

2000

"It's just Like the Resurrection": The Boer Surrender to the Canadians at Paardeberg

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Recommended Citation

Pulsifer, Cameron "It's just Like the Resurrection": The Boer Surrender to the Canadians at Paardeberg." *Canadian Military History* 9, 1 (2000)

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“Its just like the resurrection”

The Boer Surrender to the Canadians at Paardeberg

Cameron Pulsifer with Harold Wright

“**I**mperial Adventure,” the Canadian War Museum's current exhibit on Canadians in the South African War (1899-1902), contains many interesting artifacts. One of these is a rather innocuous piece of dirty white cloth on loan to the museum from Heritage Resources of Saint John, New Brunswick. Measuring 53 cm x 35 cm, with knots tied at two corners, this piece of fabric could well be a Boer flag of surrender captured by the 2nd (Special Service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry (2RCR) at the battle of Paardeberg of 18-27 February 1900. Paardeberg, Britain's first major victory of the South African War, was also 2RCR's first major engagement, and the unit received a large share of the credit from British commanders for securing the victory.



Paardeberg Drift, a crossing of the Modder River, lay about 48 kilometers southeast of the town of Kimberley and 80 kilometers northwest of Bloemfontein, capital of the Orange Free State. Here, on 17 February 1900, the Boer General Piet Cronje, retreating southeastwards from Kimberley to Bloemfontein with about 5,000 troops, plus a small number of women and children, had been forced to halt by British mounted troops. Rather than abandoning his transport and trying to escape, Cronje chose to establish a laager or defensive position along the river's north bank, measuring about a kilometre in length by about three quarters of a kilometre in depth, and prepared to make a stand.

Canadians played an important role in the ensuing battle. They were fully engaged from the first day, when they participated in a bloody

attack ordered by the acting British commander-in-chief, Lord Herbert Kitchener, and lost 18 killed and 63 wounded. They also carried out the final attack on the Boer laager at 0215 hours, 27 February, with British units providing covering fire. Six Canadian companies attacked towards a series of Boer trenches some 450 metres from their own lines, and about mid-way to the laager. The Boers opened fire when the Canadians had advanced to within about 55 metres of their position. The Canadians immediately began to dig in, but then, due to a confusion in orders, four companies beat a hasty retreat back to the start line. Only the two right-most companies remained in position, "G" Company, from New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, and "H" Company from Nova Scotia. Most observers at the time saw the fire that these two companies continued to pour into the Boer positions as the primary cause of the enemy's decision to surrender later that morning.

The Boer Surrender, 27 February

Contemporary accounts of the Boer surrender differ and indeed sometimes conflict with one another. This is probably inevitable, given the confusion of battle and the poor visibility of the early dawn, and historians will likely never be certain of the exact sequence of events. The following will nonetheless attempt to resolve some of the disparities and piece together a clearer picture than has been attempted previously.



"The Battle of Paardeberg": Bacon's South African Battle Pictures, No. 7. This highly stylized depiction, wherein everything is happening at once, nonetheless provides some notion of the nature of the Paardeberg Battlefield. The laager is in the centre right at the top.

As the dawn began to break at about 0400 hours the Canadians could see that they were in an ideal tactical position. From slightly higher ground, they looked straight into a Boer trench that ran parallel to their own, enfiladed a number of others dug parallel to the riverbank, and commanded the inside of Cronje's laager 500 metres further east.² Furthermore, although deep, the Boer trenches lacked parapets, which left those attempting to fire out dangerously exposed.³

The Canadians waited, rifles cocked. When a single Boer slowly raised his head above the trench, he received a full fusillade of Canadian rifle fire.⁴ For a while there was quiet, and then the watching Canadians became aware of much movement and activity going on within the enemy

trenches. Occasionally a white flag would spring up, only to be hastily withdrawn. Certainly it looked like they were considering surrender, but, possibly aware that in the past the Boers had used the white flag to trick an opponent into exposing himself, the Canadians kept up their sniping.

