

# WYNBERG MILITARY BASE AND THE ARMY OFFICERS' CLUB

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Wynberg Military Base is, with the exception of the Castle, the oldest military establishment in South Africa. Its history has long been neglected. This paper presents a short discussion of some of the highlights in the camp's history which spans almost two hundred years. Unfortunately, the original buildings constructed at the base between 1797 and 1807 have been demolished; a few of those built in the latter half of the nineteenth century still remain scattered in-between the more modern architecture. One building of note is the Victorian style Garrison Officers' Mess (now called the Army Officers' Club) which was declared a National Monument in 1969 and celebrated its centenary on 21st November 1988.

The original reason for the establishment of an encampment at Wynberg relates to the strategic importance placed upon Wynberg Hill by eighteenth century military commanders. In order to prevent the Cape from falling into the hands of the French, a British naval squadron under the command of Vice Admiral Sir George Elphinstone, was ordered to occupy the Cape Colony. The British ships anchored in Simon's Bay on 11 June 1795. Under command of Commissioner-General Sluysken and Colonel R.J. Gordon, the Dutch made a stand at Muizenberg but were forced to retire. Their artillery again made a stand at Retreat but was driven back to

Wynberg.<sup>1</sup> The Dutch had established a base in the low lying area South-East of Alphen Hill and it was this camp that the British captured with the help of their superior artillery.<sup>2</sup> Wynberg Hill was used as a defensive position to mount nine guns, but not very effectively and against superior odds.<sup>3</sup>

In 1797 a decision was made to establish a permanent military base on Wynberg Hill.<sup>4</sup> It was well placed between Simon's Bay and Cape Town and offered a good view of the False Bay coastline. Silver trees were cut from the government woods at Witteboom to serve as the skele-

