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TITLE: Springboks at the Somme: The Making of Delville Wood, 1916

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SPRINGBOKS AT THE SOMME: THE MAKING OF DELVILLE WOOD, 1916

In late-June 1916, Private James Ross of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade's 4th Regiment, South African Scottish, added a postscript to a letter despatched home to Cape Town from Sailly le Sec in the Picardy countryside. His mind and spirit instinctively forfeit to the green and tawny fields of northern France, 'surely the neatest part of the globe', he wrote to his parents, 'what impresses me most here is the colour ... the red of the poppies is breathtaking, and truly indescribable.'[1] At this distance, Ross's observation seems almost a moment of providential suspension; until present and future merged, he seemed blithely unaware that the grassy realm around him was a poisoned pastoral.

Near Corbie, further along the British Fourth Army's line, a resting fellow soldier, John Kilgour Parker, enjoyed a brisk sluicing in the Somme before idling away the 25th June, admiring the pipe bands of the 9th Division Black Watch or taking himself off to the sinewy challenge of tossing the caber against men of the 3rd Transvaal and Rhodesia Regiment. Aware of the incongruity of his tranquil reserve situation as the war closed in upon the recently-arrived South African contingent, Kilgour Parker was made edgy by the interminable din of the massive British artillery bombardment of German defences, reflecting, 'so much for this comic fireworks war. I suppose that if we took things seriously, our nerves would probably go in a month'.[2] Yet things were very soon to be taken seriously, and men like Ross and Kilgour Parker would then find themselves advancing to the very border of their human sanity. For not far ahead lay the terrifying resolution of the Somme offensive, and in particular the perforating shock of Delville Wood for South African forces.

In terms of the Union of South Africa's imperial war commitment, it was natural that a volunteer Infantry Brigade should find itself in the Somme sector of the Western Front, there to add to the concentration of British forces for July 1916 offensive operations. 'Let us do our duty according to our best lights ... Botha and I are not the men to desert England at this dark hour,' Jan Smuts had signalled to Arthur Gillett as early as September 1914.[3] By this he meant rescuing South Africans to be at Britain's side not just in East or South West Africa, but everywhere, thereby consolidating Dominion statehood. By mid-1915, for Smuts, Louis Botha and others in Pretoria's military command, there were no longer any serious doubts about the resilience of South Africa's own wartime position and its capacity to spare troops for overseas service: the spluttering 1914-1915 republican Afrikaner rebellion had been snuffed out, and the rapid conquest of German South West Africa had landed the Union a territory larger than Germany itself, for pretty trifling battlefield losses. So, by July 1915, South Africa could comfortably raise white soldiers for the European front, its offer of trained and skilled troops readily accepted by Imperial authorities. And, while the 1st Infantry Brigade may have been the smallest[4] of the Dominion contingents despatched to France, in the Union's

pro-war English press this was sometimes seen as merely underlining the selectively compact virility and pleasingly well-bred manliness of South Africa's fighting contribution.[5]

Furthermore, for the fit and well-educated white social elite which made up the lion's share of the 1st Brigade, to be on the Western Front was the ideal imagined form of valiant armed expedition abroad - to work and to war where the military contest <u>really</u> mattered, amidst the soldier-knight aura of an embattled European habitat. Some, like Sergeant James Herbert Quinn, even saw themselves as returning emissaries of the nineteenth century colonial 'civilising mission', their honourable destiny to purge Europe of a repellent German barbarity. 'In the old days,' crowed Quinn, 'people set out for Darkest Africa to civilise the country. Well, it is high time somebody from South Africa set out here to civilise Prussia's Darkest Europe.'[6]

Individual experience in prior post-1914 theatres of war seems to have greatly reinforced the inclination to view 1916 arrival at the Western Front, 'at last, further afield', as an engagement with 'nobler work'.[7] The disarming ease of the German South West Africa invasion had made combat undertakings there seem ephemeral, almost a tatty, sub-colonial interruption to proper high calibre soldiering. For those officers from Johannesburg's King Edward VII School given to playing veldt aphorisms, in 'German South West' they 'had done their bit', but 'team spirit awaited greater challenges than awful African sand'.[8] Being 'shot in the German West African campaign' was, as Private E.G. Kensit explained, 'a very slight irritation', but once fully recovered he was 'looking forward to the time' when he would be 'fighting properly in the trenches of Europe'.[9] Commentators in Britain also pursued this theme. Thus, the Royal Colonial Institute's <u>United Empire</u> observed with satisfaction that South Africa's patriots could now at last anticipate a momentous and regenerating 'clean fight', on 'the battle-fields of Europe'.[10]

Evidence is equally clear that early 1916 service for the South African Brigade in Egypt, and light engagements with Turkish forces in the Western Desert, was not exactly considered to be the stuff of Arabian military epic: what loomed largest was the wearing experience of flies, filth, illimitable sand, and regular outbursts of racist spleen against 'the Gyppo'[11] or 'vile', 'low' or 'foul' Turkish opponents.[12] Surveying this mediocre war, the South African infantryman had little cause to doubt that he remained master of his own superior breeding and survival.