Private Hedley Mackinnon, a rifleman in "G" Company, recalled that the Boers "were continually jumping around their trenches waving white flags," and "everyone who showed himself was shot." Then, a Boer officer came "galloping across the field with a large white flag on a staff," and the Boers "laid down their arms and came hooping out of the trenches."⁵ On the other hand, the correspondent for Toronto's *Mail and Empire*, Stanley McKeown Brown, related that

an old Boer jumped from the trench waving his hands, which caused the Canadians to cease firing. He soon jumped back in again, however, and the Canadian fire resumed. This was repeated three more times until at about six o'clock the Boer "rigged a dirty pillow-cover to the cleaning rod of a rifle and with no mistake in his slouchy movements, he slunk to the Canadians lines." Then the "eastern Canadians" of "G" and "H" Companies "received the surrender."⁶

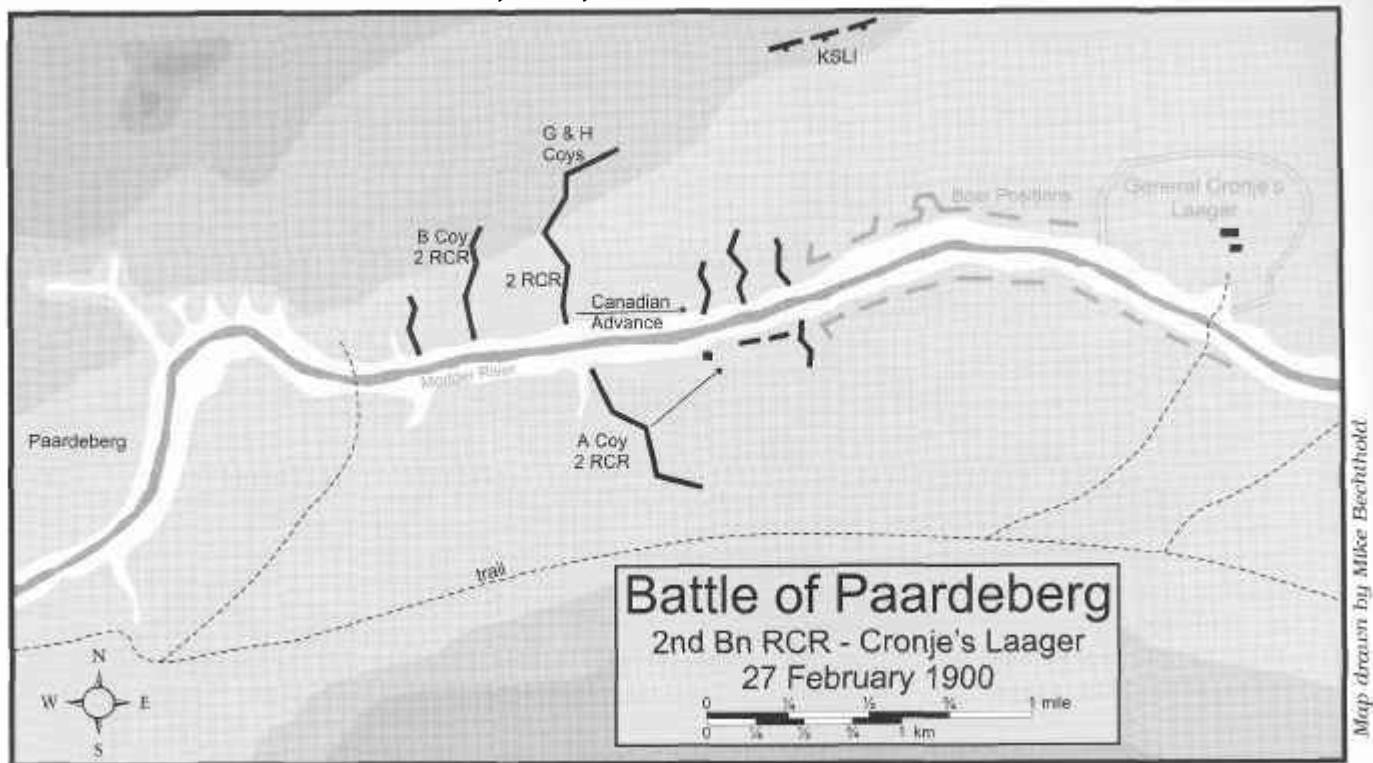
Peter O'Leary, 2RCR's popular Roman Catholic chaplain, who had been forward with the troops throughout the engagement, supplied another, more detailed version of events. He told the *Montreal Star* soon after the surrender that when the Boers had "realised the foolishness of further struggle":

