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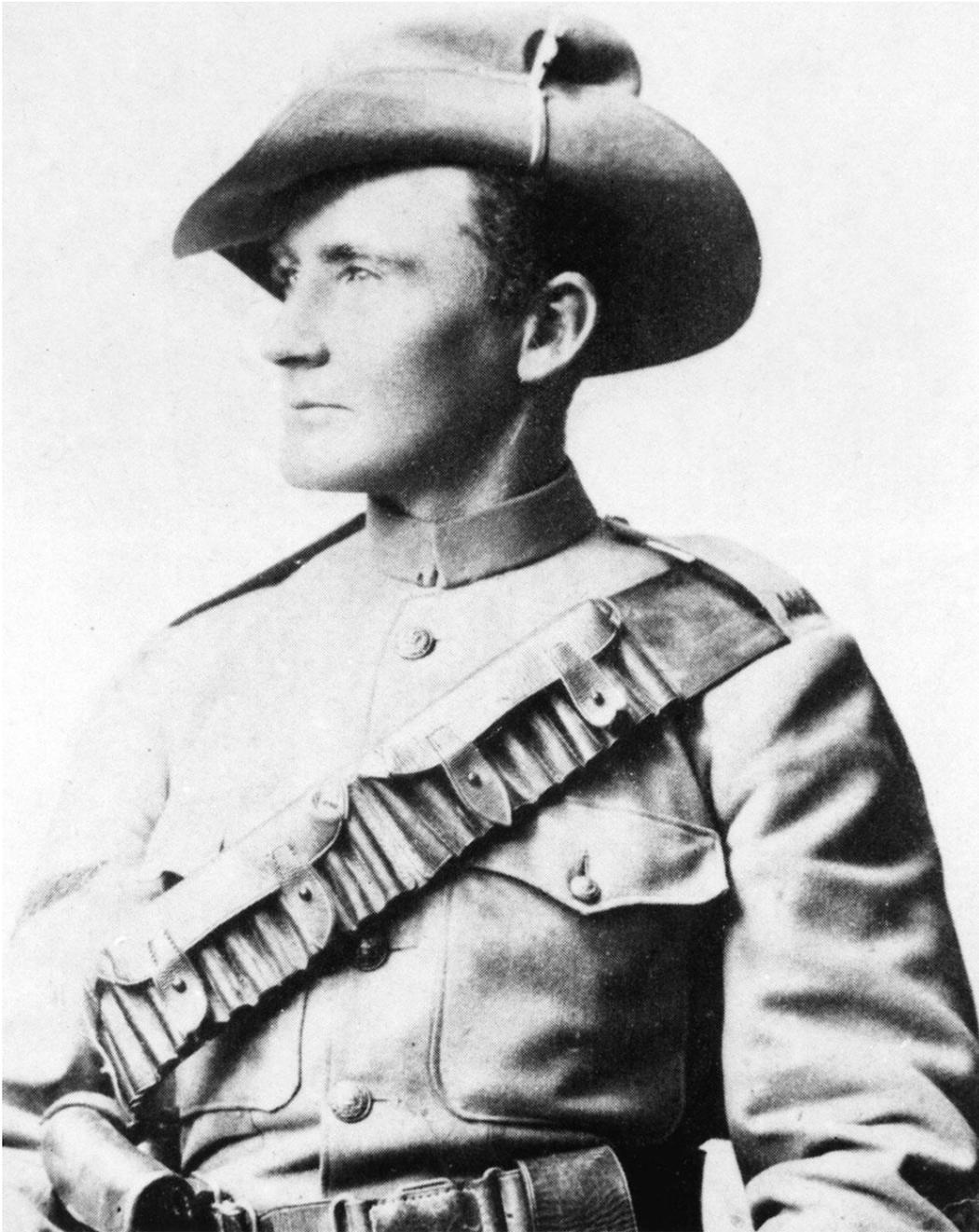
CHARLES MERRIFIELD
DENMARK SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL
AND GT ONLINE

