

BLOODY SUNDAY

Donegan & Manion Killed at Paardeberg Drift

Before Canada honored its war dead on Remembrance Day, and before there was an Armistice Day, for nearly two decades Canadians honored those who fell in the country's first foreign war at ceremonies marking Paardeberg Day every February 27th

Between 1899 and 1902, as Britain fought the Boer Republics in southern Africa, 7,368 young men¹ from Canada responded to the call of King² and Empire. Two hundred and sixty-seven of those died in the conflict; 34 of them at the Battle of Paardeberg³ where Canadian troops were credited with securing Britain's first victory of the war. Among the 34 were two Perth men, John Andrew Donegan and William Thomas Manion.

Britain had seized the Cape Colony from the Dutch in 1795⁴ prompting successive waves of the original Dutch settlers to trek east and north to establish new homes beyond the reach of British influence. In time these Voortrekker Boer⁵ settlements organized as the independent, self governing, Republics of Natalia, Transvaal⁶ (recognized by the British in 1852) and the Orange Free State (recognized by the British in 1854). For half a century Britain was content with control of the Cape of Good Hope, but in 1843 forcibly annexed the Republic of Natalia (Natal). In 1867 diamonds were discovered near the Vaal River in Griuqualand⁷, on the border of the Orange Free State, and Griuqualand was quickly annexed. Then, in 1877, the British annexed the Transvaal itself. Boer resentment simmered and in December 1880 they revolted. The first Boer War of 1880-1881 forced the British to recognize full self-government for the Transvaal and Orange Free State Boers, although under British suzerainty.

Five years later gold was discovered in the Transvaal, near present-day Johannesburg. The resulting influx of British investment and immigrants seeking to make their fortune led to Boer fears of being outnumbered in their own country, and to increasing British interference in the State's internal affairs. Negotiations failed in June 1899 and in October Transvaal President Paul Kruger⁸ gave the British 48 hours to withdraw their troops from the borders of both republics. The British rejected the ultimatum and, on October 11, 1899, launched an invasion of the Natal and Cape Colonies setting of the Second Boer War of 1899-1902.

¹ There were also 12 nursing sisters, one of whom was Mary Ellen 'Minnie' Affleck (1874-1956) of Middleville.

² When the first Canadians arrived in South Africa in November 1900 Queen Victoria was actually still on the throne. She died January 22, 1901 and King Edward VII assumed the throne and was the reigning Monarch through most of the Boer War.

³ 'Horse Mountain' in Afrikaans.

⁴ In 1795 the Dutch Batavian Republic was created in an alliance with Revolutionary France.

⁵ Although the word 'Boer' came to define a 'race' and a 'nationality', in Dutch or Afrikaans the word simply means 'farmer'.

⁶ Transvaal was officially named the South African Republic.

⁷ An area occupied by a people mixed race speaking Afrikaans.

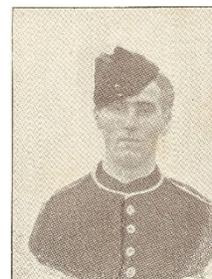
⁸ Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger (1825-1904), 5th President of the Transvaal 1883-1900.

The Boers' pre-emptive strikes quickly laid siege to British garrisons at Mafeking (October 1899), Kimberly (October 1899) and Ladysmith (November 1899). Stunned by the capacity, mobility and battlefield skill of the Boer's, Britain sent reinforcements from England and India, and called for further assistance from its Colonies and Dominions. In the end Britain fielded an army of 500,000 against 88,000 armed Boers.

Canadian opinion was sharply divided on the question of sending troops to southern Africa. Anglo Canadians were generally enthusiastic supporters of Britain's annexation of the Boer Republics, but French Canadians saw aggressive British imperialism as a threat to their own survival. International criticism of British policy in southern Africa was also loud and sympathy for the Boers widespread, particularly in France, Holland and Germany. Canadian Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier⁹ was reluctant to send troops and the issue created a cabinet crisis. Even Governor General Earl Minto¹⁰ wrote privately that he regretted Canada becoming involved in such an *"unjust conflict"*. Nevertheless, under pressure from a jingoist Anglo Canadian press, the government agreed to authorize a token force of 1,000 volunteer infantry.

As Canada did not have a standing army, volunteers who came forward were mainly drawn from units of the Active Militia. The 'First Contingent' of 1,039 men was organized as the 2nd Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) and placed under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Otter¹¹. The *"gallant thousand"*, as Minister of Militia Frederick Borden¹² called them, sailed aboard the *SS Sardinian*¹³ from Quebec City on October 30, 1900. As the war progressed, 6,300 more Canadians would be sent to augment the British Army in southern Africa.