a white flag went up in front of the Canadian lines. One of our officers stood up to indicate that it had been seen by us. Fearing treachery, one of the superior officers ordered him to lie down until a definite move in our direction had been made by the party bearing the flag. The latter shortly afterwards disappeared behind the Boer trenches, but a moment later again emerged holding the flag. This time he stepped over the earthworks, and advanced towards our position. He was received by a Canadian Officer, to whom he said he wished to surrender with all his men. As the surrender was unconditional, the officer accepted it, and thus it was that the Canadians had the honour of receiving the first detachment of Cronje's men to surrender to British forces on that memorable day. It was not very many moments before white flags were up in all directions. I myself counted sixteen.⁷

Major-General Horace Smith-Dorrien,
commanding officer of the army's 19th Brigade,

James Princip Beadle, "The Victors of Paardeberg" (1902). This depicts the scene at about 0600 hours on 27 February 1900, after the Boers had left their trenches to surrender to the Canadians of 2RCR. An officer negotiates with the Boer commanders while his jubilant troops look on from their trench. It is not sure where Beadle got his information, but much of the detail shown is very accurate. Unfortunately, the original painting has disappeared. This print has been supplied by the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.





of which 2RCR was a part, had gone forward with the initial attack, behind the battalion's right wing, and recounts in his memoirs that he stayed forward during the night in the Canadian trench.⁸ In his version of events he took a position on the Canadian trench and called upon the Boers to surrender. "After calling a few times a white flag handkerchief appeared from the nearest trench, then another and another, and this ran along all the trenches until there were heads and white flags up to the laager. I remarked at the time: "Its just like the resurrection.""⁹

On the other hand, Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Colvile, the divisional commander and Smith-Dorrien's superior, described arriving on the scene and finding two rows of men within a stone's throw of each other. The furthest one consisted of Boers on the edge of their trench, the nearest one Canadians and Royal Engineers on the parapet of their own. He promptly ordered the latter to take cover and shouted to the Boers to "lay down their arms and come over." Much discussion followed amongst the Boers, and then one of their number stepped forward, held out his hand, and said "Good-morning, General." In a few minutes "we had several hundred of them to the rear of our trench."¹⁰

Lieutenant-Colonel W.D. Otter of 2RCR had a slightly different version. In his report on the action, he had Colvile arriving *after* the Boers

had begun to surrender. "Firing continued.. until about 5:15 a.m.," he wrote, "when the enemy in their advanced trench made proposals to surrender." Canadian firing continued, however, until about 0600 hours when "one of the enemy advanced with a white flag," after which they began to surrender in batches of 200. General Colvile came upon the scene only at about 0615 hours, when he began directing "the disposal of the prisoners."¹¹ It must be said, however, that Otter, who was some 360 metres back, had not witnessed the scene personally.

These accounts have enough in common to allow a rough picture of the Boer surrender to be reconstructed. Initial surrender overtures appear to have begun soon after the Canadians fired the dawn fusillade that killed one Boer soldier. Similarly hesitant overtures continued over the next several hours, with the wary Canadians maintaining an intermittent fire. Finally, at about 0600 hours, a Boer officer attached a white flag to a pole or to a rifle's cleaning rod, climbed out of the trench, and proceeded nervously towards the Canadian positions, soon followed by other troops. Now convinced that the Boers were genuine, the Canadians stopped firing and rose to meet them.

