



From October 1899 a bitter conflict between the British and two Dutch South African republics (the Anglo-Boer War) raged across the South African veldt.

British Commander Lord Roberts left South Africa before the end of 1900 and declared victory. But the war was far from over. His successor Lord Kitchener knew a change of strategy was necessary to fight an effective guerrilla insurgency. He introduced a scorched earth policy of burning farms and crops, and concentration camps to remove non-combatants from the field.

Excesses in war and brutal treatment of prisoners are synonymous with human conflict. This war was no exception. Incidents of brutality, including summary executions, occurred on both sides.

Increasingly desperate, Kitchener turned to the Bushveldt Carbineers (mostly Australians) who successfully played the Boers at their own game.

Yet their operations resulted in the arrest, trial and sentencing of Lieutenants Harry Morant, Peter Handcock (from Bathurst, NSW) and George Witton for killing Boer prisoners. The men claimed they acted in good faith, following the orders of British

superiors. They pleaded the principle of reprisal, a defence recognised by the military law of 1902. Still, Morant and Handcock were executed by firing squad on 27 February 1902, a scene famously depicted in Bruce Beresford's movie.

Critics of the men say they were lawfully convicted of serious war crimes. Their descendants and others complain they were scapegoated. It is also alleged Kitchener conspired to deny them fair trials and kept the proceedings secret from the Australian Government. Defence counsel Major James Thomas (from Tenterfield, NSW) was only appointed the day before. While the men admitted to shooting Boer prisoners, they had a right to trial in accordance with the laws of 1902. They were denied a right of appeal and to state a military redress of grievance to the Crown.

### **Why does this need to be resolved?**

*"The passing of time and the fact that Morant, Handcock and Witton are deceased does not diminish errors in the administration of justice. Injustices in times of war are inexcusable and it takes vigilance to right wrongs, to honour those unfairly treated and to demonstrate respect for the rule of law. This matter involves injustice and how we respond is a test of our values and treatment of these Australian veterans. Their descendants, including those of Thomas and those who respect the rule of law await justice and that must be put above all other considerations".*

This Morant affair remains controversial. James Unkles will speak about the case and his continuing efforts to have it reviewed by an authority independent of government. This would finally determine whether the men were tried according to law and received a fair trial and sentences.

## 2022 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND LECTURE

For Society members the 2022 Annual General Meeting commences at 10:30AM followed by the lecture at 11:00AM. VENUE: The Auditorium, Anzac Memorial Hyde Park, Hyde Park South, corner Elizabeth and Liverpool Streets, Sydney CBD. Admission is free of charge but a donation would be appreciated. For information call 0419 698 783 or email [president@militaryhistorynsw.com.au](mailto:president@militaryhistorynsw.com.au)

Speaker - James Unkles



JAMES UNKLES is a civilian lawyer, Commander of the Royal Australian Naval Reserve (Ret'd) and former military reserve legal officer. He began researching the 'Breaker' case in 2009 and had serious misgivings about the legality of the trials of Morant, Handcock and Witton. James has conducted significant research into the Morant case. His work has included petitioning the British and Australian Governments. In 2018, he succeeded in securing a motion in the Australian House of Representatives that provided an apology to the descendants of these men and an expression of sincere regret that they were not tried according to the law of 1902 and suffered a fatal injustice. His work continues to secure posthumous pardons for the descendants of Morant, Handcock and Witton. He has been involved in documentaries and many media appearances. He is also the author of numerous articles on the Morant matter and of the book *Ready, Aim, Fire: Major James Francis Thomas - The Fourth Victim In the Execution of Harry 'Breaker' Morant*, 2019, Sid Harta Publishers. The book can be sourced online at Booktopia or contact James at [jamesunkles@hotmail.com](mailto:jamesunkles@hotmail.com). James has a website devoted to the cause at [www.breakermorant.com](http://www.breakermorant.com).

