

THE VMR IN SOUTH AFRICA 1899-1902

War between Britain and the Boer Republics of Orange Free State and Transvaal broke out in October 1899. By the time peace was finally restored in May 1902, more than 16,000 Australian volunteers had served in South Africa.

Victoria sent five contingents to the war. The backbone of these contingents was drawn from serving members of the VMR. Departure dates for the contingents were:

First Contingent	28 Oct 1899
Second Contingent	13 Jan 1900
Third Contingent	10 Mar 1900
Fourth Contingent	1 May 1900
Fifth Contingent	15 Feb 1901

The first year of the war was one of conventional action between opposing armies. Initially the British were forced onto the defensive with Australian mounted troops engaged in rearguard actions to cover the withdrawal of the infantry. By Feb 1900, however, the British forces had recovered the initiative and were advancing into Boer territory. The Australians began energetic patrolling often fighting pitched battles with Boer forces.

Some Victorians transferred to the Provisional Mounted Police Force, formed to administer captured Boer territory. One of these was Sgt James Rogers (VMR) who won a VC in June 1901.

By September 1900, the Boer capital, Pretoria, had been captured, and organised resistance had virtually ceased. Many Boers, however, refused to accept defeat, so guerilla warfare continued for a further 18 months.

As with all guerilla campaigns, the situation in which the Fifth Contingent, VMR, found itself was a difficult and unpleasant one. Lines of blockhouses, burned farms and crops, civilians driven into concentration camps, and surprise attacks by roving Boer bands characterised this phase of the war.

The good reputation of the VMR was badly damaged in June, when an outpost at Wilmsrust manned by Victorians was surprised and overrun. Casualties were heavy and arms and supplies were lost. The Victorians considered they were poorly led, and unfairly criticised. They threatened mutiny and three men were court-martialled and sentenced to death. The Victorian government intervened to have the sentences commuted to imprisonment.

Lieutenant Leslie Magyar's VC at Geelhoutboom in November 1901 did much to restore the reputation and morale of the VMR.

A King's Banner was awarded to the VMR in 1904 in recognition of its service in South Africa.