Canadian accounts have the Canadians accepting the surrender and do not mention the presence of the two British commanders. British

accounts, on the other hand, have one or the other of two British officers playing the central role. As the senior officer present, Smith-Dorrien probably would have assumed authority at some point in the early stages of the process. Once his superior officer, Lieutenant-General Colvile, appeared on the scene, however, Smith-Dorrien doubtless would have ceded authority to him, and this would explain Colvile's getting credit for the surrender in the *Times History of the War in South Africa*.¹² It is interesting to note that neither of these two officers mentions the presence of the other.

The Canadians, numbering between 120 and 160, were by far the most numerous British troops at the surrender. The only significant non-Canadian presence was a party of Royal Engineers, numbering no more than 30. The men of "G" and "H" Companies had induced the Boers to emerge from their trenches and surrender, and they almost certainly made the initial contacts as the first enemy approached. It was only natural, perhaps, that their accounts should focus exclusively upon their own actions at this dramatic moment, and that they should fail to take note of the fact that at first one, and then a second, British general officer had assumed

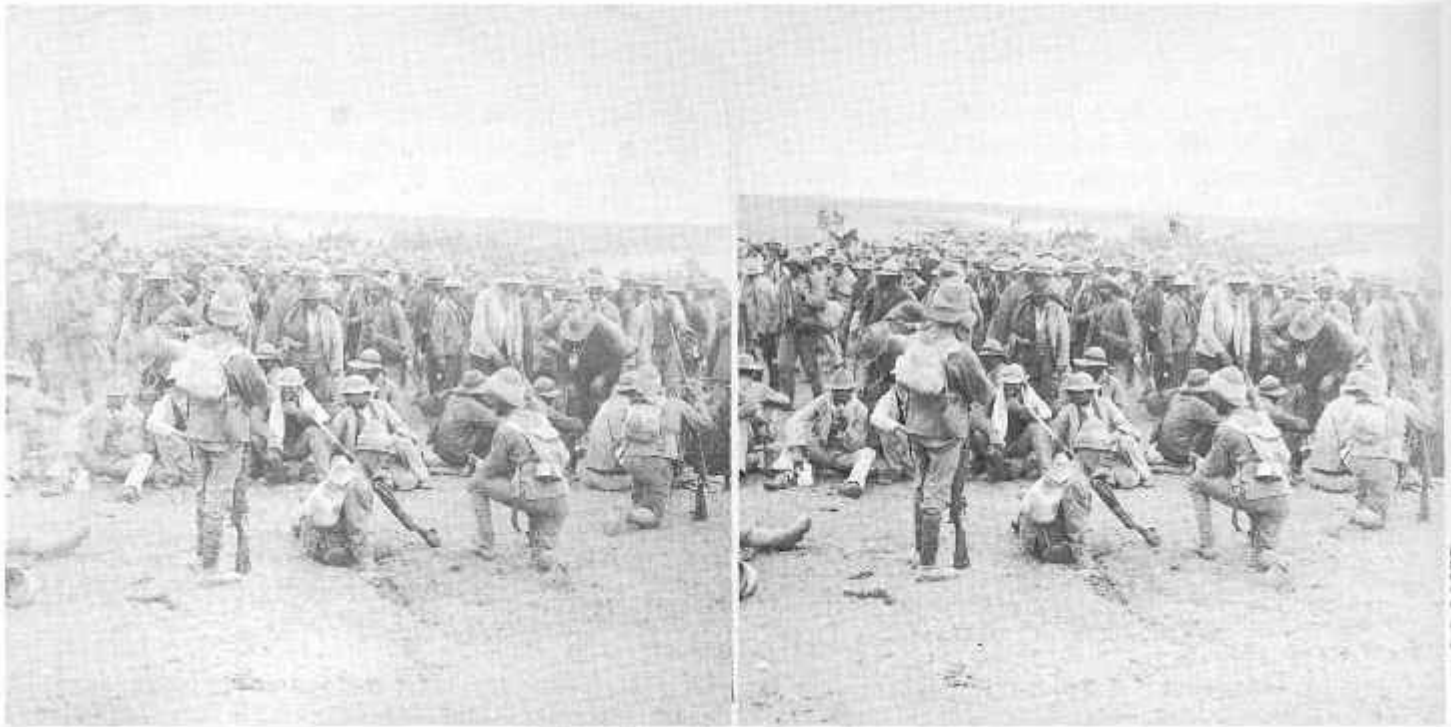
authority over the surrender process. Colvile, for his part, was unstinting in his praise of the Canadians. "I know nothing of what Cronje's intentions may have been," he wrote, but whatever they were, the Canadians "made it impossible for him to do anything but which he did."¹³

