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'Such is war nowadays!': Sport and other pastimes in the British forces during the South African war 1899-1902

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the sport and other pastime activities in which members of the British forces engaged during the South African War (1899–1902). The article questions which sports and other pastime activities were practiced, and why certain activities were sanctioned by the officers and military authorities. The article thus argues that these sport, leisure and artistic activities within the British army in South Africa could be seen as interconnected phenomena, with similar motivations of the service members who practiced the pastimes, and of the officers who sanctioned it.

Introduction

At 14:00 on the afternoon of 22 January 1901, 2 Battalion Prince of Wales's Own West Yorkshire Regiment arrived by train in the town of Middelburg in the Transvaal, seventy miles east of Pretoria. To escape the humid heat of high summer, some of the officers went to the local club for a whisky and soda. Afterwards, they went to the town square where they laid on the grass and listened to the regimental band. In other areas around the town, British soldiers kept themselves busy by playing football or cricket, while others were lounging about, reading, writing letters, or playing cards. One of the officers in the square, Lieutenant Sydney Francis, reflected on these scenes in his diary when he wrote, 'Such is war now-a-days!'[1]

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[1]National Army Museum (hereinafter NAM) 1976-07-49, Photocopy typescript extracts from letters written in diary form by Lt Sidney Goodall Francis, West Yorkshire Regiment, 22 January 1901. Used also in title of this article.

For Lieutenant Francis, as for most British soldiers, the war in South Africa was neither glorious nor exciting. At times, it hardly felt like a war at all. After the British forces had invaded the two Boer republics, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, during 1900, the war descended into a drawn-out guerrilla conflict. The out-numbered and scattered Boer commandos prolonged their resistance by sabotaging railways, bridges, and telegraph lines, and occasionally targeting isolated British convoys. To counter this, the British forces used controversial scorched earth tactics to destroy Boer farmhouses, livestock and crops in order to deprive them of the means of continuing resistance. The war thus degenerated into a slow simmering cat-and-mouse contest with seemingly no end in sight.[2]

This meant that, during the war, the daily lives of most British soldiers were boring, even aimless. Long marches, called treks, over the veldt, and boring sentry duty along the two thousand miles of blockhouse lines defending railways and bridges, offered little excitement. Writing on the experiences in the blockhouses, Thomas Pakenham notes, 'boredom was the enemy that Tommy knew best'.[3] In the eastern Transvaal, Lieutenant Lachlan Gordon-Duff of 1 Gordon Highlanders, wrote in a letter to his father that it was 'extraordinary the way things drag on … we all sit tight and do nothing except fortify. For over a week we talk and do nothing else …'[4] In June 1900, Lance-Corporal F.W. Schofield of 1Yorkshire Regiment, wrote in his diary that there was 'nothing to note. I am sick of this continual misery. Wonder when it will finish.' [5] The war lasted for another two years before Schofield received his answer.

The result of boredom and abundant free time led British soldiers to adopt a wide variety of sport and other pastimes during the war. The officers and military authorities had the challenging task of keeping the troops occupied with healthy and productive pastimes, and in doing so, preventing them from partaking in 'undesirable'

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[2]For general reviews of the course of the war, see Leo Amery (ed), *The Times History of the War in South Africa, 1899–1902*, I–VII, (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1900–1907), and Frederic Maurice and Maurice Harold Grant (eds), *History of the War in South Africa 1899–1902*, I–IV, (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1906–1910), André Wessels, *The Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*: *White man's war, black man's war, traumatic war,* (Bloemfontein: Sun Press, 2017), and for general references, Fransjohan Pretorius, *The A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War,* (Cambridge: Langham, 2010).

[3]Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979), p.538.

[4]Lachlan Gordon-Duff (ed), *With the Gordon Highlanders to the Boer War and Beyond: The Story of Captain Lachlan Gordon-Duff 1880–1914,* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2000), p.178.

[5]War Museum of the Boer Republics (hereinafter WMBR), Copy Archive: Diary of the Boer War 1899–1902 by 4710 Lance Corporal F.W. Schofield, G Company 1st The Princess of Wales's Own 19th (Yorkshire Regiment), 18 June 1900.

activities. The extent to which certain activities were sanctioned and supported, and others suppressed, is insightful in terms of the development of the social and physical culture of the British army at the turn of the nineteenth century. The British army serving in South Africa was in some ways a precursor to the army that served during the First World War only a decade later, in that it was an army largely made up of British and colonial volunteers rather than professional soldiers.[6]

Noteworthy studies into the late Victorian army include several authoritative works by Edward Spiers, who understandably focussed more on the military and social aspects of the war in South Africa than on sport and leisure.[7] A handful of scholars have studied sport within the British army, but they often focussed on broader timeframes. Tony Mason and Eliza Riedi's book *Sport and the Military*, James Campbell's *'The Army Isn't All Work'*, and most recently, Peter Donaldson's *War and the British*, all fall into this category.[8] All three offer excellent oversights into the adoption of sport within the British army during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but they do not include any substantial research on the topic in terms of the South African War. Donaldson's book is an exception, with a chapter, 'We are having a very enjoyable game: Britain, Sport and the South African War, 1899–1902')' being mostly a reprint of a 2018 article with the same title.[9] Donaldson's focus was mainly centred on the reaction of the British public and military authorities to the playing of sport in South Africa, rather than a from below look at the experiences of the soldiers themselves.

The current article expands on these works by taking a specific and more in-depth focus of sport and other pastime activities within the British army during the South

[6]For reviews of the composition of the British forces during the South African War, see Stephen Miller, *Volunteers on the Veld: Britain's Citizen Soldiers and the South African War, 1899–1902,* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), Louis Venter, Marietjie Oelofse, and Johan van Zyl, "The Composition of the Imperial British Forces in the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902: A Military and Socio-Historical Overview", *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 52, no. 2 (2024): pp.53–69.

[7]Edward Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army 1868–1902,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), Edward Spiers, *The Victorian Soldier in Africa,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

[8]Tony Mason and Eliza Riedi, *Sport and the Military: British Armed Forces 1880–1960,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), James D. Campbell, *'The Army Isn't All Work': Physical Culture and the Evolution of the British Army, 1860–1920,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), Peter Donaldson, *Sport, War and the British: 1850 to Present*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

[9]Peter Donaldson, 'We Are Having a Very Enjoyable Game': Britain, Sport and the South African War, 1899–1902, *War in History*, 25, no. 1 (2018).