After this thin combat time, the South African Brigade's arrival from Alexandria in Marseilles in April provided a positively exhilarating moment. During a short period of rest and reserve outside Marseilles, the South Africans' favourite white schoolboy indulgence in clowning about and blackening up as Africans, through the imaginative investment of a mock 'Zulu warrior' posture, was reported to have made them 'the talk of Paris'.[13] The 'Springboks' of Brigadier-General Henry Timson Lukin's settler <u>impi</u> quickly

earned a reputation, according to the Natal Witness, for fabricating fearsome 'Zulu war cries ... the first time ever in France such a frighteningly barbaric noise was heard.'[14] Conspicuously kilted South African Scots or 'Jocks' were also given to toasting themselves as 'Scotland for Ever' or as 'bonnie Highland lads' in 'Zulu Gaelic', 'Basuto Gaelic' or 'Matabele Gaelic' (apparently rendered as *'Ena palili, Zomkie palili mangie'*).[15] The 'Zulu Springbok' image perhaps offered South African soldiers a picturesque public identity in France, distinguishing their bearing from the demeanour of other Dominion and British combatants. At the same time, it was also an unlikely emblem of a mongrel white South Africanness, one part fictive Celtic warrior, another, strong and graceful buck, and a third, axiomatic soldierly Zulu-worship. There is more than a little irony in the wry conclusion of one Overseas Contingent Private that three-quarters of the French and Belgian civilians encountered 'thought South Africans should be black men anyway'.[16] The apparent tumult of *le* Zulu *blanc* seems also to have touched the ears of the British senior officer corps, not least those worthies who had served in the South African War. Around Easter, Henry Rawlinson, Herbert Plumer and Douglas Haig undertook courtesy inspections, the last especially remembered by Private Ernest Solomon for his kindly face and reassuring manner.[17]

Many elements, other than a fondness for boorish racial parody, contributed to the distinctive soldiering character of the 1st South African Infantry. Some of these, such as Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic race pride, Empire loyalist fervour, and popular militarism, were present generally in the ranks of British and Dominion troops, as has been so suggestively shown by J.G. Fuller.[18] But other consolidating traits had a more inward Union pedigree. An all-volunteer body, the 5 800-strong Brigade's four battalions were thoroughly 'nationalised', not merely through considerable cross-drafting, but through the intermingling 'Jocks' influence of shared associational ties to the Transvaal Scottish, Cape Town Highlanders, and the Union's tartan rash of urban and rural Caledonian societies. Linguistically, the contingent was overwhelmingly English or bilingual Anglo-Afrikaner; the proportional enrolment of actual Dutch-Afrikaans speakers was no more than around ten to fifteen percent. Birthplace provided another bedrock of identity. Just over half of these combatants were 'British-born', fitting together with a 'colonial-born' balance of Robbs, Rawbones and Reids as neatly as the two halves of a tally of empire loyalism.

Furthermore, the South African contingent was remarkably homogenous in its breezy middle class configuration, with very many of its recruits the patrician products of a well-endowed college ethos schooling, fused together by mainly Anglican and Presbyterian Christianity, well-connected family ties, kinship, shared social codes, and the boozy milieu of the rugby-dinner chorus.[19] In the inimitable words of the awestruck John Buchan, official historian of the South African Brigade, its 'level of education and breeding was singularly high'.[20] This recognition of its wartime class character has been echoed recently by Peter

Digby, who concludes that the men who opted for service in France were 'of a particularly fine type ... businessmen, civil servants, academics, students, ...'.[21]

Finally, in addition to sports-driven physical rigour, springy morale and white collar comradeship, the 1st South African Infantry was a weighty depository of previous military experience. Some eighty percent of its recruits recorded military training or some form of pre-war armed service.[22] Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise. In white farming areas of the Eastern Cape and Natal, for example, the array of shooting clubs, militia corps and rifle associations helped foster gun proficiency. Equally, every recruit who had been schooled between the turn of the century and the formation of the Overseas Contingent in 1915 would invariably have had musketry training, commando field exercises, first-aid and drill as a member of their School Cadet Detachment. And, unlike many School Corps of British public schools which, according to Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy had 'little or no direct or serious connection with the army'[23] before the immediate pre-1914 crisis years, pupils in South Africa's leading boys' schools had an established familiarity with regular, mobile, colonial soldiering. Selborne Cadets, for instance, had been an active component of the Kaffrarian Rifles since the mid-1880s; similarly, Maritzburg College Cadet Detachment had been affiliated to the Royal Natal Carbineers since the early 1870s.[24] Other active service experience spanned the South African War and naturally the German South West Africa commando operation, in which sixty percent[25] of the Brigade's enrolment was involved. A number of older and higher-ranking volunteers were also veterans of late-nineteenth century Zululand, Bechuanaland, and Matabeleland wars of colonial pacification. The most prominent of these was the Brigade Commander himself, Brigadier-General Henry Timson Lukin, whose shift from dispersing lightly-armed peasants to mutually advanced industrial slaughter, was to be chronicled adoringly in his posthumous 1926 biography, Ulundi to Delville Wood.[26] On top of all this, the entire 1st South African Infantry had obviously been immersed very recently in North African combat which involved prolonged marching, frontal rushes at the enemy, and securing extended lines of desert communication.

Apart from the command certainties of inter-regimental integration, disciplined self-reliance, and that enigmatic 'quality of initiative which distinguished Scots and Dominion troops alike',[27] how much of this military credit was to be directly helpful to Lukin's contingent in the execution of its offensive role on the Somme? Not much. While African combat requirements enabled Union infantry to get their teeth into highly mobile warfare across open country, a 'war of movement' lubricated by individual initiative and enterprise, the fortified stalemate of mid-1916 trench warfare provided industrial conditions 'totally alien to their mode of fighting'.[28]

What emerges quite clearly is that while educated South African volunteer infantry understood in the most general sense that the Western Front would be a more 'real', a