Most accounts agree that white flags dotted the surrender scene, the majority probably being handkerchiefs. Besides the one carried across the field attached either to a rifle's cleaning rod or to a stick, a number of others were waved or mounted within the Boer trenches. Also, shortly afterwards, a "large white flag" was raised within the Boer laager indicating that Cronje himself had opted for surrender.¹⁴

From this point, events moved quickly. Cronje sent a messenger to the British commander-in-chief, Field-Marshal Lord Frederick Roberts, with word that his Council of War had resolved on unconditional surrender. By 0700 hours, Cronje himself arrived at Roberts' headquarters under armed escort to sign the necessary documents, which formally ended the battle of Paardeberg.¹⁵

Soldiers pick through the carnage of the Boer laager after the surrender.





Boer prisoners under armed guard on the road out of Paardeberg. Most were sent to the island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic.

The Flag

The artifact currently on display in the CWM's South African War exhibit was located by Harold Wright of Saint John, New Brunswick. Wright has a file on Captain F. Caverhill Jones of Saint John who served with "G" Company, 2RCR, at Paardeberg. It contains a copy of Jones' obituary, dated 30 July 1917, from the *Globe*, a Saint John newspaper. Regarding Jones' service in South Africa, the clipping remarks:

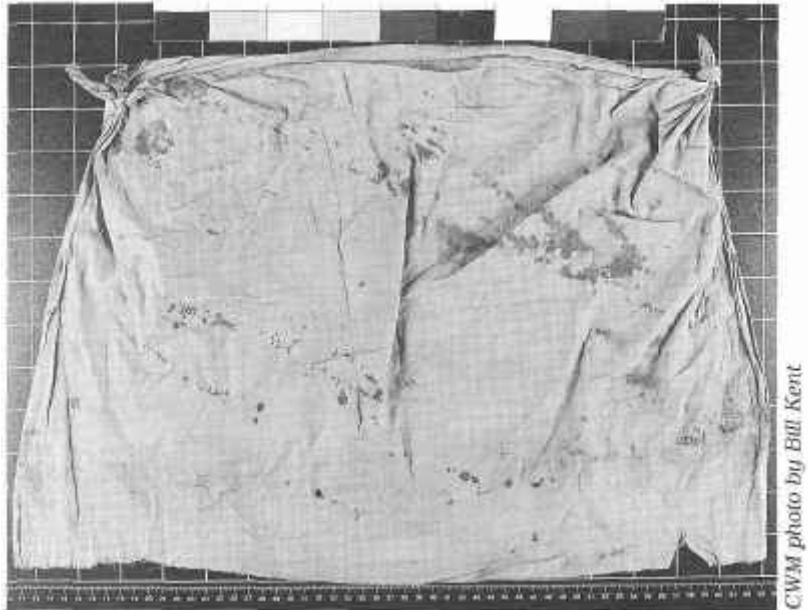
He was made a captain [actually a lieutenant] in the famed G Company, and served all through the war, making a most enviable name for himself. He was present at the surrender of Cronje and brought back with him the white flag which that General hoisted on that occasion. His collection of souvenirs brought back from that campaign was the most complete ever got together.¹⁶

