

A long-awaited exploration of military medicine

J.C. (Kay) de Villiers, *Healers, Helpers and Hospitals: A History of Military Medicine in the Anglo-Boer War, 2 Volumes*

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At last, from the celebrated authority on the topic, the book (in two volumes) that historians and laymen interested in the Anglo-Boer War have been waiting for is on the bookshelves. Kay de Villiers, emeritus professor of Neurosurgery at the University of Cape Town, has been interested in the medical services and medical issues of this important South African war for more than half a century; he has been researching this topic since 1965. I became aware of this as early as 1976 through my senior colleague at Unisa at the time, Professor Johan Barnard, to whom De Villiers owes so much in terms of encouragement. And the result has been well worth the wait.

The Anglo-Boer War was a watershed in military medicine and in the way armies take care of their wounded and sick soldiers in times of war. In what we can term “medical adequacy”, surgical anatomy was more advanced than physiology and knowledge about the body’s reaction to injury. This was due to developments in aseptic surgery and the fairly safe use of inhalant anaesthesia (chloroform and ether). Diagnostic bacteriology and immunology were well established, and the discovery of X-rays by Röntgen in 1895 had facilitated physical diagnosis.

More knowledge also came to the fore about bullet wounds. The small calibre, oval-shaped, nickel-jacketed bullet, which was propelled at high velocity by a smokeless propellant (nitro-cellulose), replaced the large, soft, leaden bullet of previous wars. This

revised the established techniques on the treatment of war wounds. Due to the relatively benign wounds caused by hard, non-expanding bullets fired from a long range, many observers at the beginning of the war argued that the wounds inflicted were less severe than was the case in previous wars. However, it became evident in this war that the distance from which a bullet was fired was important in the way the particular wound had to be treated; each wound had to be treated on its own merits.

De Villiers's two volumes (46 chapters in Volume I and 13 chapters in Volume II) cover a vast field. Volume I explains the difficulties of physical geography and transport, and recounts the origins and the evolution of Red Cross organisations in both Britain and the Boer Republics. Transgressions of the Geneva Convention are discussed, such as the misuse of the Red Cross flag, ambulance personnel carrying arms, and firing on enemy ambulances. There are exciting chapters on the British military medical organisation in South Africa; colonial medical services with the British Army; the Royal Army Medical Corps; British nurses; and British field hospitals with the army as it made its ponderous progress towards the Boer capitals. We learn how the Boer medical services functioned in the various operational areas before the fall of Pretoria, and we are informed of foreign medical aid for the republics, which included the various foreign ambulances (fourteen in all), *inter alia* the two Dutch Red Cross Ambulances, the Dutch East Indian, German, Russian, Swiss, and Irish-American Ambulances. The Irish-American Ambulance under Capt P. O'Connor caused general embarrassment when it arrived in Pretoria, because 47 of the 60 men promptly took up arms with the Boer forces. Volume I ends with a chapter on patterns of Boer and British medical care during the guerrilla phase of the war, when the foreign ambulances had left South Africa.

Volume II is predominantly concerned with the clinical aspects of military medical care referred to earlier in this review – the new kind of wounds, bacteriology, radiology, diseases, typhoid treatment, functional and psychiatric disorders, and traditional remedies used by the burghers on commando. Very useful is the inclusion of 70 pages of short biographies of important or interesting personalities, such as Bension Aaron, Dr W.B. Bidekap, Sir William W. Cheyne, Dr Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir Kendall Franks, the two Lingbeek brothers who were both medical doctors, Sir Frederick Treves, and Dr Karl von Rennenkampf.

More than 150 photographs in Volume I and 44 in Volume II are welcome additions to this labour of love. It is a great pity, however, that the author could not find the space, time and energy to cover the medical issues in the concentration camps. But that is admittedly a different story that needs to be told.

The lasting impression is that this work is a major contribution to our knowledge of the Anglo-Boer War. It is overwhelming and authoritative, supremely authoritative. And the research done on both archival as well as secondary sources is impressive, very impressive. This is a great set to own, to read and to consult. It is simultaneously a wonderful read and an excellent reference work.

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