'greater', 'tough' or 'stiff'[29] sort of war, their knowledge of the grisly realities of European mass warfare was very limited, and their conceptions of combat persistently that of brave individual endeavour and a favourable outcome. Within South Africa, the costs of the First Battle of Ypres, and Verdun, had not been chilling news stories. A further consideration is that prior to the Somme campaign, there seems to have been relatively little European battlefield news sent home by Union soldiers. What there was, mostly from a peppering of officers drafted into British regiments in 1914-1915, was well characterised by a Coldstream Guards Lieutenant, W.B. St Leger, who in late-1915 concentrated brightly on the way in which the 'great reputation', 'good name' and 'conduct in action' of South African troops was 'appreciated by the Imperial soldiers, who were proud to have them as comrades in the continuing great fight'.[30] Another officer, Lieutenant E.H. Smith of the Royal Scots Fusiliers reported from Flanders, 'as yet I've had no feeling of fear, in fact I rather like the business as it is novel, but in spite of that everything seems prosaic and ordinary ... I've only seen one casualty or two and the effects of shell fire on inanimate objects ... every day I continue to ask if there really is a war on.'[31] And where that casualty, at Ypres perhaps, or Neuve Chapelle, happened to be a South African soldier, in all these amounted to few. And whether in Cape Town or Johannesburg, the response to such deaths was fairly muted and confined to kin, friends, neighbourhood, church and school. Before the Somme, South Africans were yet to die nationally in the war, in any outwardly expressive sense.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the minds of Infantry Brigade soldiers contained scant anticipation of a war of death, dismemberment, and suffering through their initial April, May and June months on the Western Front. In any event, the enemy remained mostly invisible. In this brooding atmosphere, regimental officers and privates alike continued to plot the fields of Edwardian cliché, their ludicrous language of sporting encounter a reflection of the driving force through which the First Under Eighteen of Durban or Kimberley imagined their rush into combat with Pan-German marauders. Letters home were liberally littered with typical references to the 'sphere of unselfishness' or 'soldierly charity'[32] of Britain's Ally, and to the moral courage stimulated by participation in physically testing games.

In their conception of a coming Somme offensive as a boisterous 'scrap' or 'scraps' with the enemy, or a 'clobbering of' or 'clear run'[33] against the Germans, the sons of the Anglo-South African gentry seemed to mirror the 'schoolboy fight' idiom and sense of the individualised, psychological battlefield, still held by British General Staff in 1915-16, and explored so suggestively by Tim Travers.[34] While these imagined Dominion masculinities provided a pervasive outlook, it is also important to note that this was punctuated occasionally during Western Front training by more wry or sardonic attitudes towards war. For instance, Sergeant D.H. Kotze of the 3rd Battalion mused:

> So here I am, six thousand miles away in company of a few thousand other misguided youths...we spend our days in the pursuit of military wisdom, and our nights in the pursuit of sleep...now we South Africans are in hard training for the Great Advance. A bombing officer will tell us that bombs are the heaven-sent means of sending Germans to the other place, and the only possible things to win the war with. But a musketry officer says the same thing...finally a gallant Captain of the Bedfords who returned from Ypres minus an elbow and plus a military cross puts his money on artillery tactics. So altogether, we dear old Africa boys get rather mixed up.[35]

For May and June, the Brigade scraped along in such a way, doing fatigues, carrying munitions and other equipment, receiving instruction in bombing, signalling, bayonet combat and the use of Lewis guns, in addition to complete regiments bolting through mock attacks. The onset of front line duties and alternating close relief support soon brushed aside fancies about trench warfare as epiphany with the civilising culture of European battlefields.

In fact, soldiers' recollections of time in trench working parties are full of bored contempt for punishing drudgery. They add a South African streak to an already familiar Western Front picture of resentful men feeling that they were having to scrabble about like rabbit-warren primitives, 'living', to quote from Eric Leed's argument, 'a precivilized life that had little in common with any industrialized, technological environment'.[36] But South African grumbling over trench line assignments also had a particularly contagious form of colonial social expression. Jolted by a Western Front work burden that did not entirely square with expectations, infantrymen nursed a sense of being declassed or socially degraded by heavy manual work, asserting their indignation at having to do 'Native work', or to 'slave like *zwaartes*' (blacks). As Private Norman Kernick wrote of trench work at Maricourt, 'we had to work like kaffirs to get things into fighting trim and the fellows considered this no joke'. For another man, Britain's XIII Corps had need of appropriate education, 'it looks as if the British Army should spend a few days in *Durban or Johannesburg to learn about garden boys*'.[37]

Still somewhat peevish about the full reward of labour in northern France, a fully assembled 1st Brigade was mobilised to take up position near Bray-sur-Somme on 30 June. Private Joseph Samuels (Rand Rifles), possibly the last living survivor of the Battle of Delville Wood, recalls men being perplexed at being told to march into the vicinity of British trenches, 'but then we were instructed to camp out in the open veldt and to keep on our battle kit. They didn't give us any blankets ... we didn't know what was going on, being stuck out there in the open. Of course, the next day, we could see damn quickly what was going on.'[38] At the start of the Battle of the Somme, Lukin's Brigade was attached to the densely Scottish 9th Division, which in turn formed part of General Sir Walter Congreve's XIII Corps

under General Sir Henry Rawlinson's Fourth Army Command. The South Africans had been drafted in to replace the 28th Brigade which had been badly battered in the 1915 Battle of Loos.

Although there was admiration of South African morale and discipline amongst Highlander battalions, colonial 'Jocks' and Scots did not exactly jump into bed together,contrary to South African press reports. Men of the Seaforth, Cameron, or Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were troubled by the loss of a valued Brigade, 'friends being taken away', and wary 'of strangers coming in'.[39] Kilted South Africans who felt 'a true brotherhood' with the Black Watch or Royal Scots instead sensed 'bitterness' and 'anger' at their 'being placed in their Division'. Full of 'Scottish pride', commented one Cape Town Highlander, 'they would hardly speak to any of us'.[40] In part, this probably reflected some rooted class realities. Unlike the tough-minded egalitarian affinities between 'men from the crofts and sheep stations' which may have helped to cultivate 'a similarity between Scots and Australians',[41] there would have been little kindred structure to integrate working class Scots with the South African Brigade's concentration of middle class colonial 'Jocks', for whom 'Scottishness' was a fondness for a tweed and tartan African self-image. This was certainly the drift of things at first, until appreciation of South African courage and endurance of suffering and bloodshed on the Somme led to a generalised respect for the 1st Brigade from its 9th Division counterparts.