African War. In defining the boundaries of such activities, the article is concerned with what British soldiers did when they were not fighting, marching, or otherwise engaged in military activities. In doing so, the article fundamentally asks two questions:

- In which pastime activities did British soldiers engage?
- Why and how did the officers and military authorities support certain activities while discouraging others?

In answering these questions, the article argues that sport and other pastime activities within the British army during that period should be studied and understood not as isolated, but rather as interconnected phenomena. There were similar motivations for the service members who participated, as well as for the officers in promoting or prohibiting such activities.

Sport in the British forces

During the war, sport was undoubtedly the most popular and most prevalent pastime in the British army. It is no surprise that sport occupied – and was allowed to occupy – so much of the soldiers' time. The late nineteenth century was a period when organised sport gained a considerable level of popularity and cultural importance in Britain and across the Empire. Sports such as association football, rugby, cricket, hockey, and polo, were codified, formally organised, or became extremely popular between the 1870s and 1890s.[10] In the same period, the playing of sport also became very popular within the British army. The growth of organised sport in the army was a spontaneous and bottom-up development, mainly driven by sports-obsessed junior officers. By that time, sport had been widely adopted in public schools as a form of teaching discipline, subordination, co-operation, obedience, and self-sacrifice. These characteristics were considered equally important in sport and war.[11] Boys from such sports-obsessed public schools largely made up the officer corps, with 62 per cent of regular British officers during the South African War coming from public schools, and 11 per cent from Eton alone.[12] As a group, they revered a heroic idea that wars were fought and won on 'character' and morale rather than as a result of professional training, and as a whole, they attached a high level of importance to sport and its benefits for the army.[13]

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[10]For general reviews of the development of organised sport in Victorian Britain, see Mike Higgins, *The Victorians and Sport,* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), and Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[11]Mason and Riedi, *Sport and the Military*, p.4.

[12]Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army*, p.97.

[13]Ibid., pp.96–99.

The sporting culture within public schools was very closely aligned with broader support for British Imperialism. J A Mangan has stated that many headmasters of Victorian and Edwardian schools believed that Imperialism was a 'moral endeavour and they [schools] were the repositories of effective moral education'. Sports was a central part of this education, as served as a part of inculcating Imperial values, standards, traditions and norms into boys.[14] Furthermore, Mangan argues that athleticism at schools was associated with cohesion, identity, patriotism and morality – characteristics which were deemed essential for public school boys to become Imperialists and consequently, army or navy officers.[15]

Mason and Riedi identified several reasons why sport was allowed to gain such a strong foothold in the peacetime British army in the decades before the South African War. These reasons were a belief that it improved recruitment, nurtured a sense of *esprit de corps*, and improved fitness and physical health.[16] As James Campbell illustrates, the use of sport as part of the physical training regimen of the army was mainly brought about through the passion of junior officers, but it quickly spread to the rank and file.[17] The sport–war analogy also gained unexpected influence in the decades before the war amongst the upper ranks of the army. Senior commanders, such as Lord Wolseley, Commander-in-Chief of the British army between November 1899 and January 1901, were also proponents of the perceived values of sport to the service. 'Being a good sportsman,' Wolseley wrote as a colonel in 1869, 'a good cricketer, good at rackets or any other manly game, is no mean recommendation for staff employment. Such a man, without book lore, is preferable to the most deeply-read one of lethargic habits.'[18] The sentiment that sport was good for the armed forces was not just prevalent within the army, but also within the popular civilian culture. We now know that the Duke of Wellington never said that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton; nevertheless, few Victorians would have disagreed with the sentiment, a sentiment, made especially poignant in Henry Newbolt's 1892 poem 'Vitai Lampada'. As a result of the disastrous defeats of 'Black Week' at the battles of Stormberg (10 December 1899), Magersfontein (11 December 1899), and Colenso (15 December 1899), the British army decided to implement the large-scale recruitment of British and colonial volunteers for service in South Africa. The mass

[14]J.A. Mangan, *The games ethic and imperialism: Aspects of the diffusion of an ideal,* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p.21.
[15]J.A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school: The emergence and consolidation of an educational ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.179-206.
[16]Mason and Riedi, *Sport and the Military*, pp.38–42.
[17]Campbell, *'The Army Isn't All Work,'* Chapter 4.
[18]Quoted in Byron Farwell. *Eminent Victorian Soldiers,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985). p.206.

recruitment of civilian volunteers led to an expansion of sporting activities amongst the members of the army. Peter Donaldson states that the largely middle-class volunteers who swelled the ranks of the army 'brought to the barrack room and parade ground a civilian fervour for games'.[19] Those volunteers however did not spend much time in the barrack rooms or on the parade grounds before being deployed. Because of the need to get boots on the ground in South Africa, volunteer training was often rushed, sometimes lasting only a few weeks. One volunteer described that their two-week-long training consisted of a one-mile running drill before breakfast followed by rifle practice and learning signals in the afternoon.[20]

Time constraints meant that training continued on board the troopships, with the decks of the troopships doubling as parade grounds, shooting ranges, and sports fields. Physical drills, called 'monkey motions' by some soldiers, were practiced on a daily basis.[21] Lieutenant Francis recorded their daily physical exercises on board.

