



## Army Museum of Tasmania

Anglesea Barracks  
HOBART

Information Sheet No 22

# The Hunt for the Missing Boer War Rifles

Shortly after the Tasmania Police were formed in 1889 they became involved in a statewide search that necessitated the interviewing of a large number of former Boer War veterans across the state.

On 21 July 1902 Lieutenant Colonel Wallach DAAG (Deputy Assistant Adjutant General) received instructions from Army Headquarters, Melbourne to survey all arms and artillery returned from South Africa and report on their condition, value and whether or not they should be retained in service.

To understand the background to the events that followed a short back ground is required.

Tasmania sent, as did other British Colonies, contingents of soldiers to South Africa to fight in the Second South African War (Boer War) 1899 – 1902. The contingents were outfitted locally with uniforms, saddlery and horses (mostly Police remounts). The first contingent left the State with arms but later contingents were supplied with arms in South Africa. The First two contingents were paid for by both the Tasmanian and Imperial Government (England), but later contingents were fully paid for by the Imperial Government. In all seven contingents left Tasmania.

The Fourth Tasmanian (2<sup>nd</sup> Imperial Bushmen) Contingent left on 27 March 1901, 253 men strong under the command of Lt. Col. E. T. Watchorn. They returned to Tasmania and were disbanded on 30 June 1902. The rifles they were issued with were the

Whilst away Tasmania Police were settling into the new structure of an amalgamated Police Force and the Australian Colonies into the new structure of a Federal Government. This then was the situation when Lt. Col. Wallach received a second letter in August 1902 asking what had been done in relation to the report on Arms.

Wallach had meanwhile written to Lt. Col Watchorn the officer commanding the Tasmanian 2<sup>nd</sup> Imperial Bushmen who in turn reported that he had left South Africa with about 150 rifles all of which were unserviceable. They were stored in the

armoury of the troop ship during transit but 40 went missing. He indicated he had written to each member of the Contingent ordering them to return arms at once.

Wallach no doubt eager to reply to his superiors in Melbourne wrote to Watchorn again on 5 August 1902 asking how many had been returned and raising the possibility that the missing arms may have gone onto New Zealand with the troopship.

Unhappy about the advice that only three arms had been returned Wallach directed Watchorn to provide the Commissioner of Police with the names and addresses of each member of the contingent with the view to his enquiring into the matter.

Lists were prepared of the men's addresses by Police Districts and forwarded to the Commissioner of Police Mr. J. E. C. Lord (later CO of the 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion A.I.F.). He in turn forwarded them to his Superintendents and eventually Constables and Troopers went door knocking across the State.

List No.	Police District	No. of Men on list	Never had a Rifle	Moved from address	Lost	Lost on Ship	Located	Refused to return	Recovered	Removed from State
1	Hobart, Glenorchy, Clarence, Queenborough, Carnarvon	28	2	13		5	4			4
2	Launceston, Selby, Georgetown	30	2	7	1	19		1		
3	Macquarie	8	1	4		1		1	1	
4	Campbell Town, Oatlands, Ross	9	1	3		4		1		
5	Sorell, and Spring bay	7		2		3	1		1	
6	Richmond, Brighton and Greenponds	16	1	3	4	6		2		
7	Franklin, Kingborough	7				6		1		
8	Emu Bay, Russell	7	2	1		2		1	1	
9	Ringarooma	1				1				
10	New Norfolk, Hamilton, Bothwell	4		2				1		
11	Deloraine, Westbury, Longford, Evandale	13	1	3		8		1		
12	Fingal, Portland, Glamorgan	6		1		4	1			
13	Mersey and Latrobe	18		3		12			2	
	Totals	134	10	42	5	71	6	11	5	4

The table above shows the results of their enquiries. Five rifles were recovered; six located but not collected and 11 refused to return them. The Constables who made these enquiries, which in most cases were written on a variety of papers were very brief in their reports and it is clear that the Troopers were not unaware of the situation in regards the rifles and if Constable Richard Ross No 131 is any example it is apparent where their sympathies lay:

*Memo for:*

*Mr. Sub Insp Lynden*

*Re: Attached Correspondence*

*I beg to state I have made every enquiry relative to Murray and Sutton\* not returning their Rifles.*

*Sutton told me if I doubted his word in the least I was quite welcome to search his house. He said we cannot hand over what we haven't got. I have also made cautious enquiry amongst several members of the local Volunteers. Claude Collins of Evandale who also had served in South Africa as a volunteer and returned two days in advance of Murray and Sutton states that he saw them both land at Evandale Station and neither had arms, he had heard of several members losing their rifles aboard the transport, and he said he felt sure that if Murray and Sutton stated theirs was stolen he could rely upon them as they are both too well known and highly respected townsmen. This has been borne out by several other volunteer residents.*

*I may state in conclusion that within myself I am perfectly satisfied they have both told the truth.*

*Obediently Yours*

*Richard Ross PC No. 131*

*Evandale*

*4-10-1902*

Army Office was not amused. Lt Col. Wallach advised Watchorn to order former Trooper Kirkwood of Zeehan to return his rifle and that as an example a test case was to be made of former Troopers Claude Anthony Nicholson and Sergeant James Laurence Armistead Moore of Plenty.

The Commissioner of Police received a letter from Wallach in which he stated that the rifles were the property of the Crown and had been called in under instructions from the War Office, London.

The Commissioner replied that if the Defence Department would lay the necessary information that Police would render every assistance.

A search of the Mercury, Lower Court List and questions asked in Parliament during the period failed to disclose any further mention of Nicholson and Moore. No doubt common sense prevailed and the embryonic Defence Department who were looking for arms at no cost sought to obtain them from the returned servicemen, those who had admitted possession stated they had been given them by Imperial Officers. The majority simply claimed they were either lost or stolen and more than likely with the tacit approval of Watchorn their Commander.



This image is of one of the rifles that returned to Tasmania. It was common for Boers to carve their stocks and often when captured they were asked to carve their captors rifles. In this case the carver misspelled the name. Trooper James Robert SHIELDS No 94 was a member of the Third Contingent. Copyright S Wilson used with permission

**Notes**

\*David James Murray and Roland Thomas Sutton

**Bibliography**

Missing Rifles File, Watchorn Papers, File 10130 – 10232, Australian Army Museum Tasmania