BREAKER MORANT

National History Challenge 2020

Breaker Morant

Contested Histories



Charles Merrifield

Year 9

Denmark SHS/ G and T Online

“*The first casualty of war is truth*”.¹ Such is the story of Breaker Morant and the punishment he faced after following the orders of his superiors in the Boer War of 1899-1902. Fighting within an irregular unit practicing guerrilla warfare in the Northern Transvaal of South Africa, Breaker Morant and his comrades were court martialled for the murder of a prisoner of war and multiple Boers. Found guilty, Morant was executed by firing squad. With regard to the result of the trial, some, such as Morant’s companion Lieutenant George Witton, held the view that Morant was made a scapegoat by the British authorities in South Africa.² Furthermore, Witton believed that Morant was a victim of a serious miscarriage of justice. Others, such as Australian historian Craig Wilcox, believe that Morant had a fair trial. Whether or not Breaker Morant was a victim of a serious miscarriage of justice is highly debated among historians.

Breaker Morant was a typical young British colonial with a thirst for adventure. He was born as Edwin Henry Murrant on the 9th December 1864 in Bridgewater, England to mother Catherine (nee O’Reilly) and father Edwin Murrant.³ At the age of eighteen, Edwin Henry Murrant migrated to Australia, arriving in Townsville, Queensland on the 1st April 1883. About a year later, he changed his name to Harry Harbord Morant, claiming to be the son of Admiral Sir George Morant, although the Admiral later denied that Morant was related to him in any way.⁴ Living in South Australia, Morant gained a reputation as a drover, steeplechaser, polo player and horse breaker, among other things. He wrote reasonably well-known bush ballads under the pen name “Breaker” Morant, a name derived from one of the occupations he held. When the opportunity arose, in 1899, to volunteer to fight in the Boer War, Morant seized it, enlisting in the 2nd Contingent, South Australian Mounted Rifles.⁵ The Second Boer War, also known as the Anglo-Boer war due to the involvement of Britain, began on the 11th October 1899 and was a direct result of British Imperialism and the rush to secure South Africa’s abundant natural resource: gold.⁶ Leaving Australia on the 26th January 1900 with the Mounted Contingent, Morant served for nine months before going on leave to England for six months. When he returned to South Africa, he enlisted as a commissioned officer in the Bushveldt Carbineers, an irregular military unit who were formed in early 1901 with a maximum capacity of around 350 men.⁷ The regiment was based around Pietersburg, with Morant’s branch located in the Spelonken region of the Northern Transvaal. In an unsuccessful attack at Duival’s Kloof on the 4th August 1901, the commander of the Carbineers, Captain Hunt, was mortally wounded by Boer fire. When the news reached Morant that Captain Hunt was dead, stripped and stomped on at the hands of the Boers, he was enraged and swore revenge on behalf of the late Captain. He vowed from then on to adhere to Hunt’s orders to take no prisoners, even though he had been lenient with those orders in the past. Morant was involved in multiple killings from that point on: the murder of Boer prisoner of war Floris Visser, the murder of ten Boer men, one adolescent and the murder of German missionary, Daniel Hesse.⁸ When these killings were reported, Morant and two of his comrades, Witton and Handcock,

¹ O’Toole, Garson (11/03/2020) *Truth Is the First Casualty in War* Quote Investigator Available at: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2020/04/11/casualty/> Accessed: 25/07/2020

² Witton, George (1907) *Scapegoats of the Empire: The True Story of Breaker Morant’s Bushveldt Carbineers*, D.W. Paterson, Australia

³ Todd, R.K. (1986) *Australian Dictionary of Biography* [online] Available at: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/morant-harry-harbord-breaker-7649> Accessed: 10/06/2020

⁴ The Register (Adelaide, SA: 1901-1929) (07/03/1902) *A Rumour Denied* (p.4)

⁵ War Memorial, Australian (n.d.) *Lieutenant Henry Harbord (Harry) ‘The Breaker’ Morant* Australian War Memorial [online] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10676773> Accessed: 10/06/2020

⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica Editors (03/03/2020) *Encyclopaedia Britannica South African War* [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/South-African-War> Accessed: 10/06/2020

⁷ Witton, op cit.