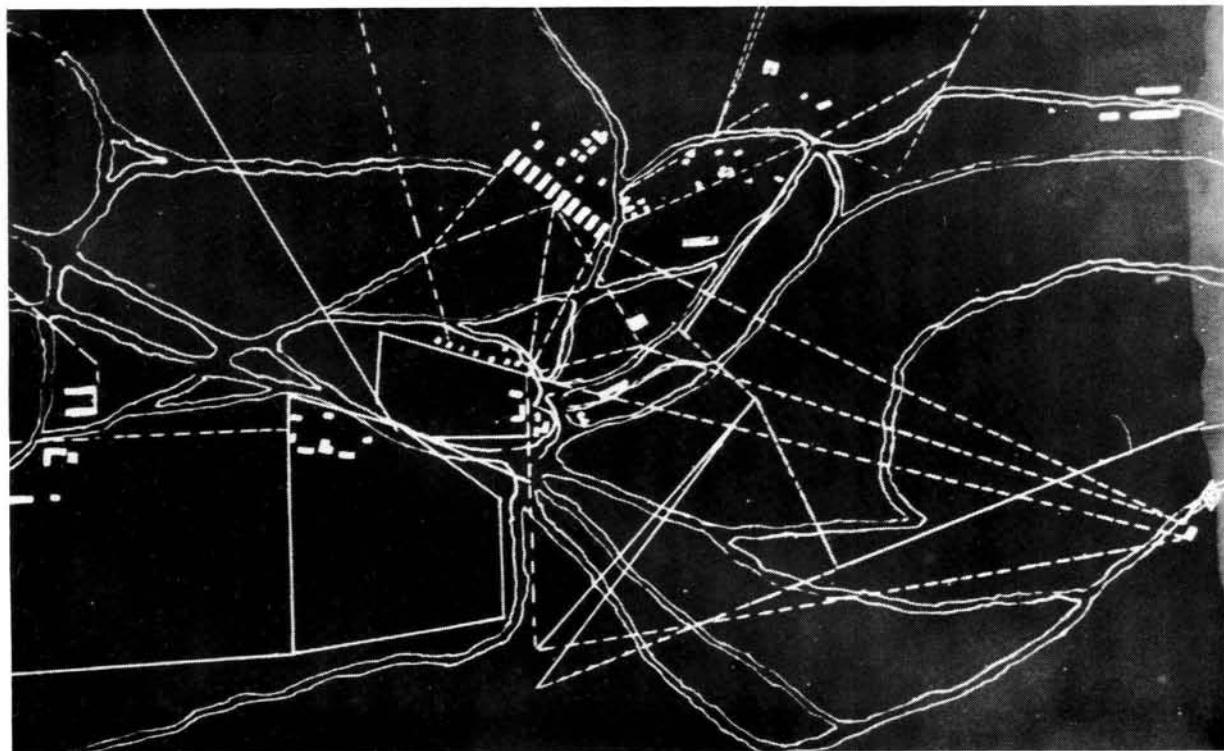


Plate 1 Louis Michel Thibault's 1811 survey of Wynberg Camp

ton to the huts. Thatching was used for the walls and hipped-roofs. Lewcock argues that the huts were of a common design inherited from Medieval Northern Europe and that the encampment closely resembled other British military camps in other parts of the world at that time.

Percival, who visited Wynberg Camp early in the nineteenth century gave the following description of its layout:

"On a rising piece of ground near our left hand, and Light Companies of the 78th, 84th, 95th and 98th were very comfortably huddled. Their huts were formed into regular streets, like an encampment, and presented the appearance of a neat village. They were composed of large branches and limbs of trees, well thatched with very thick sedges, peculiar to the country, and well calculated to keep off the violent winds and rain. At the upper end of the encampment and a little way detached, was a kraal of Hottentots, consisting of nearly 500 men with their families. There was a range of stabling and barracks for cavalry and the whole formed a little village of singular and interesting appearance"<sup>4</sup> (p. 19–20)

It has been argued that the Duke of Wellington, then Colonel Arthur Wesley, may well have influenced the decision to establish the base in its present position.<sup>6</sup> At the time the plans were being drawn up he was staying in Wynberg to recuperate for a few weeks before embarking with his regiment, the 33rd Foot for India.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, no evidence has been found to substantiate the claim.

In the years between 1816 and 1859 Wynberg Camp suffered a period of decline. It was argued that the base was no longer necessary.<sup>8</sup> The Castle and Simon's Town Naval Base were sufficient for the needs of the military in the Cape Colony at that time. An 1827 register of buildings at the camp in the Cape Archives, notes that most of the buildings were in a poor state of repair and were ready for demolition. None of the earliest buildings remain standing in the camp today. The regiment at the Camp was sent off to India and much of the life and colour the military had brought to the village of Wynberg disappeared.<sup>8</sup> A lady who visited the village at the time described how it had changed:

"Everything seems tainted with decay, and

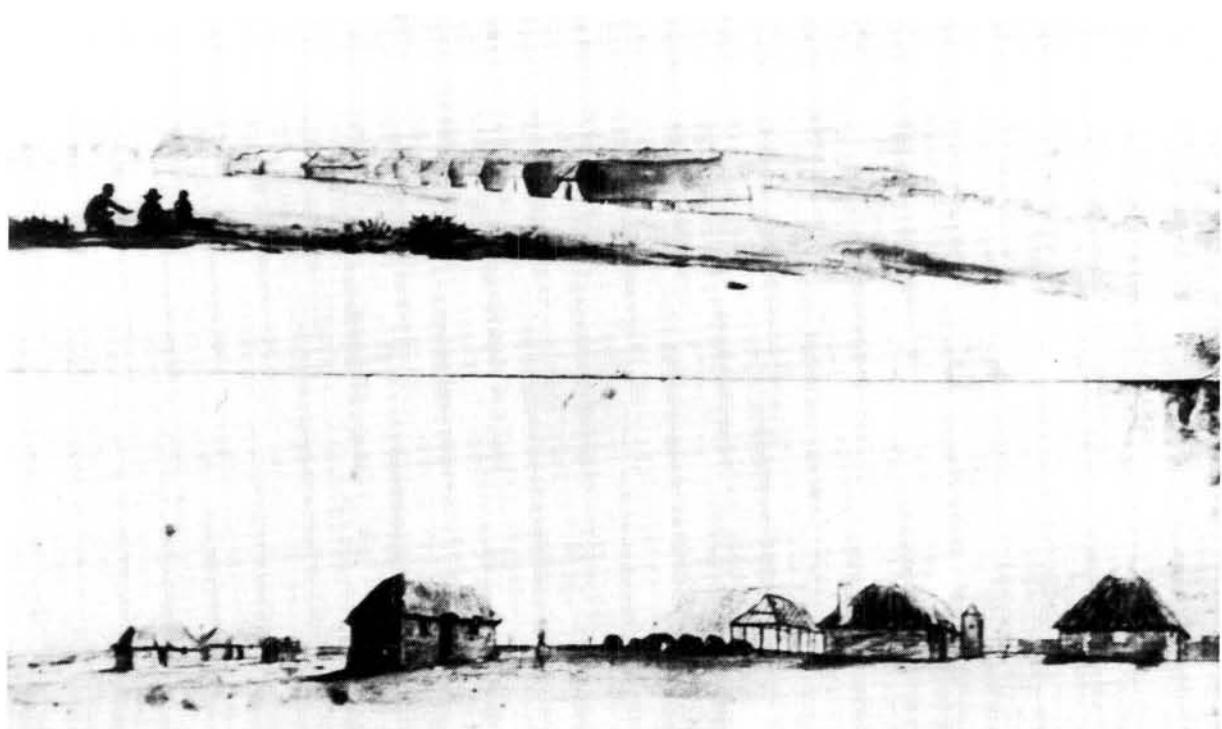


Plate 2 Burchell's drawings of Wynberg Camp dated 14.3.1811. This may be compared with Thibault's survey of the same date. The buildings in the foreground of the upper view are the barrack buildings of the Hottentot Corps. Away from them down the slopes to the right in the lower view are the church and the houses of the officers<sup>4</sup>. The camp buildings included a hospital, barracks, military chapel, guard house, 3 stores and a sexton's dwelling.<sup>5</sup>

yet there are few villages in England to compare with it for natural beauty of position and surroundings. Not very long ago this was the favourite haunt of Indian Officers and when full of dashing equipages and stylish turnouts, must have been a lively place of residence. At present all the nice cottages are tumbling to pieces; the gardens are choked with weeds and brushwood; the roads and bridal paths worn down to their foundations, and melancholy may be said to have claimed Wynberg for its own."<sup>9</sup>

In 1859 the War Department decided to build a Sanatorium at Wynberg Camp to receive sick troops from India. It was never completed and eventually cost the War Department the huge sum of £80,000.<sup>10</sup> The following report in the Standard and Mail of 3rd June 1871 explains what happened:

"After the Crimean War, England found herself in possession of a large number of wooden huts, which had been used at the Crimea to serve as winter quarters, and the

