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Lt Colonel C. E. E. Umphelby, Australia's Highest Ranking Boer War Fatality: Establishing his Memorial

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Australia's contribution to the 1899-1902 Anglo Boer War remains a significant milestone in our military and national history. Over 16,000 Australian troops were engaged and another 7,000 fought in other colonial and irregular units. As many as 1,000 Australians may have lost their lives. Among them was Lt Colonel Charles Edward Ernest Umphelby, Australia's most senior officer killed in South Africa, who died on 12 March 1900, two days after he was wounded during the Driefontein battle in the former Orange Free State Republic. My research seeks to trace Umphelby's movements in South Africa, from December 1899 until his death, and also to identify the funerary and heritage artifacts associated with his burial, namely two separate markers erected on his grave by Australians during the war, and a third and final marker erected after hostilities ended and which marks his grave today.

Charles Edward Ernest Umphelby joined the Militia Garrison Artillery at Warrnambool in June 1881 and after numerous promotions and extensive training and education in Australia and England, he reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 1897, commanding the Western District Garrison Artillery.¹ At the outbreak of the Boer War, Umphelby was nominated by Victoria's Minister of Defence as one of four Special Service Officers to serve in South Africa, joining the staff of Lt General Sir FW Forestier Walker, OC Lines of Communication in Cape Town on 9 December 1899. After serving briefly as a Press Censor, he applied to join Lord Methuen's army at Modder River Station, the forward operations base near the besieged city of Kimberley.² Appointed as Staff Officer to Colonel Barker OC of the Howitzer Battery, he went with Barker and other reinforcements to Modder River Station in December 1899, arriving just after Methuen's defeat by General P. A. Cronje's Boer forces at Magersfontein. For the next two months he watched and learnt as Methuen's army held the Boers in position at Magersfontein through containment tactics – troop reinforcements, patrolling and long range shellfire, delivered daily by a 4.7 naval gun – although in February 1900 he reported that he had as yet 'had no chance to use my rifle, but when I get the opportunity I hope to account for a few of the enemy'.³ Umphelby was a popular officer and nicknamed 'Uncle Bill' and 'Australia' by his British comrades.⁴ Yet the imminent combat evidenced by the anticipated strike for Kimberley and Bloemfontein, combined with separation from his family and country, played on Umphelby's mind. Yet, as he assured his family, 'Sometimes one gets a little down in the dumps here when he thinks how far he is away from home and the uncertain

1 *Argus*, 14 March 1900.

2 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 October 1899, 11 December 1899, and 15 December 1899; *Sydney Mail*, 24 March 1900; *Argus*, 10 November 1899, 26 February 1900, and 14 March 1900.

3 *Argus*, 26 February 1900.

4 *Argus*, 30 March 1900.

game he is playing; but I believe in luck, and hope to be with you all shortly again'.⁵



Figure 1: Studio portrait of Lt Colonel Charles Edward Umphelby, Victorian Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery, circa 1899. Australian War Memorial Collection (AWM), P04321.001.

During early February 1900 the course of the war changed when Lord Roberts and Kitchener arrived at Modder River, equipped with five divisions. Roberts' cavalry relieved Kimberley on 15 February 1900, and fearing encirclement the Boers abandoned their position at Magersfontein, falling back towards Bloemfontein, approximately 170 kilometres east, with Roberts's infantry following in their wake.⁶ The following day, Umphelby was sent to inspect Magersfontein, examining and reporting on the Boer defences and the results of

⁵ *Argus*, 26 February 1900.

⁶ G. Benneyworth and S. Lunderstedt S, *Magersfontein Revisited*, Kimberley (South Africa) 2001, pp. 37-38.

two months of British shelling. Yet he remained a disappointed spectator of events from afar, writing ruefully that, 'Some men have luck thrust on them and others have to look on'. On 19 February, Umphelby caught the first train to be run into Kimberley, loaded with supplies for the city. He observed first hand the effect of the Boer artillery on the garrison, spoke with artillery personal about their experiences and met Colonel Kekewich, the garrison commander during the siege. He inspected the fortifications and entrenchments and witnessed the most 'peculiar appearance' of a city that, despite all the shelling, had endured surprisingly 'little damage'.⁷