⁸ Ibid.

were summoned for court martial. Found guilty, Morant and Handcock were executed in Pietersburg on the 27th February 1902, while Witton's sentence was converted to penal servitude for life.⁹ Morant's last words were "*Shoot straight, you bastards*", reflecting his relentless courageousness in the face of danger.¹⁰

Morant and Handcock gave evidence to the court martial that they were repeatedly told by their superior, Captain Hunt, not to take prisoners. Morant, Handcock and Witton all stated that although they did kill the Boers, their reasoning was justified and they were therefore not guilty of the crimes for which they were charged. They claimed that they were acting on orders from Captain Hunt to "*clear the area of Spelonken and take no prisoner*".¹¹ Captain Hunt received these orders from his superior, Colonel Hamilton, Chief of Staff serving Lord Kitchener. Morant admitted that he had disregarded Captain Hunt's orders in the past, however vowed to carry them out after learning of his death as Morant took Hunt's place and saw the orders as lawful. The orders were verbally transmitted by Captain Hunt and the actions of Strathcona's Horse, a regiment which worked to clear Boer forces from Cape Town, were used as precedents for Morant's decisions.¹² The fact that Morant was close friends with Captain Hunt gave his orders weight. Furthermore, Morant knew that they contained no malicious intent and were only for purposes of good. James Unkles, an Australian military lawyer and former Australian Navy Commander, believes that there is new evidence supporting Morant's innocence. Unkles is quoted in Kathy Mark's article *Seeking justice for only Aussies executed for war crimes* as saying "*Morant had been reprimanded [previously] for bringing in prisoners, and he finally got to the point where he obeyed the orders.*"¹³ Unkles believes that Morant, Handcock and Witton were used as scapegoats to cover up the illegal orders given to them by Lord Kitchener and to encourage peace talks with the Boers.¹⁴ He also believes there are ten legal grounds upon which a re-examination of the case would be awarded and thus prove the trio innocent. Some of the most compelling of these are that Morant, Handcock and Witton were not allowed a proper opportunity to prepare their defence, their defence of obeying superior orders was not correctly applied by the trying officers and that the principle of condonation should have applied.¹⁵ The definition of condonation is "*The performance of a duty of honour and trust after knowledge of a military offence*".¹⁶ Applying this to the situation of Breaker Morant, Unkles states that during their trial, Morant, Handcock and Witton were released and given firearms to repel Boer attacks on two different occasions, which he states should be grounds for a pardon.¹⁷ Commander Unkles is adamant that this evidence should constitute a re-examination of the verdict of the Breaker Morant case.

⁹Witton, op cit.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹² War Museum, Canada (n.d.) *Canada & The South African War, 1899-1902: Units: Strathcona's Horse* Canadian War Museum [online] Available at: https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/boer/strathconahorse_e.html Accessed: 20/07/2020

¹³ James Unkles quoted in Marks, Kathy (13/08/2011) *Seeking justice for only Aussies executed for war crimes* The National [online] Available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/seeking-justice-for-only-aussies-executed-for-war-crimes-1.587861> Accessed: 23/06/2020

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Meacham, Steve (19/10/2009) *Get it right, you bastards: the fight to clear Breaker Morant's name* The Sydney Morning Herald [online] Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/get-it-right-you-bastards-the-fight-to-clear-breaker-morants-name-20091018-h2ym.html> Accessed: 23/06/2020

¹⁶ Unkles, James (02/09/2010) *Principle of Condonation- Grounds for Pardons Breaker Morant* Blog [online] Available at: <http://breakermorant.com/blog/?p=236> Accessed: 01/07/2020

¹⁷ Meacham, op cit.