Frederick Caverhill Jones, who usually referred to himself by his middle name, was born in 1869 to a prominent local banker and brewer, and one-time mayor of Saint John, Simeon Jones, and his wife, Anna McLaughlin. He became active in the local militia unit, the 3rd New Brunswick Regiment, Canadian Artillery, eventually rising to the rank of captain. From it he obtained a commission with "G" Company of 2RCR when it was formed for service in South Africa in 1899. After his return from South Africa

in 1901, Caverhill continued on the list of reserve officers with the local militia artillery, and after the outbreak of war in 1914 obtained the appointment of second-in-command in the Saint John-based 115th Battalion, proceeding to England with it in July 1916. Later invalided back to Canada due to illness, he died of cancer in a Chicago hospital on 28 July 1917. Jones married Roberta Smith in 1902 and the couple had two sons.¹⁷

Intrigued by the information contained in the *Globe's* obituary, Wright undertook to determine whether the flag and the rich store of souvenirs still existed. Unfortunately, Caverhill's immediate family had left Saint John. Distant relations who remained did not know their whereabouts or, indeed, whether they were still alive. Wright wrote numerous letters and made dozens of phone calls. He finally met with success when he received a tip that one of Caverhill's sons was still living in Ontario, and succeeded in tracking him down. While the son did remember the flag as having been in the family's possession, he did not know of its whereabouts. He did, however, suggest that Wright contact his brother, who also was still alive and living in British Columbia. This brother sent Wright a number of items relating to his father's military service, but while he did remember the flag and his father's medals he did not know where they were.

The "flag," from the collection of Heritage Resources of Saint John, and now on display in the exhibit "Imperial Adventure" at the Canadian War Museum. Accumulated lore about the artifact held that the stains were blood, but a recent analysis by the Central Forensics Lab of the RCMP has shown this to be false.



This seemed the end of the trail. However, much to Wright's surprise another package arrived later from British Columbia. It contained Caverhill's medals wrapped in a dirty rag. The son reported that he had found them while cleaning his basement. He had picked up the rag with the intention of throwing it out, but hesitated when he felt something inside. Opening it, he found his father's medals, including his Queen's South Africa Medal with four bars (Cape Colony, Paardeberg, Driefontein, and Johannesburg), his British War Medal for service in the First World War, and the Memorial Cross, received by the family after his death. They were all named to F.C. Jones. Furthermore, the son indicated that the 'old rag' in which the medals were wrapped was in fact the missing Boer surrender flag "about which his parents had talked."¹⁸

The "flag," a cotton fabric, is of a tan or off-white shade that was probably originally white. The two corners of what would have been its hoist edge are tied into small loop-holed knots. The hoist edge is hemmed, as is one of the short ends. The other short end has a selvedge edge, which is a natural edge formed by the warp of the fabric. The fly edge is raw, cut very straight. A pattern of straight lines is woven into the fabric near the hemmed and selvedge edges.¹⁹ The fabric bears some large rust-coloured and smaller black-coloured stains. Family lore holds that these are bloodstains, but recent analysis at the RCMP Central Forensic Laboratory in Ottawa found no evidence of blood.²⁰

The artifact has a good provenance. Although there is only the reference in his obituary and family recollections and no hard contemporary evidence of Caverhill's obtaining the flag, he *was* present at the Boer surrender. Indeed, as one of "G" Company's officers, he would have been at or near the centre of the morning's events. He was also, according to his obituary, an enthusiastic collector of souvenirs. And the artifact did derive from Caverhill's son, who recalled it as the Boer flag of surrender that his father had brought back from South Africa. That it came into Harold Wright's possession accompanied by Caverhill's Queen's South Africa and other military medals possibly lends credence to its being an item associated with Caverhill's military service, rather than simply an old rag. Thus there are good grounds for accepting it as one of the many Boer flags of surrender that were raised on that last morning of the battle of Paardeberg, although probably not, as the obituary implies, General Cronje's own surrender flag. The presence of the two knots suggests that it was attached to a rod or stick of some sort rather than waved by hand, but other than this nothing more specific can be said.