On 28 February 1900, Umphelby left Modder River with his orderly Private Whybrow, to join Barker, then camped at Osfontein near Paardeberg, where Roberts, having just captured General Cronje's army, was resting and replenishing his forces in preparation for the advance to Bloemfontein.⁸ Umphelby's duties were leading supply convoys up from Modder River Station, the task initially hampered by heavy rains. With the advance imminent, Umphelby described how he and Captain G. F. Johnston, rode over from Osfontein to Paardeberg to pay their respects to an Australian officer, Lt Grieve, recently killed in action at Paardeberg. 'We silently shook hands, and mounting our horses, rode back to camp, each thinking of his home and the dear ones who would miss us if our turn were next'.⁹

On 10 March 1900, as a column of Roberts' army advanced towards Driefontein, they encountered a Boer force blocking their route. Barker's 76th and 81st Battery's Royal Field Artillery (RFA) began providing direct fire support for an infantry attack on Driefontein, shelling Boer troops and artillery defending the Driefontein ridges. Umphelby's duties as Barker's staff officer was relaying orders to these two RFA battery's and helping to direct their movements and fire control. Barker's artillery opened fire when about 2,500 metres from the Driefontein ridges, before closing to a range of 1,800 metres. Firing shrapnel, they sought fire dominance, as a shortage of infantry ammunition was materializing during the British attack. At about 5.30 pm and nearing sunset, the artillery dashed forward into a hollow within less than 914 metres from the nearest Boers and reopened fire.¹⁰

Barker, and Umphelby and Major Onslow dismounted and initially stood together. Some Boer riflemen lay concealed on a ridge commanding this hollow and opened fire, raining a fusillade of bullets onto the batteries described by Barker as a 'terribly severe outburst of rifle fire'.¹¹ Umphelby strung his horse's

⁷ *Argus*, 30 March 1900.

⁸ P. L. Murray, *Official Records of the Australian Military Contingent in South Africa*, Melbourne, 1911, p. 305.

⁹ *Argus*, 21 April 1900.

¹⁰ Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 305. I converted the original distances from yards to metres. Whitehovine, *The History of the Welch Regiment*, [no place of publication given], 1931, p. 241

¹¹ *Argus*, 21 April 1900.

reins through his left arm, and seated on an anthill next to Barker, examined the Boer position through his field glasses. In his right hand he carried a little riding whip, which he raised perpendicular above his head and with both hands held his glasses. This group, clustered together, with their horses presented an ideal target, albeit at long range. The bullet which struck Umphelby caught him just below his waist, a little on the front of the right side, and exited a little in rear of his left side, passing diagonally through the body and perforating his liver.¹² Simultaneously, a second bullet hit his whip.¹³ The fusillade also wounded another officer nearby. First aid was administered and within five minutes Umphelby was carried by stretcher to a field hospital, 1½ miles away, by which point the battle was ending with a determined bayonet attack against the Boer position. He remained conscious yet bled heavily and received attention from Surgeon Major Pike. Word soon spread amongst the Australian contingent that Umphelby was wounded.¹⁴ He lingered throughout the night. Although not in visible pain, he complained of paralysis in his right leg. Wybrow sat with him while several futile attempts were made to nourish him with beef tea, brandy and other drinks, yet Umphelby retched. On Sunday morning he drank a little milk, and temporarily revived, was in high spirits, yet apparently unaware how critical his wound was.¹⁵ Lt C. A. Edwards (NSWAMC), however, saw a different picture. 'He was very glad to see me, was quite out of pain, and very cheerful. As a medical man I at once saw the gravity of the case'. Umphelby asked Edwards to 'Drop a line to the wife'.¹⁶ A London newspaper reported the next day that Umphelby had suffered a 'dangerous wound in the abdomen'. Another telegram sent by Umphelby to his family and Australia reassured them that he was 'doing well'.¹⁷

On the evening of 11 March 1900, Roberts' force resumed their advance, leaving the wounded behind. Umphelby was loaded into a wagon and moved to a new field hospital at a nearby farmhouse, about a ¼ mile away. As the wagon jolted over the broken ground he cried in agony and vomited blood. Now knowing that his end was near, he directed Whybrow to take charge of his personal effects, his watch, compass, purse, a locket containing family portraits and signet ring.¹⁸ He fell unconscious and died, just after 1 am on Monday 12 March 1900. He was survived by his wife and two daughters.¹⁹

On the evening of his death, Umphelby was buried a couple of hundred metres behind the farmhouse, his funeral service read by an army chaplain in the

12 W. T. Reah *Australians in War: With the Australian Regiment From Melbourne to Bloemfontein*, 1900, Melbourne, pp. 331-6.