The court martial held in Pietersburg found Breaker Morant, George Witton and Lieutenant Hancock guilty of the murder of twelve Boers, resulting in the death sentence. The Prosecution did not accept the evidence that Captain Hunt had taken orders as proof of their innocence, outlining in their written reply “...that such orders, if given, do not constitute a lawful command and need not be obeyed.”¹⁸ The court dismissed evidence that other irregular corps had done similar things, stating that “...two wrongs do not make a right”.¹⁹ The court also dismissed evidence that the character of the deceased men was that they deserved what they got, as the court argued that once they surrendered they were entitled to protection until trial. When Deputy Judge Advocate-General Colonel James St Clair summed up the case, he stated that “...the prisoners practically admit having committed the offence which they stand charged, but maintain that they had justification for the course they pursued...”. He continued by stating “...the commission of a wrongful act can scarcely be urged as a justification for the repetition of that act”.²⁰ St Clair pointed out that war is not a fight of man to man, disqualifying the revenge killings that occurred. Furthermore, he declared that “The right of killing an armed man exists only so long as he resists; as soon as he submits he is entitled to be treated as a prisoner of war”, meaning that Morant was not justified for killing the Boers as they surrendered.²¹ Australian historian and academic Dr. Craig Wilcox believes Morant and co were indeed guilty of the crimes of which they were convicted, saying “the secret orders they claimed to have followed ... are surely mythical, a fabrication by desperate men in the dock.”²² He maintains that no one denied killing the Boers and no evidence was produced to prove that there was an order approving the killings. Wilcox furthers his argument by stating that there was no injustice, expressing that Morant’s case lasted substantially longer than other murder trials at the time, adding that the defendants chose their own lawyer and that the lawyer had an inconsistent defence. He also argues that there was no evidence of British interest interfering with the trials or that Lord Kitchener simply executed them to give example to other soldiers.²³ Concluding, Wilcox says “But the legend that Morant and Hancock were Australians wronged by the British army is merely legend.”²⁴ Craig Wilcox is one of a number of historians who have a certain belief that no injustice occurred and Breaker Morant was indeed guilty of the crimes for which he was executed.

The story of Breaker Morant is undoubtedly contestable as there are two arguments with compelling evidence debating the idea that Morant was a victim of a serious injustice. From an Australian perspective, many people may embrace the idea of Breaker Morant as a folk hero, a figurehead for Australian’s self-determination and independence from British rule. However, the evidence that is available today strongly suggests that Breaker Morant was, in fact, not a victim of injustice but guilty of the charges for which he was executed. The fact that no proof can be produced for the orders that were allegedly given to Breaker Morant by Captain Hunt alone is enough to render the opposing argument invalid, that is, unless more evidence is unearthed in the future which suggests otherwise. The ever-evolving debate around Breaker Morant spanning the course of more than a century is testimony to the ongoing contestability of the story.

¹⁸Witton, op cit. (Chapter XVII)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Witton, op cit. (Chapter XVIII)

²¹ Ibid.

²²Marks, op cit.

²³Bleszynski, Nick, Wilcox, Craig, Woolmore, Bill (2002) *Wartime Issue 18- Villains or Victims?* Australian War Memorial Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/publications/wartime/18/villains-or-victims> Accessed: 23/06/2020

²⁴ Ibid.

References:

Primary:

Baker, Robert James, (06/06/1902) *The Boer War*, The Molong Argus, NSW (p.16)

This newspaper article, written at the end of the Boer War, gave a summary of the major events which occurred during the Boer War in chronological order. It was easy to understand and extract relevant information from due to the chronological nature of the text, allowing me to quickly find what I was looking for without reading excess information. I found this source very useful as I did not need to find out much about the Boer War, and the only things I had left to find were in this source. I only used this source for the start of the Boer War and the dates of the Boer war in my work.

Bennett, Christopher, (05/04/1902) *Sydney Execution of Australian Officers*, Australian Town and Country Journal (p.53)

This newspaper article, written after the three officers were executed, gave a clear outline of the whole story of Breaker Morant in a concise manner. This article was reasonably useful to me as I didn't use much of it in my work, although it helped me to first understand the story before I read a more comprehensive version of it. I also got from this article valuable information about Breaker Morant's life outside the army which I used in my work. This article is a somewhat accurate source of information as the full story was not known in Australia until after the end of the Boer War, which could have resulted in some falsities or omission of important information.

Bonython, John Langdon, (26/01/1900) *The Mounted Contingent*, The Advertiser, Adelaide (p.6)

This newspaper article gave information about the Mounted Contingent of which Breaker Morant was a part of. This article was somewhat useful to me as although I was able to find the date when the Contingent left South Australia, I didn't get any other information about the Contingent. The bulk of the article was the names of the people that were leaving with the Contingent, which was only useful as it proved that Breaker Morant was included in the departure.

