

GREAT GRANDAD'S ARMY

2 – HOME BY CHRISTMAS

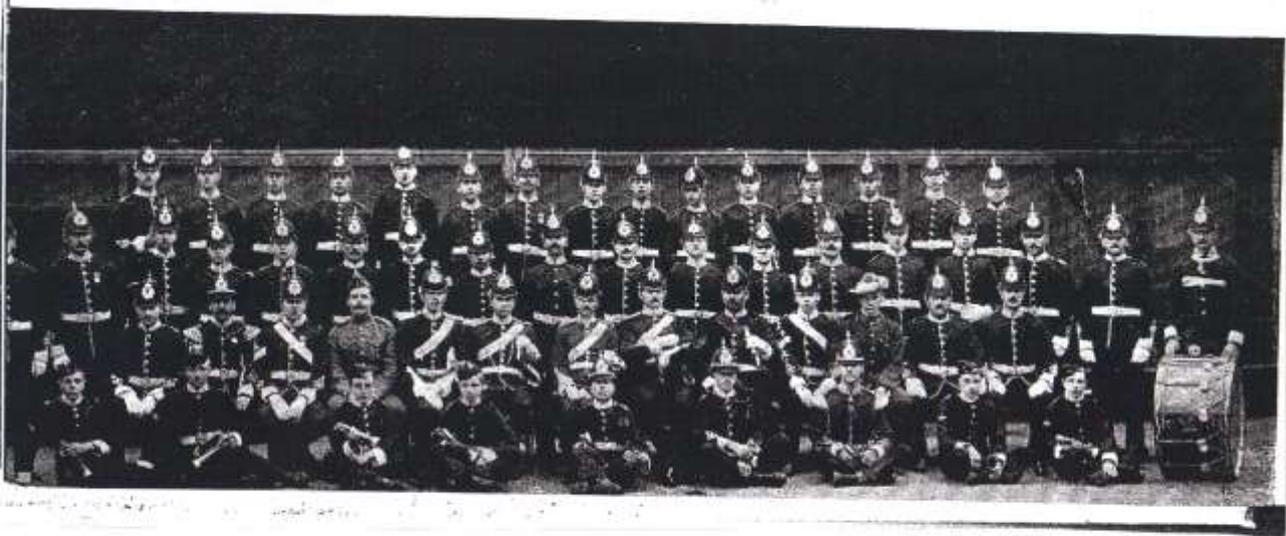
by Mike Hinson

In the 19th century, the protection of Britain's world-wide imperial interests required a fighting force which, potentially, might have been expensive to maintain. However, after the end of the Crimean War, the size of the regular army was allowed to fall. By the 1890s, it was approximately 150,000 (1). Its numerical strength was bolstered by some 200,000 part-time militia, yeomanry and rifle volunteers. About one Victorian male in 12 joined the volunteers, an activity which combined both physical exercise and pleasant company with a satisfying feeling of 'doing one's bit' for the country.

An earlier study by the present author (2) described the establishment of the Sutton Rifle Volunteers in November 1880. At that time, both the Warwickshire and Birmingham Volunteer Battalions were already fully up to strength, consequently Sutton's enthusiastic recruits were denied entry. However, despite the fact that the local volunteers were drawn from a Warwickshire town, its surrounding villages and the adjacent suburbs of Birmingham, they were warmly welcomed by the Staffordshire Regiment. They became '**F**' **Company (Sutton Coldfield), 1st Staffordshire Rifles**, with the Battalion's headquarters in Soho Road, Handsworth.

Nationally, the avowed purpose of the rifle volunteers was to provide part-time soldiers who could be rallied to support the regular army for the home defence of the British Isles against invasion.

F. Coy. Sutton Coldfield Volunteers at Crystal Palace, after Church Parade, September, 1903



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The South African Wars

In a nutshell, the South African Wars were fought between Britain and the country's earlier Dutch settlers, the Boers, for control over its lucrative gold and diamond mines.