13 *Argus*, 21 April 1900.

14 'The Diary of Sgt George Anderson Dart NSW Army Medical Corps', PR 84/228, AWM.

15 Reah, *op. cit.*, pp. 331-6.

16 *Argus*, 21 April 1900.

17 *Mercury*, 13 March 1900; *Argus*, 13 March 1900.

18 These were later handed over to Colonel Williams (NSWAMC).

19 The Heraldry & Genealogy Society of Canberra Inc.
<www.hagsoc.org.au/sagraves/bios/umphelby.php> (1 June 2010).

presence of a few comrades able to attend.²⁰ A few weeks later the field hospital closed and the wounded were transported to Bloemfontein. However, about six weeks later, Roberts ordered that Umphelby's body be reburied in Bloemfontein, about eighty kilometers away.²¹ This news was gratefully received in Australia.

The removal of the remains of the late Colonel Umphelby from the lonely 'veldt' of bush of South Africa to Bloemfontein to receive the full honour of a military funeral, is a graceful act on the part of Lord Roberts which will be greatly appreciated in Australia. We all feel it fortunate that this honour can be paid. The soldiers' burial is often a hurried affair. A general grave may be the common lot, and the foe may chance to be the careless digger of the trenches. Such an incident occasions yet another pang - one which has happily been spared on this occasion.²²

On 24 April 1900, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that 'the body ... has been disinterred from the battlefield, and will be reburied in Bloemfontein'.²³ However, this never happened.

My research identifies that two prior grave markers were placed on Umphelby's grave, before the third and existing tombstone was erected after hostilities ended. A photograph of the first grave - Grave Marker A, apparently erected by the NSWMC - was published in the *Australasian* on 7 July 1900.²⁴ Marker A appears to have been made of timber, possibly packing crates, with its inscription burnt into the wood with a heated instrument. The soil seems to have been recently excavated. The photograph was probably taken by a member of the NSWAMC who traveled into Bloemfontein with the hospital convoy at the beginning of April, some weeks after Umphelby's death. Its postage to Australia may have been delayed by disruptions to British railway logistics south to the Cape ports, caused by war damage and Boer activities in the southern Free State and around Bloemfontein. The fact that the Boer forces continued to operate with relative impunity in the Driefontein area during April may explain why Umphelby's body was not exhumed, as per Roberts's orders.

The existence of a second grave marker - Grave Marker B - was reported on 19 December 1901, in Melbourne. Captain Cecil Gaunt of the 4th Dragoon Guards wrote from Jacobsdal on 28 October 1901:

Riding over the Driefontein battlefield a short time ago I found the grave of Colonel Umphelby, Victorian Artillery. I carved a

²⁰ Reah, *op. cit.*, pp. 331-6.

²¹ R. L. Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War*, Canberra, 1976, p. 140. No source is provided.

²² *Argus*, 25 April 1900.

²³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 April 1900.

²⁴ *Australasian*, 7 July 1900. This was published after reports that Umphelby had been reburied in Bloemfontein.

headstone and put the grave in order. The carving is rough, for I am not an expert, and I made my chisel out of a table knife.²⁵

Gaunt, an Australian-born soldier serving in the South African Constabulary (SAC), was part of the Constabulary's E Division based in the towns of Petrusburg and Jacobsdal.²⁶ Jacobsdal was a three day ride from Driefontein, the surrounding countryside being then in a dangerous state, with Boer resistance continuing and civilians being removed to a concentration camp in Kimberley.²⁷ Gaunt himself was seriously wounded in the area in March 1902.²⁸ It is therefore unlikely that Captain Gaunt went to Driefontein solely to locate Umphelby's grave, but rather, having found it while operating with the SAC, took the opportunity to build a better grave marker for his fellow countryman.