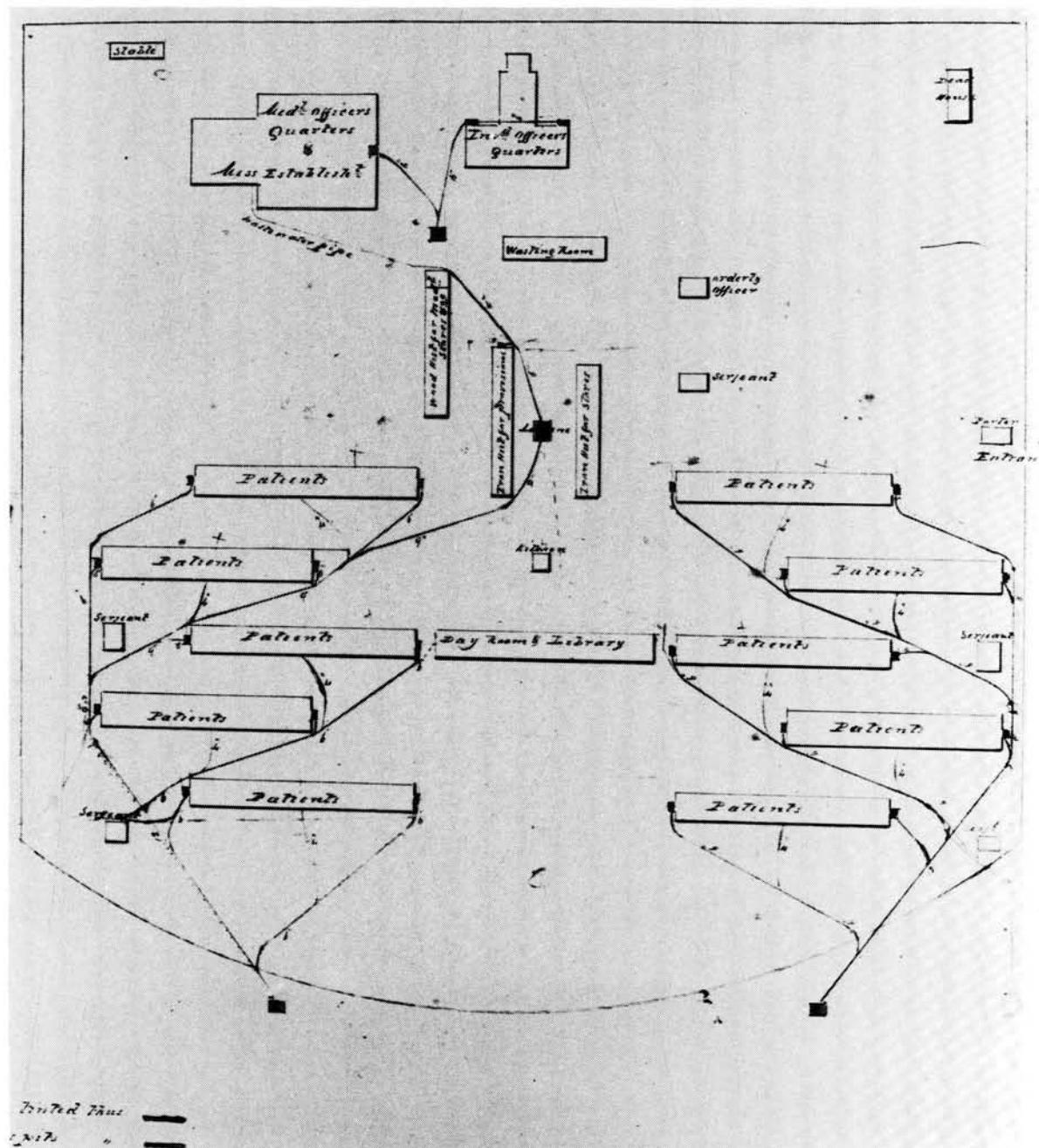


Plate 3 Plan of the Sanatorium at Wynberg Camp (Cape Archives)

question was what to do with them; they could not be left to the enemy, so someone suggested to Mr Bull to send them to the Cape of Good Hope and establish there a sanatorium for sick troops from India. "A bright idea" says John, and "I'll do it". Ships were sent out for the huts, which were taken to pieces and carried on board, brick foundations and all; of course, all must be complete – there were no bricks at the Cape! The ships arrived in due time at Table Bay, the huts, bricks and all, landed and conveyed to Wynberg at an enormous cost for carriage, and men were busily at work laying the brick foundations and putting up the huts, when lo, an order came through countering the whole arrangement, and directing the huts to be sent to Vancouver Island or some other out of the way place. Well, ships were chartered, the huts at Wynberg taken to pieces, and sent back to Table Bay, bricks and all and put on board ship, but before the ships sailed another order came through countering the last order, and directing the huts to be detained here. They were again landed, bricks too, and conveyed to Wynberg, where a few of them still stand upon Crimean bricks, and the ships which had been chartered had to be paid handsomely for the breach of charter contract."

The village of Wynberg would have blossomed again had the Sanatorium been established there. The following report in the Cape Monthly

Magazine v. 9, 1861, expresses how the hopes of the people of Wynberg village were shattered by the news that the Sanatorium was to be taken away. It appears too, that there was uncertainty about the origin of the hospital.