The CWM is frequently approached by persons proudly bearing precious family heirlooms that are supposed to have been associated with some great historical event, such as a musket carried at the Plains of Abraham, or a water bottle used at Vimy Ridge. In all too many cases, only family lore and no hard evidence



Frederick Caverhill Jones in 1899. Detail from a photograph supplied by Heritage Resources, Saint John.

supports the case. Few artifacts have such a clear provenance or supporting (albeit circumstantial) evidence as Harold Wright's Boer surrender flag. None of this evidence is completely watertight, of course, and many questions about the artifact remain unanswered. Cumulatively, however, it is strong enough to justify the inclusion of the flag in the CWM's exhibit and to suggest that it may be a significant Canadian historical artifact, a 'trophy of war' from Canada's first overseas military success.

Notes

1. There is no need to go into the details of the battle, as they have been admirably told many times before. The best modern accounts are Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal and Kingston, 1993), pp.87-112; Brian Reid, *Our Little Army In the Field: The Canadians In South Africa* (St. Catharines, Ont., 1996), pp.54-68;

- Desmond Morton, *Canada at Paardeberg* (Ottawa, 1986).
2. Major-General Sir H.E. Colvile, *The Work of the Ninth Division*, (London, 1901) p.50. Colvile's rank of lieutenant-general in South Africa was a local rank only.
3. General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, *Memories of Forty-Eight Years' Service* (London, 1925), p. 160.
4. Mackinnon, *War Sketches: Reminiscences of the War in South Africa, 1899-1902* (Charlottetown, 1900), p.28.
5. *Ibid.*, p.28.
6. Stanley McKeown Brown, *With the Royal Canadians* (Toronto, 1900), p.217.
7. CWM R.E.W. Turner Papers, 19720074-004, unidentified newspaper clipping in Scrapbook, p.33.
8. *Ibid.*, p.46.
9. Smith-Dorrien, p. 161.
10. Colvile, p.49.
11. Otter to Chief Staff Officer, Militia, 2 March 1900 in Canada. Department of Militia and Defence, *Supplementary Report, Organization, Equipment, Dispatch and Services of Canadian Contingents During the South African War*, Sessional Papers 35a, 1901, p.47.
12. L.S. Amery éd., *The Times History of the War in South Africa, 1899-1902*, Vol. III (London, 1905), p.483.
13. Colvile, p.50.
14. *Ibid.*; the reference to "large white flag" is from McHarg, *From Quebec to Pretoria: With the Royal Canadian Regiment* (Toronto, 1902), p. 130.
15. These moves are described in Amery, éd., *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, pp.484-485.
16. Newspaper clipping, *The Globe* (Saint John), 30 July 1917, in Major F.C. Jones ephemera file, Heritage Resources Saint John.
17. See the account in D.F. Johnson, B.E. O'Leary, *New Brunswick Men at War: The South African War (1899-1902)* (n.d, n.p.), pp.126-127; also Harold Wright, "A Simple White Cloth - A Paardeberg Flag of Surrender," Unpublished manuscript in possession of the author.
18. *Ibid.*
19. CWM Condition Report, "Flag, Maj. Jones", IL 1998 169-005, Helen Holt, 18 March 1999.
20. The authors would like to thank Ian Wainwright, Canadian Conservation Institute, Helen Holt, Textile Conservator, Canadian War Museum, Staff Sergeant Pat Larnus of the RCMP Canadian Police College, Sergeant Scott Brown and Constable Christopher Renwick of the Ottawa Regional Police, and Paul Roussy, Section Head, Biology Section, RCMP Central Forensic Laboratory, for taking time away from their own busy schedules to look into the matter of these stains. That they were not blood was proven by a hemochromogen test, a standard chemical method used to identify bloodstains, administered by Roussy.

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