In 1990, while researching the little known battle of Driefontein, I identified that the graves of the fallen from both sides did not appear to have been moved into the urban centers after the war, as was the policy of South Africa's War Graves Commission and Burgergrafte Komitee until the late 1970s. In January 1992, after locating numerous graves on the battlefield, I located the site of the field hospital where many soldiers such as Umphelby had died. Here, covered with thorn-shrub and dense bush growing almost three metres high, were three individual graves, all built from packed rock, two of which have individual permanent marble grave markers embossed with the deceased's name. One of these marks Umphelby's grave and is referred to as Grave Marker C.

²⁵ *Argus*, 16 December 1901.

²⁶ S. O'Neill, 'Gaunt, Cecil Robert (1863-1938)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 8, Melbourne, 1981, pp. 631-2. On 15 March 1902, Gaunt's name was included in a marble tablet unveiled at Melbourne's Church of England Grammar School which commemorated 68 former pupils who served in South Africa. *Argus*, Melbourne, 17 March 1902.

²⁷ Evacuation of Boshof, CO, Vol. 55, Ref 439-02, Free State Archives Depot, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

²⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 March 1902; *Argus*, 9 May 1902.

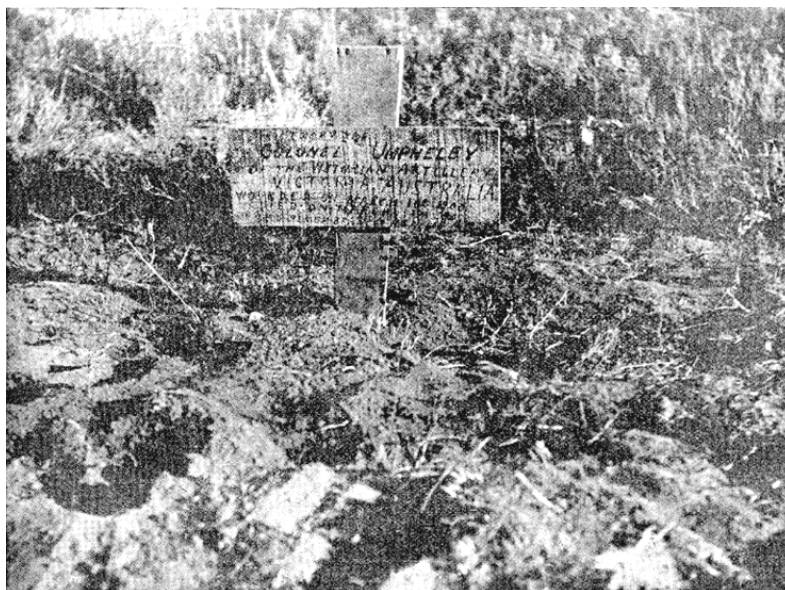


Figure 2: Grave Marker A: 'In memory of Colonel Umpelby, of the Victorian Artillery, Victoria, Australia, Wounded on March 10, 1900; and died March 12, 1900. In sad remembrance - NSW Medical Corps'. *The Australasian*, 7 July 1900.

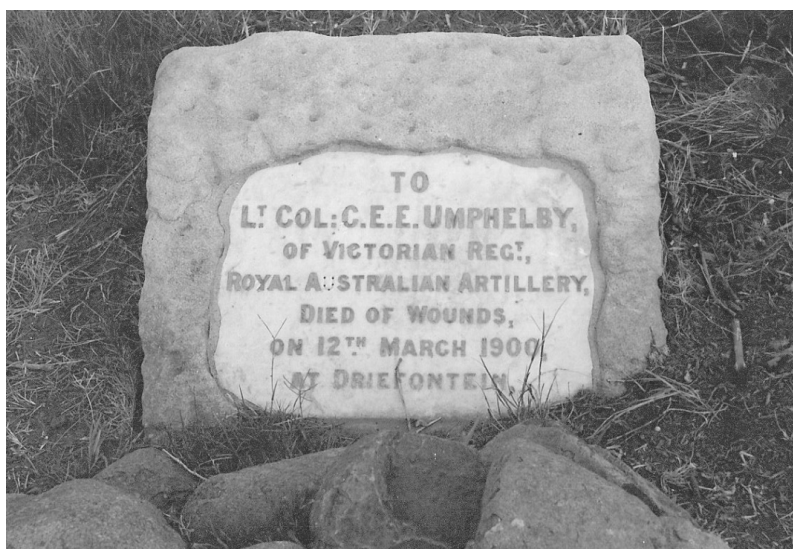


Figure 3: Grave Marker C. 'To Lt. Col: C.E.E. Umpelby of Victorian Regt., Royal Australian Artillery. Died of wounds on 12th March, 1900 at Driefontein'. Photo by author 1992.