But that would come later. On the disastrous first day of Britain's Somme offensive, Lukin's Springboks waited in reserve in the southernmost sector (or extreme right) of the British line, where Congreve's XIII Corps achieved the most successful of all Fourth Army advances, taking the German front line before midday. Rawlinson did not, however, push on beyond captured ground, in part because the major campaign objectives lay in the stalled centre of the front rather than on the right, and partly because the tactical conception of the whole Somme offensive lay in the execution of an incremental advance, through the 'bite and hold' notion of simply capturing enemy front line trenches, and then consolidating to beat off counter-attacks.[42] It would be difficult to find a more perfect instance of an infanty offensive based on loitering with intent. Rawlinson's failure to exploit Congreve's successful penetration of 1 July allowed the Germans to reinforce their shaky sector.

With the Fourth Army's commander 'concerned about enemy counter-attacks driving his army from captured strong points',[43] the reserve South African contingent moved forward on 3 July to stiffen front line positions and in particular to secure the captured Bernafay Wood. This battle area was being heavily shelled by artillery located on the German second line, on the rising ground of the Longueval-Bazentin le Petit ridge. For ten days, Brigade infantry held Bernafay under constant shelling before being relieved by other 9th Division forces. By then, the 'Boys of Africa' had discovered that war on the Somme would not be, to quote one of their number, 'a Big Push to bag some

Germans ... This was not going to be the clean job we had expected. Fritz put out curtain fire, and we realised this was war'.[44] Since 1 July the Brigade had suffered almost 1 000 casualties across all ranks, mainly by bombardment. Its Anglican chaplain, perceiving cases of shell shock and worried about maintaining direct command with the loss of numerous NCOs and officers, issued extra chocolate rations to fortify men against breakdown.

While this grinding ordeal unfolded, British battle calculations took a turn which was to have shattering consequences for the 9th Division South Africans by mid-July. Following the disaster of almost 60 000 British casualties on the first day of battle, the need to recover and press on meant that the 'only question facing the command was where to resume the Somme offensive'.[45] In deciding this, it was Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig who in a sense personally delivered the South African Brigade into the history of the Great War and the making of a white Dominion nationhood. Brushing aside the inclinations of Rawlinson and also those of Joseph Joffre, the French Commander-in-Chief, for a renewed thrust in the centre of the front, Haig pressed for an attack in the south where, for the XIII Corps, 'success had been gained'.[46]

Rawlinson framed an offensive on the right against the German second line, an attack which would strike at Longueval village and Delville Wood. Haig's precondition of clearing away flanking enemy footholds dictated the first step, the rolling up of Bernafay, Trônes and Mametz Woods which were south of, and below, Delville Wood. Following repeated scrappy attacks by tired troops who sustained heavy losses, by 13 July Mametz Wood on the left and Trônes Wood on the right were under partial and precarious British control. At this point, Rawlinson felt able to commence a dawn 14 July offensive against the German second line, bearing upon four miles of front just south of Pozières to Longueval and Delville Wood. Brigades of the 9th Division were to seize the village and then overrun Delville Wood.

'To the SA Brigade', writes Peter Digby, 'all this was a mere continuation of the Somme offensive'.[47] Down in the lower ranks, Joseph Samuels remembers, 'standing around in the dark, none of us knowing where we were, or where we would be going'[48]: world of the seen, world of the unseen. Soldiers who had seen Trônes and Bernafay Woods shredded by German artillery were now perturbed by a distinct sense of uncertainty about their survival prospects. Yet no-one could have known quite how short were the odds against cheating death or wounding.

Because of its still limited experience of trench warfare, the South African Brigade did not participate in the first rush on Longueval; instead, its troops were 9th Division reserve, primed to mop up after the German line had been breached. But Longueval proved an unexpectedly tough nut to crack. The German Commander-in-Chief, General Erich von Falkenhayn, had made no retreat an end in itself, declaring, 'nur über leichen darf der feind seinen weg vorwarts finden!' (the enemy shall not advance except over corpses).

The ferocity of German defences both delayed the planned advance on Delville Wood, and inflicted severe casualties on attacking Highlanders. Scrambling to regain momentum, Division Command was obliged to deploy a battalion of its South African reserve to reinforce its flagging offensive. With Longueval sufficiently entrenched in British hands by nightfall on the 14th, three of the four battalions of the 1st Infantry were ordered to capture Delville Wood 'at all costs',[49] at dawn on 15 July, and then to consolidate and widen the breach in the enemy area.

Delville Wood turned out to be as formidable an objective as anything in the history of the Somme campaign. As Buchan rightly recorded, the immediate battlefield environs of 'the wood of Delville' presented 'an intricate problem'. Chalky soil, thick with knotted roots and laced with branches, was less than ideal for quick entrenchment. 'The Germans knew every inch of that ground', reported Lance-Corporal Ronald Rawbone, 'they knocked the trenches to pieces'.[50] A rattled Henry Veale observed 'going through woods where every tree seemed to hold a sniper'.[51] Moreover, 'like most French woods', Delville was expansively 'seamed with grassy rides, partly obscured by scrub, and the Germans had dug lines of trenches along and athwart them'.[52] To add to the dauntingly raised terrain confronting advancing troops, Delville Wood was also roughly triangular in shape, enabling its occupying 10th Bavarian Division Germans to direct artillery, enfilade machine gun and rifle fire on to any attacking force from three sides.