The first Boer War resulted from the Boers' proclaiming, in December 1880, that the Transvaal had become a republic (3). After the successful ambush of a column of Britain's 94th Foot at Bronkhorstspuit, the highly mobile Boer commandos then besieged the seven British garrisons in the Transvaal. In an attempt to relieve them, in January 1881, Sir George Pomeroy Colley moved the 58th and 3/60th from Natal in order to mount an assault at Laing's Neck. This was repulsed by the Boers, as was a further operation at Ingogo. The ultimate humiliation of the British infantry was at Majuba Hill, where they were driven off by Boer sharpshooters who advanced under the cover of the bolder-strewn terrain. Subsequently, on 6 March, the commander of the British reinforcements, Brigadier General Sir Evelyn Wood, was instructed by the government to enter into an armistice. The Pretoria Convention of 26 March ended hostilities and the Boers were granted independence under the suzerainty of Queen Victoria. At home, capitulation to the Boers was widely condemned, with the defeat at Majuba Hill being regarded as a lasting stain on the army's reputation. In a contemporary account, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (4) stated:

'With the experience of the first Boer War behind them, little was done, either in tactics or musketry, to prepare the soldier for the second [Boer War]. The value of the mounted riflemen, the shooting with accuracy at unknown ranges, the art of taking cover – were all equally neglected.'

After the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1885, there was a 'gold rush' of many thousands of foreigners (mainly British), often referred to as *Uitlanders*. The Boers' ambitious leader, Paul Kruger, was elected President of the Transvaal for a fourth term in 1898. He was suspicious of the possible effect that this influx of Uitlanders might have on Boer society. Consequently, the Uitlanders were not only heavily taxed, but were also denied the vote. In April 1899, they petitioned Queen Victoria asking for her protection. Notwithstanding, Kruger issued a demand for the complete independence of the Transvaal and the neighbouring Orange Free State, following this with attacks on Natal and Cape Colony (5). The second Boer War began on 11 October 1899.

The war raged for more than three years, until the British forces eventually wore down the resistance of the Boers. It involved the largest deployment of British troops since the Crimean War, involving almost 450,000 soldiers, drawn from across the Empire, including men from Canada, Australia and New Zealand. There were 238,000 regular and reservist soldiers from the UK, supported by 90,000 militia, yeomanry and rifle volunteers.

The 'Sutton Six'

Unlike men in the militia, members of the volunteer companies could not automatically be posted overseas in the event of war. Nevertheless, when the call for volunteers came, there was a characteristically enthusiastic response from members of F Company (Sutton Coldfield). After a rigorous medical examination, six men were chosen to be among the first to go to South Africa and they enlisted at Whittington Barracks. They were:

Lance-Corporal S F Taylor; Private E M Brown; Private H A Blewitt;

Private E Merrifield; Private L C Secker, and Private G A Steventon.

The volunteers captured the imagination of the local press and were duly dubbed 'The Sutton Six'. As a result, this first group received a rapturous send-off and were showered with many gifts.

A local report for 17 February 1900 (6) described the enthusiasm that pervaded the farewell dinner organised by the officers and men of F Company. The health of the 'Six' was proposed by Captain Stone, the Officer Commanding, and seconded by the Mayor of Sutton, Mr S C Emery JP who opined:

'Although we read in the papers of defeats in South Africa, we never have had a defeat. [Hear! Hear!] No doubt we have had reverses. There would be reverses in every war, but no soldier understood the word 'defeat'. [Applause]

The Mayor wished the Six 'God Speed' and a safe return and, in doing so, presented each of them with a field glass (in addition to the tobacco pouches, pipes and burning glasses which they had already received from their comrades). Previously, that afternoon, each of the Six had been given a one pound tin of tobacco and 100 cigarettes by Sutton Grammar School, Old Boys.

Not to be outdone, on Monday 26 February 1900, the lucky Six were entertained to dinner at the Royal Hotel by the Mayor and Town Council, at which an impressive number of local dignitaries was present. After the toasts, the Mayor presented each of the Six with a commemorative medal bearing images of the Queen, Lord Roberts and other distinguished generals at the front (7). A well-wisher also presented each man with a box of cigars! Lance Corporal Taylor and Private Blewitt responded on behalf of the volunteers, emphasising that they were joining 'a glorious regiment', which was second to none, also that F Company was far and away the best company in the battalion! They expected to return 'in about a year'.

[In May, a further recruit from Sutton, Private F T Turner, was among a small contingent of men from the 1st Battalion who left for the front in much less of a flurry of excitement. At the Drill Hall in Handsworth, Colonel Cockrane, the Commanding Officer, presented each soldier with a sovereign, a khaki Bible – and a pair of socks from his daughter (8)].

