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Afghanistan accusations replay of Boer War

Canada has been through this before, in South Africa, a century ago

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It's springtime in Ottawa, and a Conservative MP is standing in Parliament defending the honour of Canadian soldiers accused of behaving badly in a foreign war.

For months allegations have swirled that Canadians abused and even killed their prisoners. Now a report in a British newspaper claims Canadians were seen after one battle stripping the socks from their dead enemies and pulling out toe nails to take home as souvenirs.

Not true, insists MP Sam Hughes, a future defence minister -- speaking on April 3, 1902, in the dying days of the Boer War.

"The Canadians conducted themselves on that occasion, as on every other occasion, with the greatest gallantry," he said in the House of Commons.

Fast-forward a century and -- *deja vu* -- Canadian soldiers are again facing serious claims of wrongdoing in a faraway guerrilla war, followed by political denials in Ottawa.

In Afghanistan, Canadian Forces are alleged to have knowingly handed over Taliban prisoners to local prison guards notorious for carrying out torture. They are also accused of mistakenly killing an Afghan teenager and trying to cover up the shooting.

A Canadian officer is now also on trial, accused of killing of a wounded Taliban prisoner.

Whatever the merits of the mushrooming allegations out of Afghanistan, anyone shocked by them should remember that Canada has been through all this before -- long ago in South Africa.

From 1899 to 1902, more than 7,000 Canadians served in South Africa, fighting alongside Britain and other imperial allies against the commandos of the Boer Republics.

South Africa was Canada's first foreign war and, like Afghanistan, it was a difficult and ugly counter-insurgency campaign against a determined enemy that wore no uniforms and hid among the population.

Canadians fought with skill and courage in South Africa, and won four Victoria Crosses there for bravery. But, according to a series of little-known wartime documents contained in archives around the world, some Canadian units also acquired a reputation for rogue behaviour and murder.

Questions about the killing of Boer prisoners have long haunted the history of Lord Strathcona's Horse, an Alberta-based regiment. In 1900, a squadron of mounted Strathconas allegedly lynched six Boer prisoners, after witnessing an attack against a British patrol lured into a trap by Boers deceptively flying a white flag.

The incident is retold in a letter written in Pretoria two days afterwards by Lance Sgt. R.J. Byers, a member of the Australian Mounted Rifles.

"The Canadians have a great dislike of the Boers," says the letter, archived in the State Library of Victoria, Australia. "They took a few prisoners one day and what did they do, but took their lassos off their saddles and hung six of them before their Officer could stop them."

The letter also alleges a second case of killing prisoners. "Another day, the New Zealanders had 13 Boer prisoners and they met some Canadians, who asked them if they wanted to hand over their prisoners," writes Byers. "Well the New Zealanders were glad to get rid of them, so they handed them over to the Canadians who took them away to a quiet place, and shot the 13 of them."

The Strathconas incident was also reported in a letter home by Ottawa native Sgt. Ed Holland -- one of Canada's Victoria Cross winners.

"I do not know what truth there is in it," says a copy of the letter, in the archives of the Royal Canadian Dragoons. "But I do not doubt it in the least, for they are a wild and woolly lot those boys from the West."

The affair was also used by the defence in the famous trial of Australian Lt. Harry "Breaker" Morant, who was shot by firing squad in 1902 for ordering the similar execution of Boer prisoners. Morant's court martial was popularized by the 1980 film *Breaker Morant*.

"The Canadians ... rigidly adhered to the rule of never allowing their enemies to trouble them a second time," wrote Lieut. George Witton, another Australian court-martialled alongside Morant, in his subsequent book *Scapegoats of the Empire*.

No Canadians were ever convicted of such crimes in South Africa and no illegal killings have ever been proven by eyewitness accounts.

Historian Brian Reid, a former Canadian artillery officer who briefly recounts the Strathcona incident in his 1996 book, *Our Little Army in the Field*, says all the evidence surrounding it is "circumstantial or hearsay."

But McGill University Prof. Carman Miller, the country's leading academic authority on the Boer War, says while there's no hard proof of any Canadian crimes, "I have no doubt that these few incidents took place. While we don't know without a shadow of a doubt that Canadians committed atrocities, there's every reason to believe that certain Canadian units didn't take prisoners."

Another mounted unit, the Canadian Scouts, an elite, commando-style corps of volunteers, also gained a fearsome reputation for killing its prisoners.

In a 1956 interview recorded by the Canadian Army Historical Section, William Hare, a Boer War veteran of the Canadian Scouts, says the "Scouts sought and gave no quarter ... and they took no prisoners."

Allegations that Canadians had killed Boer prisoners eventually filtered home near the end of the war, in soldiers' letters and in foreign newspaper reports. But unlike today, such questions sparked little discomfort, little sense of scandal and no official inquiries -- only denials from MPs such as Hughes, himself a Boer War veteran.

"There are certainly parallels with today," says Miller. "What's different about South Africa is that there was very little discussion of these rumours and allegations in public."

Times were different at the turn of the last century. By the time rumours of wrongdoing surfaced in South Africa, there were no Canadian reporters there to investigate the matter. And the media, politicians and the public, particularly in English Canada, were passionately jingoistic about fighting for the Empire against the Boers.

Many also suspected that the enemy sometimes killed their prisoners, too.

Even the war's critics, such as Quebec nationalist MP Henri Bourassa, might condemn Canada's willingness to send troops overseas for a British cause, but wouldn't dream of questioning the conduct of the troops themselves, says Miller.

"It was a very patriotic time," he says. "News coverage of the war focused very much on the heroism of Canadians."

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