For some hours, the South African Brigade achieved fairly rapid penetration, joined by Seaforth and Gordon Highlanders to form a groping Gaelic vanguard which had dubbed the Delville Wood rides in which it entrenched, Princes, Buchanan, Bond, Strand and Regent Street, and Rotten Row. Here, a Union infantry prong secured both the ground and a shared metropolitan identity. With swirling roots and thick bracken hampering the digging of trenches, many men took over trenches and dugouts from which Germans had withdrawn. These were not destined to provide for their keep. Their precise locations were known to German artillery direction.

At first, resisting Germans continued to fall back across successively bloodied trench lines, and then dug in in a northwest corner. But their sector commander, General Sixt von Arnim, was utterly determined to recapture lost territory, also 'at all costs'.[53] He launched a wave of battalion-strength counter-attacks, preceded by massive artillery bombardments commencing on 16 July, which incurred a harrowing toll of South African casualties. Most terrifying, all battle records agree, was the relentless shelling from three sides, the 'hurricane of shells that swept Delville Wood', in the words of Major John Ewing, official historian of the 9th Division.[54]

'The wood', wrote Private Victor Casson of the Brigade's 1st Battalion, 'was subjected to a rain of shell fire, the whole wood appeared to be hit by an earthquake. The wood heaved and shook, blowing up trees and men. Mutilated bodies lay everywhere. The dying and the maimed were calling out for

water and help - but there was none to be had. It rained hell-fire and steel'.[55] To Trooper Gerald Dicey, 'every shell buried fellows, dead and dying. The Boche made the woods resemble a ploughed funeral field.'[56] German estimates reveal that through one night of sustained artillery attack, that of 17 July, over 20,000 shells rained down on the area of Delville Wood then held by the prostrate Brigade, a withering square patch of approximately 1,000 by 1,200 square yards. At times, their near unceasing descent reached the rate of 400 per minute.[57] Those who had thought to find the Western Front a soul-stirring trial of South African 'manhood' instead discovered it to be more like an antechamber of hell.

In the shuddering landscape of the Somme, shelling in the battle of 'Devil's Wood' or 'Nightmare Wood' (as it quickly came to be called by both British and German sides) undoubtedly represented a frightful pinnacle, 'the bloodiest', to quote Basil Liddell Hart, 'battle-hell of 1916'.[58] On 18 July, the pulverising 186-gun German bombardment ceased, and nine Bavarian battalions vaulted out of their trenches and stormed into the southwest corner of the now incandescent wood, expecting to brush aside any lingering resistance to their regaining a hold on Delville. Instead, they ran into the barely-coordinated remnants of a concussed Brigade which, amidst carnage said later by British medical officers 'to be the worst that they had ever experienced',[59] were nevertheless in no mood to be dislodged from beleaguered positions. A series of ferociously-fought encounters, which often saw rifles jettisoned for bayonets, witnessed wave upon wave of attacking Germans repulsed. Preceded by German shell, mortar, gas, machine gun and rifle fire, the frenzied close combat of these stages of the Delville Wood battle, with individual soldiers and isolated groups of disorientated South Africans and Germans falling savagely upon one another, was termed, with understandable hyperbole, 'indescribable' madness and total chaos by the historian of the German 52nd Infantry, and judged 'extremely terrible' in the official German history of the Delville Wood battle.[60] The perception of Delville Wood madness or wildness in German chronicles lay in the sheer horrendousness of free-for-all conditions with mounting casualties of both sides lying unprotected and untended, as fighting men at the outer limits of human endurance hacked at one another with bayonets or clubbed away with rifle butts. With a complete breakdown in some areas of observation postings, signals, and telephone or runner (these picked off by sniper) communications, Brigade storming parties on the southern and eastern perimeters of the wood were rattled by their inability to obtain firm identification of advancing troops. While 'much troubled as to who were we fighting, possibly French rather than Huns',[61] some platoons let fly at any groups of soldiers prowling the edge of the woodland, 'waiting was just a risk, in our situation then it was kill or die'.[62] 'The wood', reported one German officer who on 18 July found the site a hot and clammy slaughter house, 'was a wasteland of shattered trees, charred and burning stumps, craters thick with mud and blood, and corpses, corpses, corpses, everywhere. In places they were piled four deep. Worst of

all was the lowing of the wounded. It sounded like a cattle ring at the spring fair'.[63]

Eventually, surviving South African infantry regrouped under Lieutenant-Colonel E.F. Thackeray, commanding officer of the 3rd Regiment, and established defensive works near the centre of the wood, across the intersection of the Buchanan Street and Rotten Row rides. There, through 19 and 20 July, what was left of the tattered Brigade fought on desperately to deny assaulting German infantry possession of the wood, with Thackeray's rising trench losses added to by dismayingly inaccurate British counter-artillery barrage. As shells from their own lines now hit South African positions, suffocating the wounded with soil, and dismembering or burying huddled men, an increasingly distraught Thackeray despatched that his casualties were 'becoming beyond endurance ...I cannot evacuate my critically wounded or bury my dead on account of snipers .. so far the SAI have held on but I feel the strain is becoming too much'.[64] Those few Company lieutenants still in the saddle on the edges of Thackeray's strong point repeatedly declared their positions 'impossible' or 'untenable', worried by gaps in their front, thin lines of men collapsing from exhaustion, and tormented by the lack of stretchers and field dressings for the wounded, 'all used up ... they are dying for want of treatment'.[65] Lance-Corporal Rowland Key, coming upon a blown-in dressing station, caught these hours of haphazard slaughter, the post 'set on fire, several poor, badly-wounded fellows were burning to death ... such carnage, enough to turn anybody's brain'.[66]

By now, British reinforcements were at last ready to assemble and relieve the haggard South African force. In the evening of 20 July, after six days and five nights of crucifying combat, reinforcing infantry (Suffolks and Norfolks, with Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and other Scottish battalions) arrived to take over the embattled Brigade position and to pipe the 'heroic survivors of the South African Brigade'[67] from the Delville Wood wasteland and out through Longueval. This withdrawal did not mean that South African infantry had been knocked out of the Somme campaign; a reconstituted Brigade fought on, elsewhere. It took a further six weeks of grinding British effort to clear and secure the whole of 'Devil's Wood'.