The Journey to Table Bay

On 10 March 1900, the Sutton Six were among the soldiers who embarked at Southampton on a troop ship called the Tintagel Castle, bound for the Cape of Good

Hope (9). Their voyage is commemorated in a small book entitled, *OHMS - or How 1200 Soldiers Went to Table Bay*. This was written by Dr W McLean, the ship's surgeon, in collaboration with the ship's third officer, Lt E H Shackleton (who later was to become Sir Ernest Shackleton, the heroic Polar explorer). A copy of this book may be found in the military museum at Whittington Barracks, near Lichfield. The names of the Sutton Six are recorded among the list of troops. On embarkation, Lance-Corporal Taylor was promoted to the rank of Corporal, whilst Private Secker was promoted to the rank of Lance-Corporal.

Detailed accounts of the progress of the war in South Africa, usually syndicated from national newspapers, were printed in the local paper each week. News involving local soldiers at the front deserved special column inches. For example, a letter from Private Blewitt reported that the troops arrived at Cape Town on 31 March – and that his first job was to dig graves for dead Boer soldiers.

Experiences in the Field

At the Cape, the Six eventually embarked upon an old troopship called the Pavonia, bound for Port Elizabeth. From there, they continued their journey by train until they reached Springfontein in the Orange Free State. There they rested for two or three days and had experience of sleeping in the veldt for the first time. After marching to Edenburg, the troops joined a convoy marching to Bloemfontein, some 80 miles distant. One hundred and fifteen men (out of 116) finally reached their destination on 3 May 1900 (10).

Unfortunately, there had been a serious outbreak of enteric fever (typhoid) at Bloemfontein. It was the cause of the only fatality among the Sutton volunteers. Corporal Samuel Freer Taylor had been in good health on his arrival, however, he caught the disease and, tragically, died on 22 May. Aged 27, he was the fourth son of Mr Samuel Allen Taylor JP of 'The Hollies', Four Oaks and had worked in a solicitor's office in civilian life. There is a memorial plaque to him in St James' Church, Mere Green. (11). At that time, press reports recorded that there had been 6,300 admissions to the field hospitals of men with enteric fever, a statistic which led to considerable debate and concern in Parliament (12).

The remaining Sutton Volunteers had already left Bloemfontein as part of a Company of 90 soldiers under orders to join up with the 17th Brigade, under Major General Boyes, which formed part of General Rundle's Division. On the way, the Company passed Sanna's Post, the site of a violent confrontation some weeks before. 'We could see any amount of arms and legs of Boers and Kaffirs lying about,' said L/Corporal Secker in a later interview (13). On 23 May, they joined the Brigade and marched on to Biddulphsberg. From there they went to Willow Grange where the troops were involved in a good deal of fighting. Constantly attacked by the enemy, they were twice under heavy rifle fire at Prinseloo. The British forces responded with artillery fire, eventually forcing the Boers to surrender.

The Brigade arrived at Harrismith in August where the situation was much quieter. From there, it marched to Vinersburg where it fought De Wet forces. Having reached Rietzburg in October, the troops received orders for going home. After some fighting on the way, the troops arrived back in Harrismith in early November.

L/Corporal Secker wrote home frequently and several of his letters were printed in the local paper (14). He reported that, before leaving Harrismith, the troops had been inspected by General Rundle who praised them for being a great credit to the Battalion, having shown considerable coolness under fire. According to Secker, they were the only volunteers in the 8th Division to have been in action, actually under fire. He reported:

'Our sick list is much heavier than I thought ...four have died and 25 have been invalided home. That is about 25 per cent of the Company. Rather heavy isn't it?'

Homeward Bound

In a letter to his mother dated 10th November, L/Corporal Secker described his journey back to Cape Town by rail:

*'We are going down in a great style, viz. a covered wagon in which there are 25 of us, so you can tell we are a rather lively crew. **I think that I shall arrive home four or five days before Christmas** ... so don't forget to have plenty of mince pies ready. I rather fancy a turkey for dinner, so don't forget to get one!'*

Unfortunately for the Sutton men, this was not to be. They arrived at De Aar Junction (in Cape Colony) to be told that F Company would not be going home until they had completed twelve months service in South Africa. After six weeks at De Aar, on 27 December 1900, Secker and two of his comrades were detailed to take a party of prisoners back to Cape Town. Having completed this task, they were stationed at Green Point Camp for three months, but were not allowed to go into Cape Town owing to an outbreak of bubonic plague there.