John Andrew Donegan was born at Perth on December 17, 1878 to Patrick J. Donegan (1838-1900) and Margaret Manion (1851-1922). His father was *"engine driver on the old Perth and Smiths Falls Local for many years, being afterwards promoted to the position of Inspector of Locomotives in the C.P.R. shops at London, Ont."*¹⁴ John Donegan was educated at Perth and at St. Peter's School and the Collegiate Institute in London. On leaving school, he worked at Pocock Brothers boot and shoe store, and then in the C.P.R. freight office in Chatham. Donegan was a member of the 26th Middlesex Light Infantry Active Militia and, although married with two young children, when the Boer War began, enlisted with the RCR ('B' Company).



William Thomas Manion was born on the 3rd Concession of Bathurst Township on May 25, 1876, the son of James Thomas Manion (1848-1905) and Catherine O'Brien (1856-1889). Prior to enlisting with the RCR ('C' Company), Manion had been a member of with the 10th Royal Grenadier Regiment of Active Militia at Toronto and had previously served six years

⁹), Canadian Prime Minister 1896-1911.

¹⁰ Kynynmond Elliot, 4th Earl of Minto (1845-1914).

¹¹ William Dismor Otter (1843-1929). He is described in one history of the RCR campaign in southern Africa as a *"bloody minded martinet"*.

¹² Frederick William Borden (1847-1917), Minister of Militia 1896-1911. Borden's son was among the 'gallant thousand' and was killed in South Africa.

¹³ The overcrowded ship was the dubbed the *SS Sardine* by the men.

¹⁴ *Perth Courier*, February 23, 1900.

with the 14th Princess of Wales Rifles Active Militia at Kingston. He was employed by the Dominion Radiator Company, Toronto, where his fellow workers presented him with a purse of \$75 when he left for South Africa. When he enlisted he was engaged to marry Mary Cousins of Toronto.¹⁵

Donegan and Manion were second cousins. Manion's maternal grandfather and Donegan's paternal grandfather were brothers.¹⁶

Privates Donegan and Manion reached Cape Town on November 20, 1900 to join a British Army in a state of shock. Over the previous two months British troops had either been forced to surrender to Boer Commandos or were besieged in the garrison towns. Then came 'Black Week', when British forces were defeated at Magersfontein (December 11, 1899) and Colenso (December 15, 1899). A month later they were defeated again at Spioenkop (January 24, 1900).

With reinforcements arriving, in February 1900 the British Army changed its approach. In an effort to bring the highly mobile Boer Commando units to fixed battle, instead of moving exclusively along railway lines vulnerable to ambush, troops were sent marching directly across the veldt toward the Boer capitals of Bloemfontein (Orange Free State) and Pretoria (Transvaal). Late in the day on February 17th leading elements of the 15,000 strong British 6th Division closed on the circled wagons of Boer General Piet Cronjé's¹⁷ 5,000-man Commando dug in on the banks of the Modder River at Paardeburg Drift¹⁸ between Kimberly and Bloemfontein.

Sixth Division Commander Lieutenant-General Thomas Kelly-Kenny¹⁹ deployed to lay siege to Cronjé's laager, intending to use his superiority in artillery to shell the Boers into surrender. Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Herbert Kitchener²⁰ however overruled Kelly-Kenny and ordered a series of infantry and cavalry attacks on the Boer trenches and rifle pits for the morning of February 18th. The battles of 'Black Week' had already demonstrated the cost of frontal attacks on entrenched Boers, and the result at Paardeberg Drift was no different.²¹

After an all-night march of 24 miles, 930 officers and men of the RCR reached Paardeberg Drift at dawn the following morning. After gulping down a field ration of biscuit, coffee and rum the regiment was ordered across the river to occupy some high ground named

¹⁵ In December 1920 the *Perth Courier* reported that Manion had taken out a life insurance policy before his departure and that the Ocean Accident & Guarantee Company had paid out \$1,000 to his fiancée.

¹⁶ *Perth Courier*, February 23, 1900.

¹⁷ Pieter Ambrose Cronjé (1836-1911). Cronjé had also commanded Boer forces in the 1st Boer War (1880-1881). In 1899 he laid the sieges of Kimberley and Mafeking and defeated the British at the Battle of Magersfontein. Taken prisoner at Paardeberg he spent the remainder of the war in detention on St. Helena Island. Ridiculed by other Boer Generals for his surrender at Paardeberg he never returned to South Africa, but joined a side-show at Coney Island, New York.