In the overall movement of the Delville Wood battle, as Peter Liddle has concluded, 'between July and 3 September, South African units, above all, were involved in the progressive capture, consolidation, and retention of Delville Wood'.[68] And in this view, all other British military histories of the Somme are equally clear that Delville Wood was done in South Africa's name, through an unprecedented discharge of courage, sacrifice, and endurance which left both allies and adversaries in awe.[69] Here, and beyond, suggests Trevor Wilson in his magisterial The Myriad Faces of War, the 'contribution to the ensuing phases of the Somme campaign' of South Africa's colonial force 'would become legendary'.[70]

Judgement of the actual British tactical effectiveness of the Delville Wood engagement is more mixed. For Digby and Uys, the 1st Brigade's taking and holding of large parts of the forest represented a momentous consolidated breakthrough, ensuring that the 'second stage of the Somme offensive in this section of the front was secure'.[71] In a more modest overall appraisal of the Somme campaign, Wilson would see the Delville Wood achievement as one episode in a plodding, 'bit by bit' British advance - an army bleeding profusely, but pressing inexorably upwards.[72] Travers, on the other hand, is all astringent scepticism. Not only were continuing late-July attacks on Delville Wood horribly botched because of inadequate General Headquarters and Fourth Army planning; their costly consequences were rendered all the more bleak by prior 'general complaint that there was no point in taking Longueval and Delville Wood at this time because they were overlooked by enemy-held higher ground' (High Wood) and would in any event only create a vulnerable salient. 'Indeed', argues Travers, if Delville Wood continued to be contested through August, this was 'mainly it would seem, to straighten out the line'.[73]

Whatever the military interpretation, the human cost of the Delville Wood action was immense. Brigade strength at entry on 15 July had stood at 3,153 men - 121 officers and 3,032 troops of other ranks. Six days later, its active complement had been whittled down to 720 - eighteen officers and 702 other ranks. Total battle casualties totalled 2,536 killed, missing presumed dead, wounded or captured. It took Brigade burial parties, assisted by Indian Cavalry Ambulance Corps bearers, weeks to recover and inter the dead; only 151 reasonably intact bodies were eventually recovered, of which just eighty-one could be properly identified. The tattered shreds of a further six hundred or so unidentified Brigade soldiers lay scattered anonymously in Longueval and Delville Wood. In the heat of late-August, a visiting Field Artillery Officer, Lieutenant I.R.H. Probert, recorded how his stomach heaved at the smell of wet, decaying vegetation, excrement, urine, and scraps of putrifying flesh, as Delville Wood was still 'full of dead and smells terribly.'[75] John Masefield, tramping Delville Wood four months after the end of the Battle of the Somme, remarked on how the dead still lay three or four deep and the bluebottles made their faces black'.[76] Horror gripped many other onlookers. Surveying the craters, blasted trench emplacements, dugouts and choked communication ways through the undergrowth, an unhinged 3rd South African Infantry Anglican chaplain recoiled from the almost inexpressible, a black confrontation with 'bad places, pits of horror'.[77]

After the Somme, Eustace St Clair Hill could not escape a raw sense of the war as a moral abomination. Leaving Longueval on 23rd July, he confessed candidly to his St John's College headmaster that his Delville Wood experience had made him wonder about the idea of war as a painful necessity; now seeing it as a savage education, he hoped that 'this war goes on and on until men loathe war and determine forever to give it up as an unChristian, damnable method of settling disputes'.[78]

Appalled by the scale of the Delville Wood slaughter, Brigade infantry expressed their feelings in letters filled with outraged sensibility and shaded by awareness of tragedy: while not entirely supplanted, the cacophony of Springbok glory and invincibility became a more minor descant. Astonishingly, some English school journals carried later-1916 Delville Wood correspondence from France which reported soldiers' experiences with remarkably brutal honesty, a discourse of agony which cracked the banality of sacrificial glory which these self-same publications paradoxically still continued to reflect. 'I've seen enough - shattered bodies, bloodstained heroes, dead, dying, shot and shell, a very hell let loose', concluded one Private in his South African College Magazine.[79] Another, with Delville Wood now the forest of his mind, despatched an obituary note on one Ben Auret, 'hard lines, cut up like the trees ... of Auret we have been able to gather nothing more than his name as he is no longer whole'.[80]

The physical and psychological scalping of the Delville Wood experience produced intense and constant allusions to heat, to horrific death, and to victimhood as a balm to sickened spirits. 'Devil's Wood' had been a 'hot place', a 'scorching patch', an 'unbearable furnace', or 'the heat of hell'; inevitably, it was also likened to South Africa's most characteristically arid and coppery regions, hotter than 'the Karoo' or 'the highveldt'.[81] European soil had been relentlessly unyielding. The constant sight of broken bodies pervaded infantrymen's personal accounts, identifying the grotesque with hypnotic compulsion: 'beastly sights ... unbelievable carnage, enough to turn anybody', reported Private Kenneth Earp, 'men's limbs blown all over our trench. One of our sergeants was hit in the face by another man's head, cut off by a piece of aerial torpedo. The Bosches had an awful time also. We saw bits of arms and legs going up, and once I saw a naked trunk, slit right down the middle ... it simply makes you weep'. Earp indeed recalled seeing an officer 'blubbing like a child in sheer hysterics'.[82]