> We have parades all day long, consisting of physical drill and running round the decks, so we are keeping very fit. We have a good scheme for keeping up the shooting – a section is lined up facing the stern – then barrels and boxes are dropped and volleys fired at them until they disappear.[22]

The officers did the same by throwing bottles into the ocean and shooting at them with their revolvers. These drill and shooting exercises soon transformed into competitions between the men from different companies. On board the SS *Ormazon*, the Fifth Australian Contingent held a drill competition between companies for a prize of £10.[23]

Physical drills and shooting competitions were not sufficient to keep the men occupied for the entire duration of the three or four week-long sea voyages. To help pass the time, various types of sport were therefore practiced on board – especially sports that were deemed to aid physical development, such as tug-of-war and boxing, with the

[19]Peter Donaldson, 'We Are Having a Very Enjoyable Game,'p.6.
[20]NAM 2001-07-508: Typed copy of the diary of Pte Thomas James Monday, 1st Vol Bn The Buffs (East Kent Regiment), p.1.
[21]NAM 2005-07-773: Diary, typed transcript, relating to the Boer War service of 3723 Cpl George S Botwright, 1st Bn The Durham Light Infantry, 2 November 1899.
[22]NAM 1976-07-49: Photocopy typescript extracts from letters written in diary form by Lt Sidney Goodall Francis, West Yorkshire Regiment, p.2.
[23]Australian Boer War Memorial (ABWM), "The Diary of Trooper Frederick Edwards," 15 March 1901, https://www.bwm.org.au/soldiers/Frederick_EdwardsNDD.php

boxers sometimes blindfolded for the amusement of the spectators).[24] Cricket was also played on the decks of the troopships, and officers even played tennis on occasion.[25]



Figure 1: A pillow fight aboard the SS *Avoca* en route to South Africa[26]

Once in South Africa, sport not only continued to occupy a large amount of the soldiers' time, but in many cases, was also encouraged. Even during the initial months of the war (prior to the guerrilla warfare period), sport was very common within the ranks of the British army. Association football was especially popular. Some soldiers

[24]NAM 1991-07-177: Bound typescript of diary of Tpr, later SQMS, William E. Rider, Warwickshire Yeomanry, 7 March 1901, Carmen Miller (ed.), *Charlie's First War: South Africa, 1899-1900,* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 22 November 1899.
[25]D.W. Churcher, *From Alexandria to Ladysmith with the 87th: The 1st Battalion Princess Victoria's Royal Irish Fusiliers in South Africa 1899-1900,* (York: Boer War Books, 1984), 8, Gordon-Duff (ed.), *With the Gordon Highlanders*, p.37.
[26]*Black And White Budget,* 25 August 1900, p.662.

reported that they played football within the first week of disembarking in South Africa.[27] In Natal, both the besieged and relief forces spent their spare time occupied in playing football. In the besieged town of Ladysmith, there was a football match between the Natal Carbineers and Natal Mounted Rifles in November 1899, the former winning by two goals to one.[28] In the relief forces, Private Frederick Tucker of the Rifle Brigade, noted in his diary that, among the approximately 22,000-strong force stationed at Frere, football was the 'chief amusement' among the troops. 'One thing to be admired about British soldiers,' he wrote, 'is they will not be denied sport, and if a football is to be found they will have it.'[29] There were even football tournaments, with the West Yorkshire Regiment, for example, holding an inter-company tournament on the Natal front which lasted for several months. The 'Regimental Shield' was won by H Company in the final that was held to mark the occasion of Queen Victoria's birthday on 24 May 1900.[30]

The popularity of football during the war was to be expected considering that it was already one of the most popular sports within the peacetime army.[31] It was certainly also the easiest sport for the British soldiers to play on the African veldt, requiring only a flattish piece of land and a ball. In Victorian Britain, one in 20 men between 18 and 39 years of age were active amateur football players, fuelling participation amongst the volunteers in South Africa.[32] In 1890, there were 190 football clubs in Liverpool, and probably more than 200 in Birmingham.[33] The soldiers never lost interest in the domestic matches that were taking place back home, one soldier noting that when they got newspapers from Britain, the first thing that they did was to look for the latest football results.[34]

Whereas football was a clear favourite among the British soldiers, cricket was also very popular, especially among the English officers and men. In South Africa, cricket

[27]NAM 2001-07-508: Typed copy of the diary of Pte Thomas James Monday, 1st Vol Bn The Buffs (East Kent Regiment), p.3.
[28]Ladysmith Historical Society, *Extracts from Notes Taken on the Boer Campaign by Arthur Joseph Crosby, Natal Carbineers*, (Ladysmith: Wescott, 1976), p.10.
[29]Pamela Todd and David Fordham (eds), *Private Tucker's Boer War Diary: The Transvaal War of 1899, 1900, 1901 & 1902 with the Natal Field Forces,* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1980), p.24.
[30]NAM 1976-07-47: Photocopy typescript of the diary of 4412 Dmr H. Goodwin, 2nd Bn West Yorkshire Regiment, p.17.
[31]Campbell, *'The Army Isn't All Work,'* Chapter 4
[32]Robert Tombs, *The English and Their History*, (London: Penguin Books, 2015), pp.515–516.
[33]Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.151.
[34]Van Dyk ABO Trust: P. Jackson, South African War Diaries 1900, p.49.

matches were often lopsided affairs. In November 1899, for example, the side of the Natal Carbineers were far superior to that of the Natal Mounted Rifles, the former beating the latter by an innings and 43 runs.[35] In January 1901, the Bultfontein garrison was no match for the Cape Mounted Riflemen, who won by an embarrassing margin of 189 runs to 29.[36] There were even matches between civilians and British soldiers. In a match held on 27 January 1900, the townspeople of Prieska, in the north-western border districts of the Cape Colony, were outclassed by the New South Wales Mounted Rifles, who declared their innings on 146 for 7. The team from Prieska could only muster a pitiful 25 and 14 in response.[37]



Figure 2: A game of cricket on the veldt, circa 1900.[38]

[35]Ladysmith Historical Society, *Extracts from Notes*, p.11.
[36]André Wessels (ed), *Anglo-Boer War Diary of Herbert Gwynne Howell,* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1998), p.91.
[37]WMBR Copy Archive: W.H. Barham – Diary of the Boer War, 1899–1901, 27 January 1900.
[38]Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, P00295.700

Cricket and rugby were the most popular sports within the colonial contingents from New Zealand and Australia. These sports were popular because of the cultural exchange with the United Kingdom, and by the turn of the nineteenth century, both rugby and cricket were well established on the colonial sport scenes. For example, by 1900, the four major population centres of New Zealand, Wellington, Dunedin, Christchurch, and Auckland, each had more than forty men's cricket teams playing competitive weekly matches.[39]