"And there, on that rising ground whose breezes fresh from False Bay – fresh from the South Pole, ..., laden with fragrant ocean salts, and cooled by a whole zone of Antarctic Ice ... there is the great Sanatorium that was to be. There, fast disappearing before the tear dimmed eyes of the village population, stands all that is left of the fair vision of prosperity – the annual thousands expended, of enhanced house rent, of liberal contracts for farm and garden produce – which for a time gladdened, their sight 'Twas a vision too fair for reality ... Planned by wise forethought, wrought with cunning skill, carried at vast expense from Canada to England, from England to Cape Town, from Cape Town to Wynberg, the wooden huts for what was to have been one of the greatest military hospitals in the world, are now in the course of being sent off again on travels to Hong Kong on Swan River, or Vancouver's Island or some other furtherest bound of earth." (p.294–295).

The camp remained undeveloped until 1886 when proposals were made to build permanent barracks for the British garrison stationed there.<sup>11</sup> By this time Wynberg Camp was occupied by over 1 800 officers and men with stabling for about 300 horses.<sup>12</sup> The painting by



Plate 4 *The partially completed Sanatorium ready to be dismantled and shipped away in 1861. (Cape Monthly Magazine, V.9. 1861)*

Rolando (below) shows a view of the camp before the construction of permanent barracks was started.

Plans for the construction barracks, a guard room, an officers' mess, stores, a garrison classroom and other buildings were drawn up to suit the local requirements. On 22nd December 1886 Colonel G. Philips, the Commanding Royal Engineer, approved the plans for an attractive officers' mess in the ornate Victorian style of architecture.<sup>13</sup> By 20th August 1887, the building was almost complete. The Wynberg Times made the following report on its progress:

"The officers' mess room also, has too fine a floor not to be utilised in a proper manner and my fair friends are freely expressing the hope that it may be used at an early date in a manner Terpischore<sup>1</sup> would commend" (p.3).

The officers of the 1st Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers, the oldest regiment of the British Army<sup>14</sup> were the first British officers to move into the Garrison Officers' Mess.<sup>15</sup> The Wynberg Times of 2nd December 1887 refers indirectly to a dinner held in the building in honour of St Andrew the Scottish Patron Saint (on 30th November), and to

take leave of Lieutenant-General Sir D'Oyley Torrens, Commanding the Cape Colony District. He had just been appointed Governor of Malta. This is the earliest record of a function held at the Garrison Officers' Mess. The Royal Scots garrisoned at Wynberg Camp would have used the newly completed Mess to host the occasion.

"The General and Staff were entertained by the officers of the Royal Scots on St. Andrew's Eve, when 40 sat down to dinner." (p.3).

Of the many early visitors to the Garrison Officers' Mess, one officer in particular, is worthy of note. Captain R.S.S. Baden-Powell, later Lieutenant-General Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scout Movement, served as "Aide-de-Camp," and Assistant Military Secretary, in the Cape Colony from 1887–1889.<sup>16</sup>

On 29th November 1899, Wynberg Camp was declared a military hospital to receive soldiers wounded or sick returned from the front in the Anglo-Boer War.<sup>17</sup> The Garrison Officers' Mess was used as an officers hospital and the wood-and-iron troops quarters were converted into wards.<sup>18</sup>