Figure 4: Grave Marker B. The legible engraved particulars on Grave Marker B are: 'C Umphelby, Artillery, Australia, Wounded 10.3.00, Died 12.3.00, In remembrance, NSWAMC, T 15'. Photo by author, 8 December 1996.

The second tombstone belonged to Sgt Franklin of the Essex Regiment and is identical to Umphelby's stone. The third unmarked individual grave might be that of Lt Wimberley of the Welch Regiment who died on the same day as Umphelby, although positive identification has proved impossible.²⁹ The mass graves of the other ranks buried here are indicated by two burial mounds of packed rock, each located to either side of Umphelby, Franklin and the third unmarked grave. The mass graves have no markers. The original four corner fence-posts of the cemetery still stood, and some rusted barbed wire which once enclosed the graves I found amongst the scrub. At that time, however, it was impossible, due to the dense vegetation, to undertake an accurate appraisal of the surface evidence.

²⁹ Archival research in the UK and South Africa and fieldwork on the battlefield and elsewhere in South Africa has located no other trace of Lt Wimberley being buried anywhere other than this site. Two possibilities therefore remain: that his family never marked his grave and this mound is his final resting place, which seems unusual given that his father was a senior British officer; or that his remains were exhumed after the war for internment in the UK – however there is no evidence on the terrain to suggest that there was another grave, which has been removed/ disturbed. Based on this evidence, the conclusion therefore stands, at present, that this is Lt Wimberley's grave.

However, after I delivered a lecture in October 1996 on the Driefontein battle at the Kimberley Anglo Boer War Expo, the organisers resolved to 'clean up' the Driefontein hospital burial site, one aim being to find the grave of Lt Wimberley.³⁰ On 8 December 1996 we burnt away the vegetation. I located a single rock tombstone visible in the smoldering soot, located beyond the perimeter of the original fenced enclosure. As I turned it over, expecting to see that it belonged to Lt Wimberley, I found that it was in fact another grave marker to Lt Colonel Umphelby. It was the hand engraved stone, Grave Marker B, made by Captain Cecil Gaunt.

When comparing the text on Grave Markers A and B, it is evident that Gaunt used the inscription on the wooden cross as his reference, merely shortening the text. The original wooden cross (Grave Marker A) was presumably then discarded. Gaunt's hand-carved stone marker, which we found laying face down and beyond the cemetery precinct, was evidently removed from Lt Colonel Umphelby's grave and discarded at the time the extant marble tablet (Grave Marker C) was put in place. The marble tablets marking the graves of Umphelby and Franklin were brought to the cemetery by contractors, probably appointed by the Guild of Loyal Women, a public subscription society who paid for grave stones and markers to be erected on British graves after the war. Umphelby and Franklin's stones are identical to many other stones erected by the Guild in the former Orange Free State Republic. Those contractors presumably removed Grave Marker B, discarded it and then erected the marble tablet, Grave Marker C, and fenced in the graveyard.

A March 2010 revisit found that the graves are unreachable due to vegetation overgrowth, worse than that encountered previously. There is little interest by South Africa's heritage authorities in allocating resources to maintaining graves such as these. Although the vegetation was again removed in March 2000, for the commemoration of the battle during which Australia's Acting High Commissioner laid a wreath at the site, no further maintenance or protective measures have been instituted. Lt Colonel Umphelby's grave and those of his comrade's buried at the site of the Driefontein field hospital is at risk of being lost forever.

³⁰ Steve Lunderstedt, a Kimberley (South Africa) based historian, specialist military history tour guide and organiser of the Expo, mobilised twenty-five volunteers from the Kimberley based Diamond Diggers Shell Hole, a military veterans organisation. Lunderstedt played a key role in putting together the logistics for this clean up operation and was present when I located Grave Marker B.



Figure 5: Driefontein Field Hospital cemetery, 10 March 2000; Lt Col Umphelby's grave in the foreground and Sgt Franklin's grave further to its left. The rock mounds cover mass graves of British hospital fatalities. Photo by Steve Nott.