A third factor was an often expansive expression of common humanity, springing from that coagulating 'awareness that soldiers in the trenches opposite were similarly victimized'.[83] Before the horror of the Somme, there had been few respectful South African infantry feelings for the Germans, and even less occasion for them. Now, generally speaking, Delville Wood left some sense of compassionate recognition of German dead. In an eastern strip of the wood, 'as bare as the Karoo', Private Rowland Key knocked up 'a little wooden cross' above a German sniper buried by an exploding shell, 'some poor fighter, striving as we are for home and beauty'.[84] Repelled by 'bits of bodies that lie all over the place', a mordant Lance-Corporal Henry Clark declared it 'a shame that men who have fought for their country can't have a decent burial, whoever they are. They will most likely be posted up as "an unknown British or German Hero afterwards"'.[85] When it came to the unknown soldier, the psalm-loving Reverend J.H. Whaits was a practical and reflective man. Having tramped Delville Wood in search of Private Lawrence Immelman, 'missing since the

fight', Whaits advised his parents that their son had probably been buried 'by a comrade subsequently killed, and so unable to tell where'. Conveying to the Immelmans his sorrow at the sight of so many victims of the Delville Wood terror, Whaits suggested a universal Christian honouring of the dead, 'One Big Calvary with names on its base should be erected after Peace, to commemorate all who lie there'.[86]

Back in the Union of South Africa, certainly in empire loyalist white civilian responses to news of Delville Wood, there was little room for public nightmare or faintheartedness: passions were too high and conviction too deep. Reporting in late-July that 'total casualties for Lukin's brigade is less than 5%', the Diamond Fields Advertiser exulted in a South African 'First Blood' on the Somme, nearly all of it German.[87] Delville Wood became for many other papers the immediate symbol of Springbok tenacity and heroism in France, observing the Brigade's 'brilliant work', 'prowess in Delville Wood', 'imperishable heroism', and crowing over 'Springboks' splendid' or 'matchless' 'stand'. Even when the full scale of Delville Wood casualties became clear, the Union's pro-war press did not grow less euphoric. Indeed, it made a great deal of these: of the fact that South African patriots were not the kind of people to be discouraged by losses from continuing 'the Great Battle of Right against Wrong'. This was one of the marks of their 'race', continuing essential war business, 'unflinching' and 'unbowed'.[88] In its more sober moments, the Weekly Telegraph dwelt upon a Garibaldi spirit stalking Delville Wood, with 'Our Boys' responding anew to the remembered spirit of his patriotic challenge of 'forced marches, short rations, bloody battles, wounds, imprisonment, and death'.[89]

For the rest of 1916, Delville Wood left behind it a further distinct cluster of eulogizing echoes. One immediate impact on South Africa's home front was shaped by the cadet territorial codes and masculine character-building of the 1st Brigade's important school recruiting grounds. College chaplains published accounts from the Western Front extolling the fighting qualities of Delville Wood's South Africans in their local parish magazines. Their militant tone was simultaneously reflected by many of the schools' own publications which, in magazines such as The St Andrian and The Selbornian, also turned editorial comment over exclusively to the conventional repertoire of noble war sacrifice. 'Gallant lives and noble deaths', was the dominant, no-nonsense idiom of The South African College Magazine, which invoked Delville Wood as the heroism of disciplined endurance and of sticking to one another, not least through the exceptional banality of its SACS Old Boy Obituaries: thus, Lieutenants William Nimmo Brown ('splendidly trained') and Vaughan 'Toby' Noaks ('a good fellow off the field') vindicated a patriotic English white South African schooling.[90]

July 1916 casualty lists also drew dashing British responses. United Empire, journal of the Royal Colonial Institute, marked the loss of two fellows, former masters of St Andrew's College, Johannesburg (which in 1915 had

despatched over 500 'St Andrians' to the Brigade) as manhood selflessly sacrificed in 'one of the most heroic defences ever known in the whole history of war'.[91] Beyond this, a surfeit of fairly dire student verse celebrated Springbok transcendance over waste and destruction. That by senior cadets of the South African College School, Cape Town's willowy equivalent of Melbourne's Scotch College, plumbed quite unparalleled poetic depths, as In Delville Wood, 'charred and splintered/foul and mired/boom of guns/where birds once choired', or At Delville Wood, 'fellows finding death and glory/on this field of battle gory'.92

A less adolescent assertion of Delville Wood as the Union's real war initiation was the place it quickly assumed by late-July in the educated discourse of the settler population - in pulpit meditations, mayoral orations, parliamentary speeches, middlebrow periodicals, and the barrage of proud town council resolutions cabled to France, repeatedly extolling 'the gallant/heroic/ dauntless action of our contingent'. These last emanated not just from larger, English-dominated urban areas but also from loyalist-influenced Cape Afrikaner small towns and rural municipalities like Swellendam, Porterville and Oudtshoorn.[93]

But it was, above all, the Union's main newspapers which spread the essential Delville Wood message. A flinty set of assumptions permeated the commercial press which identified closely with Union government war policy. One spreading theme was stoical acceptance of heavy battle casualties, as in the sunny view of the Cape Times that losses were 'actually small when compared to the rapidity of our advance'.[94] A perverse variation on this was to celebrate the Delville Wood toll as a moral imperative; towards the end of July and in early August 1916, dithering 'Patriotic Parents' were reminded that 'anybody reading the casualty list should feel ashamed for still keeping any sons back'. The Cape Times also weighed in against remaining 'slackers' whose 'unwillingness' to join 'was now dishonouring South Africa's many fallen.[95]