According to Peter Horton, rugby suited the 'competitive' and 'rugged' nature of the colonial environment. Horton states that rugby's violent nature and subtext of 'heroism, selflessness and camaraderie' gave it a hold on the culture of colonial Australia.[40] This is opposed to football, which, according to Ian Syson 'failed to embed itself as a component of the national cultural-mythological discourse, especially when it comes to military history.'[41]

Other less popular sports practiced by the British soldiers included rugby, hockey, tennis, and even golf. Lieutenant Gordon-Duff played golf in the Eastern Transvaal on a makeshift course called the Yeomanry Links. Gordon-Duff complained that he was out of practice and that the greens were 'hard and lumpy', which made putting 'a nightmare'.[42] On 30 October 1901, he wrote in a letter, 'I have been golfing a bit every day with a driver; it helps to pass the time, but the excitement consists of losing as few balls as possible.'[43]

It is noteworthy that where the British forces almost invariably played organised sports, the opposing Boers kept busy with so-called *Boeresport*, rural games, such as athletics and horse racing but also included more informal games such as 'leapfrog' and 'egg in the hat'. The Boers also sometimes played sports such as football whilst boxing was popular among the burghers.[44] Boers who were captured and interred in prisoner-of-war camps in South Africa, St Helena, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), India and Bermuda had a far greater exposure to the British organised sport and readily adopted it. The

[39]JP Carr, "The first Golden Age?: A social history of New Zealand Cricket 1914-1939," MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 2001, pp.1-2.
[40]Peter Horton, "Rugby union football in Australian society: An intended consequence of intended actions," *Sport in Society*, 12, no. 7 (2009): pp.968-969.
[41]Ian Syson, "Fronting up: Australian soccer and the First World War," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31, no. 18 (2014): pp.2346-2347.
[42]Gordon-Duff, *With the Gordon Highlanders*, p.239.
[43]Ibid., p.258.
[44]Dean Allen, "Sport and the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa, 1899-1902," in Michael Butterworth (ed.), *Sport and Militarism; Contemporary global perspectives,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp.84-85

monotonous life in these camps encouraged the playing of sports and other leisure activities. The Boers copied many of the organised sports that they observed from the British.[45] On some occasions, the Boers even played against locals and British soldiers. In Colombo, Ceylon for example, a group of Boer prisoners played cricket against a local British team. The Boer lack of cricketing experience showed, as they were beaten by 141 runs.[46]

The highpoint of sport in the British army during the war was undoubtedly the regimental or garrison sports days, also known as 'gymkhanas', which were often held to celebrate special occasions, such as Christmas, New Year, or royal birthdays. These sports days usually consisted of a variety of activities based around athletics and, in mounted units, equestrian competitions. Sergeant Edgar Henry Redway of the Royal Canadian Regiment recorded that, on one such day, the Canadians held a long-distance run, an obstacle race and a 100-yard dash, the winner of the latter clocking an impressive time of 11 seconds.[47] Lieutenant Gordon-Duff gives a rather comical description of a gymkhana where the main event was fence-jumping:

> The race was awfully funny, many of the ponies never having jumped. There was frightful confusion at the first jump, all refusing, however they all scrambled over after a little. There were several falls. There were only two entries for the mule race … We also had a flat race for ponies, and a foot race for the men, altogether a very successful afternoon and a fair attendance.[48]

Tug-of-war was a regular part of such sports days, being considered a healthy and manly activity. In the Royal Artillery, Lieutenant Maturin offered two bottles of whisky to the winners of a regimental tug-of-war competition.[49] There was a tug-of-war competition on Christmas Day during the siege of Ladysmith in which even some of the ladies of the town took part.[50] To celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday on 24 May

[45]Floris JG van der Merwe, "Sport in Concentration and Prisoner of War Camps during the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902," in Gregor Reindt, Anke Hilbrenner, and Dittmar Dahlmann (eds), *Sport under unexpected circumstances: Violence, discipline, and leisure in penal and internment camps,* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), pp.51-54.
[46]Ibid., p.56.
[47]Queen's Own Rifles of Canada Regimental Museum and Archive (hereinafter QORCRMA), "South African War Diary of Edgar Henry Redway," 17 January 1900, https://qormuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/04650-redway-diary-south-africa.pdf. Accessed 23/10/26.
[48]Gordon-Duff, *With the Gordon Highlanders*, p.223.
[49]Walter Mitton (ed), *The Boer War: A Bombardier's Memoirs*, (Knebworth: Able, 1996), p.42.
[50]Churcher, *From Alexandria to Ladysmith with the 87th*, p.63.

1900, Lieutenant Herbert Gwynne Howell of the Cape Mounted Rifles gave a description of the activities of one such day, 'Queen's birthday. Lovely day. Divine service 8 o'clock. Full parade all hands 11.30 and marchpast. Usual cheers, etc. Sports in afternoon. Artillery won tug-of-war on horseback. Cape Mounted Riflemen won ditto on foot. … great success.'[51]

As mentioned by Gwynne Howell, gymkhanas sometimes included some head-turning events, such as mounted wrestling on mule back and mounted tug-of-war, but perhaps one of the most creative events was organised by 5 New Zealand contingent, who held a unique kind of horse race, called the 'V.C.' (Victoria Cross). This was a mounted race over four flights of hurdles, picking up a dummy representing a wounded fellow soldier, and returning over the hurdles carrying the dummy; thus, saving the 'wounded man' and earning the rider the distinguished medal for valour.[52] Equestrian sport naturally attracted betting. The men under Lance Corporal Murray Jackson of 2 Hampshire Regiment for example, held horse races which featured what he called 'some pretty tall betting'.[53] Jackson wryly remarked that he, as lance corporal, did not stop these races on account of him having the fastest horse.[54]

Celebratory sports days were used as propaganda in British newspapers and magazines to downplay the difficulties of campaigning in South Africa, furthering a 'cult of athleticism' in the British public.[55] The illustrated news magazine *Black and White Budget*, for example reported on 1 December 1900 about a sports day celebrating the birthday of the King of Portugal, where a team of the Gordon Highlanders competed in tug-of-war against a team from the Royal Irish. When the Gordons won the contest, the publication gave a rather comical reason why. 'Owing to the incessant and useless beeswaxing of rifle butts, the Gordons have developed very powerful muscles,' the publication reported.[56]