¹⁸ A 'drift' in Afrikaans is a river ford.

¹⁹ Sir Thomas Kelly-Kenny (1840-1914). A close personal friend of King George VII he was later appointed Adjutant-General of the British Army.

²⁰ Horatio Herbert Kitchener (1850-1916), Lord Kitchener of Khartoum. During WWI Kitchener would serve as Secretary of State for War (1914-1915) in the British Cabinet.

²¹ At Paardeberg Drift (and similar Boer War bayonet charges) the British Army learned nothing about the futility of frontal infantry assaults on entrenched positions. Fifteen years later the same tactics would be employed against entrenched Germans in France and Belgium with massively costlier results.

'Gun Hill'. The 50-yard wide Modder River was in flood but by clinging to a single rope strung by the engineers the crossing was achieved by about 11:00 a.m.



The RCR crossing the Modder, February 18, 1900

The Canadians linked up with the Shropshire Regiment on 'Gun Hill'. At about mid-day they were ordered to advance. Two Companies moved forward down a low slope and into murderous fire from the Boer rifle pits. The leading troops went to ground, taking cover behind anthills, and tried to advance in a series of short rushes. Eyewitness, Frederick Hamilton²², correspondent of the *Toronto Globe*, described the first advance of the RCRs;

Instantly a deadly fire rose from the Boer trenches. Hundreds of men whom our watchers on the left had not seen sprang to the lip of the bank and began firing over it. The air back at the 800-yards range resounded with a long fusillade of whip-cracks, as the Mausers went in flight overhead. The bullets smacked overhead like a package of fire-crackers ignited and allowed to explode in feu-de-joie. Of course they could not keep running long. No charge, as a matter of fact, can be made over a distance greater than 100 to 150 yards, for men's wind will not stand a longer run. Remember that our men at that moment had been twenty-four hours under arms, had marched twenty-four miles, and had had no sustenance in all that time, except a drink of rum, perhaps a biscuit; in some cases, a cup of coffee. So they ran on a bit, laid down, fired, ran on again, fired yet

²² Charles Frederick Hamilton (1879-1933). An army intelligence officer and later journalist with *Toronto World*, *Toronto Globe* and *Toronto News*; during WWI he served as Deputy-Chief Censor and following the war became the RCMP's first intelligence officer.

again, got another bit forward. They dropped all over the field. Far up in the rush fell [William T.] Manion of C Company, formerly a Grenadier ...

As casualties mounted three more companies were sent forward into the firing line, with two more brought up in close support. Still no advance could be made and the men lay pinned down under a scorching sun, without water, and without having a meal or sleep, since the previous day.

At about 4:30 p.m. the Cornwall Regiment was ordered forward, through the Canadians, in an assault on the Boer trenches. When the bugles sounded all five companies of the RCRs fixed bayonets, jumped up, and joined the Cornwall's charge. A storm of Boer fire stopped the attack in its tracks. By sundown no British soldier had come within 200 yards of the Boer line²³. Another eyewitness, RCR Lieutenant Alexander Clyde Caldwell of Lanark²⁴, who was commanding a signal corps position, watched the second charge from 'Gun Hill';

Then the charge came, and the fire was awful. I can't see how so few were hit. It is simply a wonder to me that the regiment wasn't wiped out to a man. The men dropped left and right. Darkness came on and how thankful we were for it – tired, hungry and thirsty, only the excitement keeping many of us up. Then came the wounded, it was awful. The dead were left on the field and buried the next day, Monday.²⁵

A letter from RCR Private Charles Hodge, who served with Donegan in 'B' Company, recalled;

So terrible was the fire that it seemed the heavens had opened. Pvt. Donegan was shot through the heart ... dying instantly.²⁶

Pinned down until shrouded by nightfall the Canadians finally gathered their dead and wounded, including the bodies of Privates John Donegan and William Manion, and withdrew back to Paardeberg Drift. In a letter home, Father Charles O'Leary, Roman Catholic Chaplain with the RCRs, wrote;

Monday morning, we gathered our dead together and buried them side by side – eighteen in all – in one broad grave, whilst I performed the sad but consoling duty of committing them to the care of God's angels when we would be far away from this fateful land.²⁷

Not all of the 18 RCR dead were Roman Catholics. An RCR history recounts that, in the absence of the Protestant Chaplain, Father O'Leary read both the Catholic and Anglican services of burial.