A second response was representation of Delville Wood as a shaken European domain, fortunate to have been calmed by an implanted Dominion South African identity. According to the Weekly Telegraph and Rand Daily Mail respectively, it had become 'a Springbok corner' and 'pasture of khaki gazelles', while the Zululand Times, reporting the King's 1917 visit to the battle scene, pointed approvingly to the way in which welcoming 'sons of the veld' had burrowed down once again to show George V where 'they had dug themselves in and made their timeless stand' as 'heroes in the history of France.'[96] Furthermore, in a distant European war in which South Africa's white settlers were Africans and its Africans Natives, there was heavy emphasis on the battle valour of variously 'splendid', 'gallant', or 'toiling Africans' whose fine 'African quality' had brought to the Somme 'a great epic of the Golden Cape'.[97] In the mouths of some Dutch Reformed Church clergy in the Western Cape, the rib-cage of Afrikaner loyalism, the ideal of the ardent African son

acquired an Afrikaans character, with Delville Wood having felt the mark of 'dappere' or 'sterkste Afrikaners',[98]

A third, and clearly most inflated affirmation of Delville Wood, was dissemination of the notion of it having delivered a mature South African nation in its own loyalist image, encased within an empire identity. Or, as the knowing modern historian would say, that 'imagined community' of the nation, bound by common identity and national purpose. In this assertion, however brutal the surgery of the Somme, the bloodied brambles and barbed wire of Delville Wood had imaginatively stitched together the Union's two settler communities. Now, the sour Anglo-Boer tribal legacy of the South African War had been sweetened, the soil of the 1916 battlefield 'a fresh and pregnant seal' on the 1902 Peace of Vereeniging. Now, too, the recent Union of 1910 had been decisively hardened.[99]

A forceful political idiom of Anglo-Afrikaner 'race' fusion impelled English editors and their model middle-class correspondents to applaud the emergence of 'One Nation', whose 'men of both English and Dutch descent have fallen for the same cause, in the same action'.[100] From Johannesburg's The Star there was joy that 'Briton and Boer had stood shoulder to shoulder after the South African War, and that the races had died together at Delville Wood', while the Cape Times dubbed the Brigade's 1915 volunteers, 'the true South African nationalists, fighting for South Africa's freedom.' Of particular note was the vigorous assimilationist line taken by pro-war countryside papers, several of which suggested that with Somme - inspired war unity ('surely no room for division now'), South Africa's two divergent parts had come together like those of Belgium.[101] In Britain, meanwhile, armchair imperialists eagerly added their piece, declaring that Brigadier-General Lukin's infantry had actually minted a responsible nation out of socially and linguistically diverging tributaries of empire. Instinctively, United Empire knew all: 'what Anzac will mean to the Australians and New Zealanders, and Ypres to the Canadians, Delville Wood will be to the South Africans', adding the agreeable confirmation that, 'now loyal Britons were the same the world over'.[102]

Inevitably, perhaps, white public celebration of Delville Wood as patriotic war sacrifice conveyed slightly mixed messages, as its chorus was simultaneously Union populist and British imperialist in character. On the one hand, in South African Party branch speech after party branch speech, student magazine after student magazine, weekly editorial after weekly editorial, moderate and upstanding Cape Afrikaners lauded the fighting qualities of 'Zuid-Afrikaners', crowing that in French eyes, South African soldiers were among the best in the Empire, or that German prisoners-of-war were crediting their heavy casualties to uniquely South African fighting qualities, the product of a hardy and handy commando system.[103] Drawing on popular memory of the South African War, loyalist Springbok troops were now recast in the pugnacious spirit of *bittereinder*, no-surrender, commandos.

More weighty, though, was an anglophone patriotism which was markedly imperial rather than merely national in scope. Delville Wood's fire had demonstrated that when moulded by 'the power of British discipline', South African colonials had naturally responded 'as all British soldiers do'; as 'fully Britons', many had fallen 'in our Empire's Cause'.[104] Even common evocations of a 'young South Africa' having returned from the battlefield, 'a Nation', were not fully-articulated interpretations of an independent nation. While men had perhaps 'not fought for England', they had done so 'for the British Empire and the honour of being one of its important Dominions'; and in so doing, they were simultaneously ensuring South African freedom.[105]

For the Union's pro-war, pro-empire gentry, the proud image of Delville Wood - a rhetorical landscape upon which white South Africans had died united to preserve civilisation and liberty for Dominion and Empire - became a touchstone of loyalism. For prominent Cape liberals like John X. Merriman, too many Afrikaners were showing too little pride in national war achievement, and there was a vituperative, post-Delville campaign against the Afrikaner De Burger and Ons Vaderland, as 'enemy' papers, 'subsidised by German gold'. In a provocative 17 August issue, the Cape nationalist Burger had attributed the South African Brigade's heavy casualties to inept British higher command. Calls for the restricting or proscribing of dissenting anti-war socialist and pacifist bodies, such as the South African Peace and Arbitration Society, now also grew increasingly shrill.[106]

Here and there, amidst the later 1916 epistolary din, was the tremulous public voice of the grieving 1st Brigade veteran, haunted by memories of fallen comrades on the Somme, imagining that he 'could wipe the place off the map ... its filthy wreckage of trees ... a death trap for so many. Let us leave and be done with Delville Wood'.[107] But, by the end of 1916, the Union of South Africa was already minting the rituals and procedures 'to direct human memory' of its Somme participation 'from the horrors to the meaningfulness and glory of war'.[108] In constructing its own Great War legacy, Delville Wood would now grow to become a battle in name and not just in fact. But that, of course, would be another story.

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