Among equestrian sports, none surpassed polo for widespread popularity, especially amongst officers. Lieutenant Gwynne Howell recorded that they played up to three times a week in the garrison towns of Klerksdorp and Ventersdorp during the latter stages of 1901.[57] This is no surprise, as polo was a staple of the officer class in the

[51]Wessels, *Anglo-Boer War Diary*, p.50.
[52]Frank Perham, *The Kimberley Flying Column: Being Reminiscences of Service in the South African War of 1899–1903*, (Timaru: unknown., 1957), p.63.
[53]Murray Cosby Jackson, *A Soldier's Diary: South Africa 1899–1902,* (Winchester: Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum Trustees, 1999), p.48.
[54]Jackson, *A Soldier's Diary*, p.48.
[55]Donaldson, 'We Are Having a Very Enjoyable Game,' p.9.
[56]*Black and White Budget*, 1 December 1900, p.283.
[57]Wessels, *Anglo-Boer War Diary*, p.156.

peacetime army, especially in India. Mason and Riedi argue that the high financial costs of purchasing ponies and maintaining grooms associated with polo served to maintain social standards amongst the officer class. 'At the end of the nineteenth century, as polo developed into a focus of regimental activity and pride, it became an almost compulsory activity for young officers – especially cavalry officers.'[58]



Figure 3: Polo match played as part of a Cape Mounted Police Gymkhana at Vryburg, Cape Colony, in 1901.[59]

Hunting was another sport that was associated with the officer class, specifically those from the landed gentry. Hunting was encouraged within the army because it was said to promote 'an eye for the country', and was useful for judging distances and scanning horizons for Boer commandos.[60] Apart from the perceived benefits of hunting as a training ground for war, it was also of practical value for the soldiers in South Africa, being both an activity to occupy free time and to secure extra food, something that

[58]Mason and Riedi, *Sport and the Military*, p.59.
[59]Courtesy of the McGregor Museum, mmkp4952.
[60]Ibid., p.43.

was always scarce during the war. Despite excessive hunting during the nineteenth century, wild game was still plentiful at the time, and soldiers hunted extensively.



Figure 4: Colonel A. T. Slogget, Superintendent of the Imperial Yeomanry Hospital, posing with his trophies after a springbok hunt.[61]

Major John Pine-Coffin of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment recorded that he hunted in the Bloemfontein area every day during May and June 1900.[62] Pine-Coffin even complained that he was accidentally shot at while hunting, drolly noting in his diary that his fellow British soldiers 'are more dangerous than the Boers'.[63] When stationed in the northern Transvaal in September 1900, Lieutenant Francis described that the West Yorkshire Regiment had a 'great time out there' owing to there being 'lots of buck to be shot'.[64] Lieutenant Gordon-Duff and his fellow officers of 1 Gordon Highlanders hired black child servants as beaters and retrievers when they went

[61]Courtesy of the Van Dyk ABO Trust.
[62]Susan Pine-Coffin (ed), *One Man's Boer War: The Diary of John Edward Pine-Coffin,* (Bideford: Edward Gaskell, 1999), pp.60–90.
[63]Pine-Coffin, *One Man's Boer War*, p.91.
[64]NAM 1976-07-49: Photocopy typescript extracts from letters written in diary form by Lt Sidney Goodall Francis, West Yorkshire Regiment, p.27.

hunting for game birds, recreating as much as they could the grouse hunts they were used to back home.[65]

Besides hunting animals, some members of the British army also kept them as pets. There were the usual ones, such as dogs and cats – one unfortunate regimental cat was named 'Emergency Rations' – but here were also some more unusual pets.[66] Lieutenant Gordon-Duff kept an ill-tempered aardvark, which spat at anyone who came close to it.[67] A Squadron of the New South Wales Mounted Infantry branded a sable antelope in the hope of making it the regimental pet, which – needless to say – they did not succeed in keeping for very long.[68] Other pets that were kept included goats, pigs, monkeys, baboons, and even lizards.[69]

There was some vocal opposition against the sport–war analogy, notably from the Tommies' bard himself, Rudyard Kipling, who wrote a scathing poem, *The Islanders*, criticising among other things Britain's sporting culture. Kipling's criticism of the 'flannelled fools at the wicket' and 'muddied oafs at the goals' was a direct reference to the failures of the British war effort in South Africa.[70] This was part of a larger debate in Britain around sporting culture and its effect within the armed forces. Some criticised the officers for the amount of time and energy spent playing sport, including Leo Amery, editor of the influential *The Times History of the War in South Africa*. According to Donaldson, polo and hunting were even used as shorthand for an unreformed army culture.[71] The South African War was both the high tide for the playing of sport within the British army, and the turning point towards a more professional, less sport-orientated order that burgeoned as a result of the ineffective performance of the army in South Africa.

Whatever the criticism back in Britain might have been, it had little effect on the playing of sport within the army in South Africa. There does not seem to have been much awareness of this debate amongst the rank and file, and senior officers continued to advocate for the playing of sport. This may in part be due to reluctance to move away from the sport-as-training-for-war metaphor and the 'gentleman-amateur' ideal as

[65]Gordon-Duff, *With the Gordon Highlanders*, p.192.
[66]Byron Farwell, *The Great Boer War*, (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p.371.
[67]Gordon-Duff, *With the Gordon Highlanders*, p.258.
[68]WMBR Copy Archive: W.H. Barham – Diary of the Boer War, 1899–1901, 7 June 1900.
[69]Johan Hattingh and André Wessels, "Life in the British Blockhouses during the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902," *South African Journal of Cultural History*, 13, no. 2 (1999): p.52; Farwell, *The Great Boer War*, p.371.
[70]Donaldson, 'We Are Having a Very Enjoyable Game,' pp.4–5.
[71]Ibid., p.16.

general principle but in the South African case, specifically, there were more immediate advantages in allowing the playing of sport during the campaign. The excessive amount of free time on the hands of the members of the British forces meant that there were plentiful opportunities to stray into mischiefs, such as drunkenness, prostitution and theft. Tom Williams made this argument when discussing the leisure and tourist activities of the occupying British Rhineland army between 1918 and 1929. He stated:

> An analysis of British soldiers' tourism and leisure activities in the occupied Rhineland reveals an underlying strategy not only to manage soldiers' free time by proposing healthy, respectable and educational activities but also to limit interactions between the occupying forces and the civilian population.[72]

This is supported by Lord Kitchener's stance on occupying soldiers' time in India when shortly after the end of the war in South Africa he was appointed Commander in Chief of the British forces in India. Kitchener stated in 1903, 'all healthy outdoor sports and games' acted as a bulwark against drink, idleness and sexual promiscuity amongst the men on campaign.[73] The question of how much his experience in South Africa over the preceding two years had influenced this opinion is up for scrutiny. It may thus be argued that sport in the British army during the South African War was promoted by officers as a practical way of keeping soldiers occupied, rather than as grandiose notions of fair play or training. Keeping soldiers within watching range was essential for officers in preventing them from partaking in forbidden activities. Two cases in point are alcohol abuse and sexual misconduct among the British troops. Paul Kopperman states that alcohol abuse within the late Victorian army was far less prevalent compared to its eighteenth century equivalent. Kopperman argues that the officers' ability to keep watch over their men meant they could better monitor their intake of liquor.[74] This is part of a broader development within the late Victorian army that officers became increasingly concerned with the off-duty activities of their men, and with preventing immoral or illegal activities. Sport was thus a popular and effective way of keeping soldiers occupied and in camp, where the officers could observe them. Evidence of the use of sport in this way by officers can be illustrated in the fact that laying out sports fields was often given priority when camp was set up. At times, both a cricket and football field would be laid out, which could take the better part of a day's labour to do.[75] The prevalence of officially sanctioned sports days and the number

[72]Tom Williams, "Keeping the Occupiers Occupied: Leisure and Tourism in the British Rhine Army, 1918–1929," *British Journal for Military History*, 9, no. 3 (2023): p.110.
[73]Quoted from Mason and Riedi, *Sport and the Military*, p.38.
[74]Paul E. Kopperman, "'The Cheapest Pay': Alcohol Abuse in the Eighteenth-century British Army," *The Journal of Military History*, 60 (1996): p.468.
[75]NAM 1980-10-15: Manuscript diary of L/Cpl F. Rutledge, H. Coy 2nd East Surrey Regt, 16 August 1900., Van Dyk ABO Trust Diary of the Hon. E.H. Lygon, p.23.; WMBR

of mentions by officers of the matches played further supports the fact that officers often initiated and supported the sporting activities.

Sexual misconduct was another example of unwanted behaviour that officers attempted to control. This was an especially challenging task, as the British forces were broadly spread out across South Africa and often intermingled with the civilian population. Bill Nasson argues that British troops paid scant regard to the colour line in their public consorting with women, in contrast to the more racially exclusive social norms of South Africa. Alert to the potential damage to the standing of the army, especially among the Cape Afrikaner population, British commanders attempted to contain soldiers from consorting with local women, especially black women.[76] Prostitution was furthermore problematic for the British authorities for its connotations with the spread of sexually transmissible diseases.[77] Despite attempts to limit the freedom that soldiers had to stray out of camp, especially at night, there certainly were instances of prostitution. For example Trooper Frank Perham of 5 New Zealand Contingent wrote of a brothel in Kimberley, describing that, 'at any time any of the boys wished to get over the traces, they could go to 'houses of ill fame', which he labelled 'numerous'. 'A number of the boys,' he wrote, 'did pay visits to these places and some of them to their later regret.'[78] He was quick to absolve himself, however, writing that he himself made a point of giving such places 'a wide berth'.[79] He later gave a detailed description of the time he did visit a brothel in Kimberley, noting that the prostitutes were multi-racial, supporting Nasson's argument. Prostitution and other sexual misconduct were obviously extremely difficult to police, as the British forces and the civilians were broadly spread out across South Africa, often in isolated convoys with little oversight. It was easier and more effective for the military authorities to attempt to prevent such illicit activities by organising or allowing alternative leisure activities.

Other Pastimes in the British Forces

It became increasingly difficult to police soldiers' pastime activities when they were on leave in the cities. If the veldt and garrison towns of South Africa were places of sport, the cities were places of leisure. By 1901, the British army was practically in complete control of the metropolitan areas of the former Boer republics. These cities were

Copy Archive: Extracts from letters written by Captain George Vernon Clarke, 8 May 1900.

[76]Bill Nasson, "Tommy Atkins in South Africa," in *History Matters: Selected Writings, 1970–2016*, (Cape Town: Penguin, 2016), p.39.

[77]Philippa Levine, "'A Multitude of Unchaste Women': Prostitution in the British Empire," *Journal of Women's History*, 15, no. 4 (2004): p.159.

[78]Perham, *The Kimberley Flying Column*, p.42.

[79]Ibid., p.42.

referred to as 'protected areas', and within them, civilian life more or less returned to normal.[80] When enjoying the advantages of cities, such as restaurants, hotels, shops, and social gatherings, officers had a great advantage owing to having more free time, money to spend, and high social status.

Shortly after the occupation of Johannesburg in June 1900, Lieutenant Gordon-Duff went to a restaurant where he had eggs and beefsteaks, with coffee and cakes for dessert.[81] He appreciated that he could eat at a table and sit on a chair, but he complained that the prices were very high, describing Johannesburg as the 'most extortionate place' he had ever been.[82] In the cities, there were numerous balls, dances, and other social gatherings where service members and civilians intermingled. These events were almost exclusively reserved for officers. They were also very popular. Lieutenant Gwynne Howell wrote that a ball hosted by Lady Methuen, General Paul Methuen's wife, in Pretoria was so crowded that he left after a few dances.[83] A captain with the Royal Field Artillery wrote in September 1901 that in Johannesburg, he attended 'recherché' dinner parties twice a week, while a lieutenant with 1 King's Dragoon Guards recorded that he regularly attended roulette and garden parties with ladies in Cape Town.[84] Hospitals also offered a unique opportunity to socialise, and several officers mention in their letters and diaries that, while convalescing, they played tennis and croquet and had tea and picnics with nurses.[85]

[80]Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p.536.
[81]Gordon-Duff, *With the Gordon Highlanders*, p.103.
[82]Ibid.
[83]Wessels, *Anglo-Boer War Diary*, p.169.
[84]WMBR Copy Archive: Extracts from letters written by Captain George Vernon Clarke, 5 September 1900, WMBR Copy Archive: Lieutenant Vere-Wayte-Wood – 1st King's Dragoon Guards, South Africa, 8–10 April 1901.
[85]Wessels, *Anglo-Boer War Diary*, p.161.