²³ Some accounts of the battle say that two RCR soldiers were killed on the lip of the Boer trenches.

²⁴ Alexander Clyde Caldwell (1874-1939) was the son of Lanark timber baron William Clyde Caldwell (1843-1905), Ontario MPP 1872-1875, 1879-1886, 1888-1894, 1898-1905.

²⁵ *Perth Courier*, April 27, 1900.

²⁶ *Perth Courier*, April 13, 1900.

²⁷ Rev. O'Leary's letter was reprinted in the *Perth Courier* of April 20, 1900.

The RCR suffered 18 dead and 60 wounded among a total of 303 officers and men killed and 906 wounded. In terms of total casualties, 'Bloody Sunday', February 18, 1900, was the worst day for British arms in the Boer War.

For nine more days the British pounded the Boer force with artillery to little effect until, on February 26th, Lieutenant-Colonel William Otter was ordered to lead his Canadians in a night attack. After hours of desperate fighting, as dawn broke on the morning of February 27th, the Boers finally surrendered²⁸. Between February 18th and 27th the RCR suffered a total of 34 men killed and 92 wounded. The Battle of Paardeburg was the first significant British victory of the war and Canada became the darling of the Empire. British Field Marshal Lord Roberts said that "*Canadian now stands for bravery, dash and courage*".



Men of the RCR at Paardeberg Drift, February 1900

On February 23, 1900, first news of the 'Bloody Sunday' charge at Paardeberg Drift reached Perth. Under the headline "*Two County of Lanark Men Killed*" the *Perth Courier* reported;

On Wednesday morning news flashed over the wires, on the authority of the Toronto globe's correspondent in South Africa, that on Sunday [February 18th] in an engagement under General Roberts, the first Canadian Contingent [RCR] had lost twenty men killed, sixty wounded and six missing.

Among the names given of the killed were those of two young men who were born in the county, John A. Donegan, of London, Ont., a native of Perth, and William T. Manion of Toronto, who was born on the 3^d line of Bathurst, near Perth.

²⁸ 4,000 men, 10% of the Boer Army then in the field, were taken prisoner.

When Mayor John A. Stewart²⁹ heard of the sad events he ordered the flags on the town buildings – the town hall and main fire hall – to be raised at half mast; and Sheriff Thompson³⁰ directed that the flag at the court house also be displayed at half mast. The bell of St. John’s Church – both the deceased being Roman Catholics – was set tolling in melancholy honor of the young men, both of whom frequently while living enjoyed the rites of the church in this edifice.



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John Andrew Donegan and William Thomas Manion were buried where they fell, in a mass grave, and lie in Vendusiedrift Garden of Remembrance, Paardeberg, South Africa. Their names are engraved on a war memorial in the cemetery, along with those of 32 other RCR men who died at Paardeberg. Manion’s name is also inscribed on the Boer War Memorial on University Avenue in Toronto³¹. Donegan’s name appears on the Boer War Memorial in Victoria Park, London, Ontario, and he is further memorialized by a stain glass window in St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Cathedral Basilica at London; “erected by the patriotic citizens of London in faithful remembrance of Pte. John Donegan a member of this parish and one of the first Canadian soldiers killed in the South African War”. There are no plaques or memorials marking the Boer War at Perth.

The Second Boer War of 1899-1902 represented the first time men in Canadian uniforms, fighting in Canadian units, went to war beyond their own borders. Of the 7,368 who served in the conflict, 267 died. The men of the RCR may have charged and died at Paardeberg for King, County, Empire and glory but a few more months on the veldt left most disillusioned. One veteran would later write; “I risked my life so that a few rich men could have full control of the gold and diamonds of the Transvaal. I was taken in by a lot of propaganda”. Six of the eight RCR companies refused to extend their service beyond the year for which they had originally enlisted. Canada, however, was proud of them. For the next two decades, until the cost of two world wars overshadowed the South African war, that pride would be expressed, and the fallen remembered, every February 27th on Paardeberg Day.

- Ron W. Shaw (2016)

²⁹ John Alexander Stewart KC (1867-1922) was Mayor of Perth 1900-1904, Member of Parliament 1918-1922 and Minister of Railways for three months in 1921. In 1947 his wife, Jessie, donated Stewart Park to the Town of Perth in his memory.

³⁰ James Thompson (1812-1912), Lanark County Sheriff 1866-1903. Thompson was also one-time owner/editor of the *Perth Courier*.

³¹ The Toronto memorial was designed by Walter Allward who would later design the Vimy Ridge memorial.