Burrell, Henry, (07/04/1902) *The Court-Martialled Australians*, The Argus, Melbourne (p.5)

This newspaper article clearly detailed what Morant, alongside his comrades Witton and Handcock, were tried for. It was very useful to me as it provided information about what charges were laid against the trio, the trial and the outcome. I found the information in this source either useful for my work or useful to help me understand the surrounding story.

Fairfax, John, (07/04/1902) *Lieutenant Picton's Statement*, The Sydney Morning Herald, NSW (p.7)

This newspaper article outlined the attack at Duvial's Kloof in which Captain Hunt was killed as well as the revenge killings that the Bushveldt Carbineers carried out. This proved moderately useful to my work as it gave me evidence for the motives of the killings, however did not provide me with the detail on the actual attack which I was looking for. I was able to use a small amount of the information contained in this article in this essay.

Smart, Thomas, (20/05/1902) *That Court Martial*, The Herald, Melbourne (p.2)

This newspaper article was an extensive recount of the particulars of the trial. It was very useful to me in my work as it clearly separated the details of each individual case as well as providing information about the sentences. I found this article to be a very valuable article as it was one of the main sources which I used to get the information about the court proceedings.

Thomas, Robert Kyffin, (07/03/1902) *A Rumour Denied*, The Register, Adelaide (p.4)

This newspaper snippet provided a statement from Admiral Sir George Morant that he was not related to Breaker Morant. This was a useful source as it was evidence that Morant's father was not who he claimed him to be, however this source did not provide any other information. I was able to use the information I gained from this source in my work.

Witton, George (1907) *Scapegoats of the Empire: The True Story of Breaker Morant's Bushveldt Carbineers*, D.W. Paterson, Australia

This book told the story of Breaker Morant, his time in the Bushveldt Carbineers, extensive details of the trials and an overall comprehensive description of the whole ordeal. This source was invaluable as not only was it the most extensive primary source on the topic, it was written by George Witton, one of the men charged alongside Morant whose death sentence was lessened to penal servitude for life. This source was extremely useful to my work as there was ample information about many of the things which I needed to know, so I used a lot of the information I found here in my work. This source is predominantly accurate as it contains the account of a man who witnessed the events unfold. Nonetheless, the source is not completely accurate as some facts may be omitted, exaggerated or understated as Witton's account contains bias due to his personal relationship with Morant and strong distaste for the British authorities.

Secondary:

Bleszynski, Nick, Wilcox, Craig, Woolmore, Bill (2002) *Wartime Issue 18- Villains or Victims?* Australian War Memorial Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/publications/wartime/18/villains-or-victims> Accessed: 23/06/2020

This website provided three different historian's views in regards to a number of questions asked surrounding the story of Breaker Morant. This source was very useful as it presented me with an example of a historian, Craig Wilcox, who made points supporting the idea that Breaker Morant was not a victim of a serious miscarriage of justice. The information I extracted from this source is reliable as it is written in an impartial tone by a qualified historian with extensive knowledge of the Boer War. I used only the opinion of Wilcox in my essay as I sourced opinions of historians on the other side of the argument elsewhere.

DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) (2020), *Researching Australians at war*, DVA Anzac Portal, Available at: <http://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/research-education/researching-australians-at-war> Accessed: 10/06/2020

This website was extremely useful in directing me to appropriate, reliable sources which I could examine to find information related to my topic, such as Trove, the Australian National University's Australian Dictionary of Biography, as well as the Australian War Memorial site. This site is good to find reliable sources as it is operated by the Department of Veteran's Affairs.

Encyclopaedia Britannica Editors (03/03/2020) Encyclopaedia Britannica *South African War* [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/South-African-War> Accessed: 10/06/2020

This website gave me a concise outline of the Boer War. The source covered the dates of the Boer War, the underlying causes of the war and the progression and the peace-making stages of the war. I found this source useful as it contained information I wanted to include in my essay, such as the underlying causes of the Boer War which was not in the initial source I looked at. This source is very accurate as, like all Encyclopedia Britannica pages, it is written by an academic and reviewed by an editorial board before publication.