Figure 5: Nurse A.G. Jones and another nurse on a picnic with some officers at the No. 7 Hospital at Mooi River, Natal .[86]

Some troops were upset about the time officers spent in the company of ladies. On 23 January 1902, Private Walter Putland (Middlesex Regiment) voiced his displeasure in a diary entry:

> [O]ne would not think there were Boers a few miles from here, officers playing polo, tennis, with ladies and plenty of dinner and tea parties, there are plenty of Balls [*sic*] but not for Thomas Atkins, he is still the same absent minded beggar as he was when the war first broke out, and if officers wifes [*sic*] continue to come out of England and stay here, I am thinking the War will never be over.[87]

In the larger towns, soldiers could go to see professional plays and shows. In Bloemfontein, the town hall was known by the British soldiers as the 'Vaudeville

[86]Courtesy of the Van Dyk ABO Trust.
[87]Alan Putland (ed), "The Personal Diary of Private Walter Putland," 23 January 1901, http://samilitaryhistory.org/diaries/diaputld.html.

Theatre'.[88] Lance-Corporal Syd Critten (9th Battalion, Imperial Yeomanry) went there to see *The Private Secretary* and *I don't like London*, while Trooper Frederick Edwards saw *Charlie's Aunt* in August 1901.[89] In Kimberley, Trooper Perham saw performances of *Ye mariners of England*, *Rip van Winkle* and *A message from Mars*.[90] He also mentioned in his diary that he went to Kimberley during his free time to see the bioscope in the town hall.[91]

The soldiers who were stationed on the veldt outside the cities and larger towns had to be more creative, especially at night when it was too dark to play sport or hunt. Amateur dramatic and musical concerts (or concert parties) were the chief recreation. Such concerts typically consisted of a repertoire of events that included instrumental solos, singing, dancing, and recitations.[92] Some of the songs that were performed at these concert parties were *Goodbye Mother Annie*, *Unexpectedly*, *The Lodger In Our Yard*, *What's Up*, *Stalls & Boxes*, *4 & 20 Girls*, *It's a Fine Quiet Place Where I Am Lodging Now*, and *The Irish Jubilee*, usually concluding with the national anthem.[93] As early as December 1899, Sergeant Redway wrote that the Canadians put up a concert with anything that could be used as an instrument, including tin cans and foghorns.[94] The Scottish regiments played their bagpipes in the evenings around campfires, and even during the siege of Ladysmith, the Natal Carbineers formed a band, which consisted of a big drum, side drum, triangle, and eight tin whistles.[95] What the Tommies lacked in instruments, they made up for with enthusiasm.

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[88]Derek du Bruyn and André Wessels, "The British Soldiers' Bloemfontein: Impressions and Experiences during the Time of the British Occupation and Lord Roberts's Halt, 13 March – 3 May 1900," *Navorsinge van die Nasionale Museum Bloemfontein*, 29, no. 3 (2013): p.51.

[89]Jenny Hardwick (ed), "The Letters of Syd Critten, Imperial Yeomanry from March 1900 to May 1901," 17 November 1900, http://samilitaryhistory.org/diaries/critten.html (Accessed 23/10/26), ABWM, "The Diary of Trooper Frederick Edwards," 16 August 1901, https://www.bwm.org.au/soldiers/Frederick_EdwardsNDD.php (Accessed 23/10/26).

[90]Perham, *The Kimberley Flying Column*, p.42.

[91]Ibid., p.62.

[92]NAM 2001-11-174: Typed transcript of a diary kept by 4645 Tpr William Atkinson-Cluer, A sqn 1st Royal Dragoons, 3.

[93]See for example NAM 1976-07-47: Photocopy typescript of the diary of 4412 Dmr H. Goodwin, 2nd Bn West Yorkshire Regiment, 11, Gordon-Duff, *With the Gordon Highlanders*, 40, QORCRMA, "South African War Diary of Edgar Henry Redway," 17 January 1900.

[94]QORCRMA, "South African War Diary of Edgar Henry Redway," 25 December 1899.

[95]Ladysmith Historical Society, *Extracts from Notes*, p.18.

Helen Barlow argues that such concert parties had a dual purpose within the British army, namely as a tool of soft power to 'enforce a sense of authority, discipline and order' as well as to 'boost morale and solidarity in situations of tension and conflict'.[96] Both these were very clearly visible in the case of the South African War. Just as the role of sport by day was to boost morale and build a sense of *esprit de corps* amongst the service members, so too did such concerts in the evenings. Lieutenant Gordon-Duff reported a 'magnificent' concert that the Gordon Highlanders and an Australian unit put together.

> It was a glorious night and the stage was a wagon at the foot of Camp Kopje, the audience being seated on the slope. The performers were all men [privates], ours and the Australians. Some of the items were wonderfully clever. There were all sorts of songs and duets, and recitations and violin solos etc.[97]

The use of such evocative terms – 'magnificent', 'glorious', 'wonderfully clever' – indicates that these concerts also improved the general mood of life on the veldt. Another example is that of a trooper in the Imperial Yeomanry, who wrote that for New Year's celebrations, they held a concert party around a bonfire 'just to let the Boers know we were enjoying ourselves despite their sniping'.[98] Similar to sport, concerts also served to keep men occupied and out of trouble. John Mackenzie-Rogan, reflecting on his time as a regimental bandmaster in the Coldstream Guards, praised the perceived advantage of these musical concerts for soldiers stationed in India.

