and Western Europe, went to South Africa privately to support the Boers. Although there are no official records of exactly how many such men fought in the campaign, it is estimated that there were approximately 2,675 volunteers, mostly Dutch, German, and French. The Scandinavian contribution is estimated at 150 men.

## The Philatelic Aspects

Mail from the volunteers becomes available from time to time on the philatelic market. However, a substantial portion of what one sees consists of covers sent to or by the men from The Netherlands. Considering how few Scandinavians were involved, it is easy to understand why examples of their mail are scarce. In addition, much of that which is available is inbound letters to the POW camps after men were taken prisoner by the British, when they were no longer moving about the countryside and had more time to engage in correspondence with friends and relatives.

As a measure of how limited the supply of philatelic material from the volunteers really is, it can be noted that in four auctions involving significant collections of Anglo-Boer War material in England during the past 15 years, fewer than a dozen pieces related to the Scandinavian volunteers were offered.



Figure 2. OFS postal card sent by a Danish volunteer in the artillery.

The earliest item that I have is a postal card sent by a Danish volunteer from Brandfort Lager in the Orange Free State on March 28, 1900 during the retreat of the Boers after the British captured Bloemfontein. Sent by Lt. Valdemar Andersen of the OFS Artillery to his father in Storehedinge, Denmark, it was received a month and a half later after traveling via Johannesburg in the Transvaal and Delagoa Bay in Portuguese East Africa. (Figure 2.)

As it turned out, Lieutenant Anderson was captured and ended up in the Diyatalawa POW camp in Ceylon. Figure 3 is a registered cover sent to him from Copenhagen on September 17, 1900,

apparently by his wife. It traveled via Brindisi, Italy and Colombo, arriving at the camp on October 9, where it was censored by the British authorities.

Figure 4 is unusual in that it bears the cachet of the office of the “Central Committee of the Scandinavian Organization” at the National Hotel in Pretoria. It was sent on April 19, 1900 to POW J. Fries, Veldcornet of the Scandinavian Corps, who was a POW at Greenpoint near Capetown. This cachet





Figure 3. Inbound cover to Danish POW in Ceylon.



Figure 5. Cover from occupied Transvaal to Danish POW on St. Helena.

Figure 4. Cover from Johannesburg to Scandinavian POW at Greenpoint.



Figure 7. Inbound cover to Swedish POW on St. Helena.

Figure 6. Inbound postal card to Swedish POW on St. Helena.



Figure 8. Outbound postal card from Finnish POW on St. Helena.



is the only such example seen by the author. The cover also bears a circular censor marking in violet and a pink censor tape inscribed "V.R. Opened under Martial Law."

Some of the POWs were sent to St. Helena. Figure 5 shows a cover sent from British-occupied Johannesburg on May 31, 1901 to Victor Schadtler, a Danish member of the Scandinavian volunteers. It has the violet circular censor marking.

The Swedes were also among the POWs as attested by an inbound postal card sent from Bollnäs, Sweden, on October 22, 1901 to Carl Mellquist at Deadwood Camp, St. Helena. The postage is canceled on a TPO and traveled from Sweden to Germany on the Trelleborg-Sassnitz ferry. No arrival marking was applied but the card was censored at Deadwood Camp. (Figure 6.)



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A second Swedish example is a registered letter sent on December 17, 1901 from Stockholm to Baron Oscar Cederström at Briars Camp on St. Helena. It was received there on January 7, 1902 and bears the triangular censor marking of Deadwood Camp. (Figure 7.)

The most exotic of the examples shown here is a St. Helena postal card sent by a POW at Deadwood Camp, St. Helena on October 17, 1901 to Vasa, Finland. (Figure 8.) Ernst Ewart Lindburg was one of only 22 known Finns who served as volunteers in South Africa. He was one of 10 people serving with the Scandinavian Ambulance when he was wounded and captured by the British at the Battle of Paardeberg on February 27, 1900. ■

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