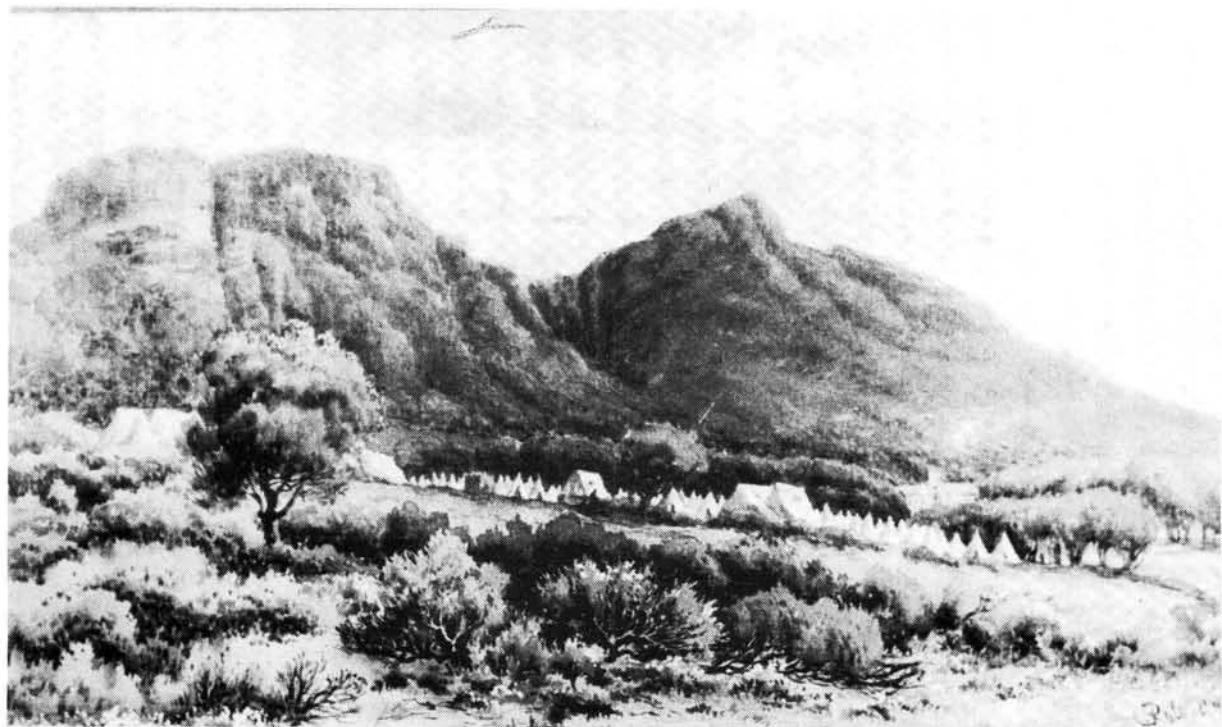


Plate 5 *The 91st Regiment at Wynberg Camp commanded by Colonel Bruce in 1881 (Officer's Club Museum, Wynberg Military Base)*

Barrack accommodation was, however, insufficient and a field hospital of tents was erected at the camp.<sup>19</sup> The barracks were named No. 1 General Hospital and the tents No. 2 General Hospital, Wynberg. The Commander-In-Chief of the British Forces in South Africa, Field Marshal Lord Roberts, VC, KG, GCB, GCSI, GCIE, inspected the hospitals at the camp on 13th January 1900.<sup>20</sup>

The report of the Royal Commission on South African Hospitals in 1901 describes conditions at the General Hospitals at Wynberg Camp.

"At first in some of these there were bugs but they were never numerous. It is undoubtedly that at times there was great pressure on these hospitals, first when the wounded and sick came down in large numbers from Lord Methuen's Army and secondly, when the epidemic of enteric fever took place at Bloemfontein and very large numbers of men were sent down from the Orange River Colony to the base. At these times the staff of medical officers, nurses and orderlies was very hard worked, and the hospitals were undermanned. The same causes rendered their equipment inadequate, or barely sufficient for the number of patients. But there was not at

any time a shortage of food or proper medical attendance. All the chaplains who ministered in the hospital speak in the highest terms of it as do the nursing sisters who had been there, and passed on to other hospitals." (p.58–59).

In fact, there were seven sisters on day duty and two on night duty for 600 beds spread out over an area approximately a quarter mile in diameter. There were bitter complaints from welfare organisations about insufficient provision made for the sick and wounded.<sup>21</sup> The following report from the Cape Times of 29th June, 1964, gives a description of the conditions forwarded by one of the fifty army nurses sent to serve at Wynberg Camp in the South African War.

"The camp was of tents and huts on the grass as far as one could see. At night sisters carrying lanterns picked their way from hut to hut and tent to tent."

By the time the war ended the base hospitals in Cape Town had treated 31,305 patients. The mortality rate was 1.15, fairly low considering the circumstances and a credit to the Royal Army Medical Corps.<sup>22</sup> The South African War Memorial in the Wynberg Cemetery commemorates the fallen.



Plate 6 Convalescent officers enjoying the fresh air on the verandah of the Garrison Officers' Mess c.1900.