> The band performances vary the dreary monotony of cantonment life and help to dispel the depression consequent thereon. Their effect upon the general health and tone of the troops is incalculable … daily programmes of light and lively music have acted as a wholesome tonic to the community, and in many cases have helped to restrain the men from indulgence in drink and other excesses.[99]

[96]Helen Barlow, "From the Band of Musick to the Concert Party, Ca. 1780–1918: Musical Entertainment in the British Army," *Music in Art*, 41, no. 1/2 (2016): p.83.
[97]WMBR Copy Archive: Diary of the Boer War written by Pri. Richard Coyle, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment March 1900 – March 1901, 20; Gordon-Duff, *With the Gordon Highlanders*, p.57.
[98]Hardwick, "The Letters of Syd Critten," 1 January 1901.
[99]Quoted in Barlow, "From the Band of Musick to the Concert Party," pp.85–6.



Figure 6: Officers who won the 'costume race' as part of the Easter celebrations during the siege of Mafeking.[100]

Apart from sport, hunting, or musical concerts, soldiers spent their free time in innumerable other casual pastimes, especially in the quiet periods between other organised activities. Playing cards was very popular, the games of choice being whist and napoleon – called nap.[101] In his memoirs, Burgher Frederick Botha recalled that his commando once overran a blockhouse while the British soldiers inside were playing cards.[102] Card games invariably led to gambling. 5 New Zealand contingent, for example, played nap for threepence a corner.[103] Private Monday of 1 Volunteer Battalion, East Kent Regiment, noted in November 1900 that the men of his company were gambling away the £2 pay that they had received only two days earlier.[104] Gambling was so widespread that Lance Corporal Jackson wrote how even their chaplain staked money, ostensibly to show the men it was possible to lose without

[100]*Black and White Budget*, 30 June 1900.
[101]NAM 1991-07-177: Bound typescript of diary of Tpr, later SQMS, William E. Rider, Warwickshire Yeomanry, 7 March 1901, Perham, *The Kimberley Flying Column*, p.30.
[102]WMBR 05796/00001: Personal experiences of Frederick Gerhardus Botha during the Boer war, 1899–June 1902, p.91.
[103]Perham, *The Kimberley Flying Column*, p.30.
[104]NAM 2001-07-508: Typed copy of the diary of Pte Thomas James Monday, 1st Vol Bn The Buffs (East Kent Regiment), p.19.

using foul language.[105] Technically gambling was not allowed but, as it was almost impossible to police effectively, officers turned a blind eye, especially if it kept men in camp and away from worse distractions. Lieutenant Carey complained that he ordered his men that, if they 'must' gamble, they had to do it 'privately and unbeknown' to him, exasperatedly adding that it was 'very foolish!'.[106]



Figure 7: Bivouac & troops playing cards.[107]

Reading and writing letters were further pastimes in which almost all soldiers participated. Mostly starved of news, Tommies often asked in their letters for papers and magazines to be sent to them. Bombardier Mitton noted in his diary, 'tis a great treat to sit down with a paper … any old paper is of interest to us.'[108] After three weeks' worth of mail arrived at once at their camp, a lance corporal in the Imperial Yeomanry noted that they stayed up into the small hours of the morning reading their letters and papers.[109] Major Churcher described the longing for letters and news from home as 'insupportable'. 'No one', he wrote, 'who has not been through it can realise the utter misery of it all.'[110]

[105]Jackson, *A Soldier's Diary,* p.4.
[106]Arthur Carey (ed), *Dearest Mother: Arthur Carey's Letters Home* (*S.l.: s.n., s.a.*), 17 October 1901.
[107]Courtesy of the War Museum of the Boer Republics, AG 15035.
[108]Mitton, *The Boer War*, p.65.
[109] Hardwick, "The Letters of Syd Critten," 18 November 1900.
[110] Churcher, *From Alexandria to Ladysmith with the 87th*, p.75.

Conclusion

The 'utter misery of it all' ended on 31 May 1902, with the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging. It concluded a war which had lasted for more than two and a half years and involved approximately 448,000 British and imperial soldiers. As a result of the guerrilla warfare in South Africa, British soldiers had an abundance of free time, which they spent engaging in sport and other pastimes. Until recently, scholars have predominantly studied sport and other pastimes within the British army as separate phenomena, often over a long period. Scholars have also focussed predominantly, and justly, on the cultural side of such pastimes. Sport, for example, has been studied as a cultural phenomenon within British society generally and the army specifically. The same can be said of tourism and artistic activities. This has however meant that the specific situation and requirements of campaigning in South Africa have been undervalued when specifically discussing sport and other pastimes during the South African War.

In South Africa, such sport and other pastimes were often allowed and encouraged by officers as meaningful pastimes, which served to keep the men occupied during the long periods of inactivity. This had a two-fold purpose. Firstly, it was meant to keep up morale and create a sense of *esprit de corps* within and between regiments, especially considering that the British forces in South Africa were an amalgam of regular professional soldiers and British and colonial volunteers. Secondly, troops who were actively busy with sport, hunting, concert parties, and other pastimes were less likely to indulge in unwanted behaviours, such as drunkenness, prostitution, or theft. Officers could closely observe the behaviours of the men under their command when they were engaged in sport and other pastime activities.

The South African War can thus be seen as a turning point in the British army's relationship with sport and other pastimes. During the war, sport started to lose its central and almost unquestioned place as a form of training for war. On the other hand, officers and military commanders started to realise the use of sport and other pastimes as a way to occupy the time of soldiers, and keep them under observation in order to improve discipline and boost morale as wars started to become more drawn out. The same pattern for the use of sport and other pastime for these purposes thus becomes clear during the World Wars and after. In 1917, during the First World War, all unit sports championships and squad PT was codified in a series of rules and doctrine that was governed by a single body after the war – the Army Physical and Recreational Training Staff.[111] Organised, centralised sport and recreation continued to expand throughout the twentieth century, and with the advent of national service

[111]See Campbell, *'The Army Isn't All Work'*, Chapter 12: "The Greater Game: Wartime Recreational Training" for a description of how the Army sports and physical culture was centralized and expanded during the First World War.

that mobilised millions of men outside of war situations, required the perpetual availability of such activities to keep service members occupied during long spells of boredom and inactivity.