After their twelve months service had been completed, they received orders to embark upon the transport ship, Oratava, which sailed from Table Bay on 5 April 1901. It docked in Southampton on 23 April, bringing home 60 officers and 1057 men, including seven from the South Staffordshire Regiment (16). The recently promoted Corporal Secker arrived in Sutton on the 10.30 pm train from New Street.

Other members of the Local Service section of 1st Volunteer Brigade of the South Staffordshire Regiment arrived at Southampton some weeks later, aboard the Idaho. On the night of 19 May, they were lodged at Whittington Barracks, proceeding to Wolverhampton the following day where they were entertained to lunch by the Mayor. After this, the Handsworth and Sutton contingent arrived at 5.40 pm at Snow Hill Station where a guard of honour was waiting. The Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Alderman S Edwards, welcomed them on their return. The troops then formed a column and, accompanied by the Battalion band, marched to their Drill Hall Headquarters in Soho Road, Handsworth, cheered by enthusiastic crowds all along the route (17).

Welcoming Sutton's Heroes

The volunteers from F Company had anticipated a tough time before leaving for South Africa - and their worst fears had been realised. Corporal Secker estimated that they had marched some 2000 miles and had roughed it in the open 'for weeks and weeks at a time' (18). They certainly deserved the warm official welcome given to them, along with other Reservists, on 24 May 1901 (19). It was held at the Royal Hotel and was hosted by the Mayor, Alderman J T Glover, with members of the Corporation and other local dignitaries in attendance. After the repast, and having drunk the royal toasts, the Mayor next proposed, 'Success and Welcome Home to the Returning Volunteers and Reservists from the Front' to general acclaim. He went on to praise the way in which these men had responded to the call of their country at a time when it was in need. They had bravely defended and upheld the honour and interests of the British Empire. The English nation had shown the whole world that England's sons were always ready to protect her interests and, if needs be, lay down their lives in her defence (Applause). Major General Arbuthnot JP, in expressing his great pleasure at seeing the Volunteers return safe and well, said that, in days to come when the war was a thing of the past, they would look back with pride at the sacrifices they had made for the honour of the country and of the flag (More Applause). In reply, Captain Stone said that he would like to thank the Mayor on behalf of the Company for the enthusiastic reception accorded to them. He knew the men would do their duty and they had done it very loyally.

At F Company's Annual Prize Distribution later in the year (20), the following volunteers received the Transvaal War Medal in recognition of their service in South Africa: **Sergeant E Merriman; Corporal L E Secker; L/Corporal E M Brawn; Privates H A Blewitt, J Steventon, and F T Turner** [it would seem that the latter had succeeded L/Corporal Taylor as a member of the Sutton Six.]. The medal was posthumously awarded to the late **L/Corporal S Taylor** and was proudly accepted by his father.

A Further Call to Arms

Some months before these events, on 16 February 1901, the *Sutton Coldfield News*, had published an urgent appeal to South Staffordshire Rifle Volunteers. It stated that the War Office, through the Officer Commanding Lichfield district, called for 60 men to volunteer in order to complete the Worcestershire Service Company. The returns from Handsworth, Smethwick and Sutton Coldfield showed 16 names. As a matter of urgency, it was requested that more men from these and other districts from which the corps recruited its volunteers should send in their names without further delay that the required number might be achieved (21).

Nationally, a further two tranches of volunteers, including men from Sutton, were sent out to join the forces in South Africa, each expecting to serve for twelve months. . Altogether, 27 men from F Company enlisted and saw active service during the Boer War. Considering the Company's numerical strength, this was regarded as being very praiseworthy. The third section had included:

L/Corporal H Lewis, Private J Allsop, Private H Rogers, Private A E Tranter and Private E T Rose.

Apparently, this section saw very little fighting, but experienced plenty of hard work for eight hours per day. They were stationed in bunk houses on the Orange River (22).