(a) *The Memorial, in the form of a boulder loaded onto a trolley by R. Cane and Sons, Monumental Works, ready for transport to St. Johns Parish Cemetery, Wynberg C. 1903 (Cape Archives)*

**Plate 7 The South African War Memorial**



(b) *The Memorial as It stands in the cemetery today*

In the quiet years following the war, Cyril Connolly, later to become one of Britain's best known literary critics when he served on the staff of the New Statesman, Observer and Sunday Times, lived with his father, a serving British Officer, at the base. In his book "Enemies of Promise", published in 1961, Connolly describes his childhood impressions of the camp.

"We lived at Wynberg; there were chameleons in the garden and squashed apricots; on Sundays the Regiment had church parade and there were smells of pine and eucalyptus, paint blisters and hot tar." (p 159).

The 2nd Battalion East Lancashire Regiment was one of many British regiments which was based at Wynberg Camp prior to 1914, when the garrison left for England. This regiment had, many years earlier, formed part of the force under Major-General Sir David Baird which captured the Cape from the Dutch in 1806. On the conclusion of hostilities, the East Lancs received

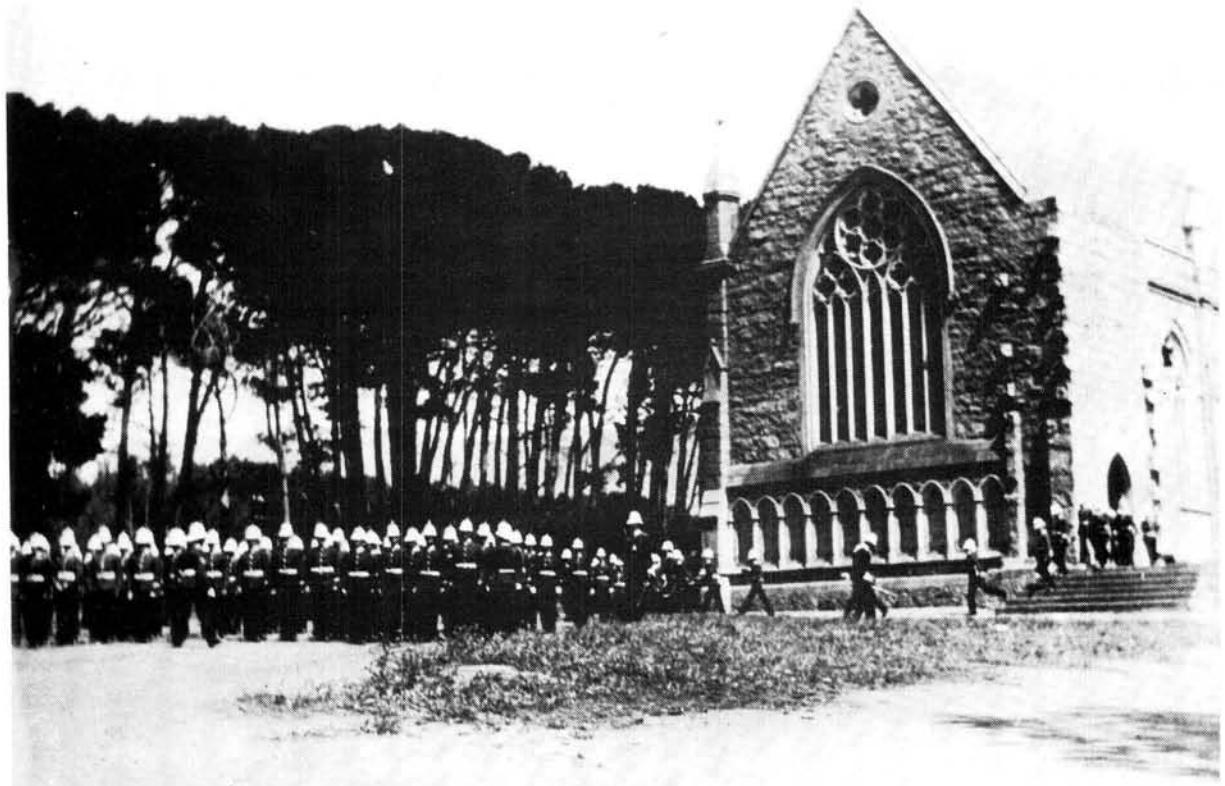


Plate 8 An unidentified group of British soldiers attending church parade at the Garrison Church (St John's Anglican Church) early this century (Cape Archives)