Marks, Kathy (13/08/2011) *Seeking justice for only Aussies executed for war crimes* The National [online] Available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/seeking-justice-for-only-aussies-executed-for-war-crimes-1.587861> Accessed: 23/06/2020

This article detailed Australian military lawyer and Australian Navy Commander James Unkles' campaign for a pardon for Breaker Morant. This source was quite useful to me as there were quotes from Unkles that I was able to use in my essay. As well as this, the source gave many reasons as to why Unkles believed Breaker Morant was

the victim of a serious miscarriage of justice. This article holds reliable information as it is written by experienced journalist Kathy Marks in an impartial tone.

Marks, Kathy (22/08/2011) *Was Breaker Morant the victim of a British cover-up?* The Independent [online] Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/was-breaker-morant-the-victim-of-a-british-cover-up-2341689.html> Accessed: 17/06/2020

This article covered James Unkles' campaign in better detail and mentioned people who opposed the campaign for a pardon. This article was very useful to me as not only did it give detail on Unkles' campaign and his reasoning behind it, it also gave me the name of Craig Wilcox, an academic opposing James Unkles' campaign. This gave me a good starting point to conduct further research.

Meacham, Steve (19/10/2009) *Get it right, you bastards: the fight to clear Breaker Morant's name* The Sydney Morning Herald [online] Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/get-it-right-you-bastards-the-fight-to-clear-breaker-morants-name-20091018-h2ym.html> Accessed: 23/06/2020

This article introduced James Unkles' campaign, gave background information about Unkles and detailed his reasons for campaigning for a royal pardon for Morant. This source was very useful as it listed the ten reasons Unkles believed called for a pardon which I was looking for to include in my essay. The information in this article is for the most part reliable as the reporting is done in an impartial manner, however the opinion of Unkles could contain bias as his former involvement with the Australian Navy may have caused him to be more inclined to accept evidence in Morant's favour.

O'Toole, Garson (11/03/2020) *Truth Is the First Casualty in War* Quote Investigator Available at: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2020/04/11/casualty/> Accessed: 25/07/2020

This website gave the quote which I used as the opening sentence of my essay. It was very useful as it provided the source of a quote which I had heard of beforehand. I was able to use the quote as an attention-grabbing statement for the first sentence of my introductory paragraph.

Szabo, Christopher (12/02/2010) *South African Historian Against Royal Pardon For 'Breaker' Morant* Digital Journal [online] Available at: <http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/287483> Accessed: 11/06/2020

This article gave South African historian Hamish Paterson's opinion on the petition started by James Unkles to pardon Breaker Morant. This source was quite useful as it provided me with the opinion of a South African historian on the topic which I needed to know to comprehend the full argument. I used the knowledge I gained from reading this source to write my essay but not direct pieces of information.

Todd, R.K. (1986) *Australian Dictionary of Biography* [online] Available at: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/morant-harry-harbord-breaker-7649> Accessed: 10/06/2020

This website gave a concise overview of Breaker Morant's life. It was very useful as it gave an accurate and complete insight into his life and supplied many important dates and events in Morant's life which I was able to use in my work. I used this source to find out the who, what, when and where of Morant's childhood as well as what Morant did before his involvement in the war. This source is very reliable as it is maintained by the Australian National University and written in an impartial manner.

War Memorial, Australian (n.d.) *Lieutenant Henry Harbord (Harry) 'The Breaker' Morant* Australian War Memorial [online] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10676773> Accessed: 10/06/2020

This website gave a concise, to the point overview of Breaker Morant's life which I used to validate information I had gathered from other sources. It was very useful in my research as it laid out the main details of his life in dot point, such as date and place of birth. It also included a description, the nominal roll which he was on and a timeline of events, all well set out and easy to comprehend. I was able to check information from other sources with the information that was here, as well as use some information that I did not find elsewhere in my essay.

War Museum, Canada (n.d.) *Canada & The South African War, 1899-1902: Units: Strathcona's Horse* Canadian War Museum [online] Available at:

https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/boer/strathconahorse_e.html Accessed: 20/07/2020

This website covered what Strathcona's Horse was and briefly touched on what they did while in South Africa. I found it slightly useful as it contained a brief description on the work of Strathcona's Horse, but did not have the information on what it was that Strathcona's Horse did that Breaker Morant claimed as precedent in his trial. I was able to include the description of Strathcona's Horse that I got from this source in my essay.

Image:

Australian War Memorial (c.1900) Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C809> Accessed 26/07/2020