Lasting Recognition

At a meeting of the Sutton Corporation on 5 May 1901, the Mayor, Alderman Glover, proposed the following resolution:

'That this Council desires to record its high appreciation of the self-sacrificing and patriotic spirit of the members of the Sutton Coldfield Volunteers who came forward in response to their country's call, and of the manner in which they have maintained the good name of the Royal Borough of Sutton Coldfield in South Africa.'

The resolution was passed unanimously. Members of the Corporation also resolved that this vote of thanks should be engraved on vellum and a copy presented to each volunteer. [Copies of this illuminated address are still in existence and maybe viewed in the Local History Department of Sutton Reference Library (23)].

Declaration of Peace

Lord Roberts had defeated the main Boer army at Paardenburg in February 1900 and had gone on to take Bloemfontein in March and Pretoria in June, whilst Kruger was forced to flee to the Netherlands. Nevertheless the Boers continued to fight a guerrilla campaign for a further two years. Kitchener eventually suppressed them with a variety of drastic tactics, including detaining Boer families in concentration camps. After protracted negotiations, final surrender terms were signed by the Boers at Pretoria on 31 May 1902 and the war was over.

News was received at 6.30 pm on a Sunday evening in Sutton, when a 'telephonic message' was received from Birmingham by a Mr P Baggs of Station Street (24). The news spread quickly, guns were fired, fireworks were let off and a bonfire was lit in the Parade. There was merry-making in the centre of Sutton into the small hours. The following day, flags and bunting decked the streets. In the evening, headed by the Cannock Chase Colliery Band and the Gem Street Industrial Band, a procession wended its way to the Town Hall where the Mayor and his Deputy made loyal speeches. The newspaper's correspondent remarked:

'The assemblage was quite as large as that outside the Town Hall on the return of the Sutton Six from the war, and it was quite as enthusiastic. On every face was gladness and it was evident that but one thought animated all, that of joy at the return of peace to the country.'

After the War

Now that the war was over, the officers and men of F Company (Sutton Coldfield) 1st Staffordshire Rifles resumed their regular programme of drills, church parades, field exercises, rifle shooting competitions, annual camps and social events much as before

The loss of the Butts in Sutton Park for safety reasons continued to rankle, even after ten years. A further attempt to gain permission to construct a range was made in 1905. Captain Stone, the Officer Commanding, and a deputation from the Company, accompanied by experts from Messrs Kynocks [of Witton], attended a meeting of Borough Parks and Estates Committee (25). They urged the necessity for a safety range in Sutton Park. The Committee resolved that the matter should be considered (3342). Later in the year, a site was inspected and a recommendation made that permission be granted. By February 1906, a site was offered, subject to approval from the War Office, but there is no record of that permission having been granted.

At a meeting of the Borough Council's Parks and Estate's Committee on 25 September 1906, an application from Captain Yates, the new Officer Commanding F Company, was read. He requested permission for a memorial tablet to the local Volunteers who served in the South African War to be placed in the Council House. It was resolved that the Borough Surveyor should ascertain from Captain Yates what form the tablet should take and then report (3462) (26). At a further meeting on 24 October 1906, it was resolved that a memorial tablet should be placed in either the Town Hall or Council House, subject to the design being approved.

There is a white marble memorial tablet in the wall by the Parish Church that lists the names of all the men from Sutton who fought in South Africa.

The Haldane Reforms

Despite the fact that the British Empire had been victorious, there was a critical appraisal of the army's performance. Over 100,000 casualties had been suffered from battle or disease in opposing the Boers' fighting force which numbered 50,000 at the most. It had cost the country £222 million.

Of the various reports and proposals for reform that followed, the most effective were those implemented by Richard Burdon Haldane, Secretary of State for War, 1905 – 1912. Even though he was required to make significant economies in the army estimates, he was determined to create a new Territorial Force to replace, absorb and expand upon the militia, the yeomanry and the volunteers. The TF would support the regular army. The *Territorial and Reserve Forces Act* was enacted in August 1907 and subsequently came into force on 1 April 1908. Under its provisions, existing volunteer battalions became part of the Territorial Battalions of their county regiments. This meant that F Company could no longer be part of the Staffordshire Regiment after 31 March.

On 13 March 1908, F Company of 1st Volunteer Battalion of The South Staffordshire Regiment held its final dinner at the Acorn Hotel, Birmingham. Its officers and men had served their country with merit, distinction and honour for 27 years, but had now become part of Sutton's military history.

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