Plate 9 A large stone close to 2 Military hospital, used by regiments as a memorial of their stay at Wynberg Camp.

the formal surrender of the forts protecting the approaches to Table Bay. The regiment had also been stationed at the Cape during the years 1859–1861 when the Sanatorium was constructed at Wynberg Camp. Before the Battalion left Wynberg in 1914, the dates of its three tours of duty were engraved on a plaque and mounted on a large stone at the top of the hill close to the present 2-Military Hospital.<sup>23</sup>

When the First World War broke out in 1914, the South African Prime Minister General Louis Botha offered to take over the defence of the Union and thus release the British Garrison of 6,000 men for service elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> The response to the call for South African volunteers was overwhelming. Intensive training of recruits was conducted at Wynberg Camp. Conditions were tough for the volunteers who had to deal with the seasoned Imperial soldiers still stationed at the camp. J.E.P. Levyns, a private in the Cape Town Highlanders at that time describes what a barrack room was like.

"It was one of those long, wood lined corrugated-iron buildings, usually referred to as huts that had been built during the Boer War or earlier and had been used by troops of the Imperial Army since 1902. The "hut", harshly lit by electric lights in the ceiling, was furnished with rows of iron army beds along both side walls and several trestle tables between them. The beds were of a type that had probably been used in army barracks for a century or more. They were made of two loose halves, the bottom half being designed to slide under the top so as to leave room between opposite beds for the tables of scrubbed deal, supported on trestles, at which the men had their meals." (P.8).

In 1915 the 1st, 2nd and 3rd South African Mounted Rifles, "the strength of twice three thousand horse" trained at Wynberg Camp and on the heaths at Pollsmoor.<sup>25</sup> Route marches were also conducted at Muizenberg in preparation for attacks on wireless stations at Luderitz and Swakopmund in German South-West Africa, and later, for campaigns in German East Africa. Wynberg Camp was a hive of activity and was covered in bell tents. Once the SAMR left, the Camp became a nerve centre for medical services. No. 1 and No. 2 General Hospitals had treated 24,408 patients by 1917. Wounded and sick soldiers came to the hospitals from as far away as Europe, Egypt and Mesopotamia.<sup>26</sup>

The last British infantry regiment to be billeted at Wynberg Camp was the 25th Battalion Middlesex Regiment which spent 3 weeks there in February 1917. Their troopship, the 11,347 ton SS "Tyndareus" struck a mine off Cape Agulhas laid by the German raider "Wolf".

Whilst awaiting transport to Hong Kong, the Middlesex Regiment made a name for themselves by their smart turn-out in Cape Town for the opening of the Union Parliament. They formed the guard of honour for the Governor-General Lord Buxton, and as they marched through Cape Town, the cheers from the crowds that lined the streets almost drowned the strains of their famous regimental band marching at the head of the column.<sup>27</sup>

The battle honours of the regiment are on display in the Army Officers' Mess at Wynberg Camp.

There was great jubilation in Cape Town, when the Armistice was signed on 11 November 1918. On 25th January 1919 the South African Forces overseas contingents were demobilised and troops ex H.M.T. "Field Marshal" were released from Wynberg Camp with an allowance and civilian clothes.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1920's and 1930's Active Citizen Force regiments such as The Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles, the Cape Town Highlanders and Regiment Westelike Provinse held training camps at Wynberg Military Base. The Special Service Battalion, formed to provide employment for young men during the Great Depression also trained there. The base began to play an increasing role as the home of permanent force and SAP personnel. Only limited training was conducted at the base during the Second World War. Youngsfield and other new bases served as training centres. Wynberg Camp, nonetheless, played an important medical role in the war and No. 1 General Hospital, still housed in some of the old wood-and-iron troops quarters, treated some 900 patients.<sup>29</sup>

In recent times the camp has become extensively developed. No. 1 General Hospital was demolished and replaced by 2-Military Hospital, one of the best designed institutions of its kind in the world. Only a few wood-and-iron huts remain standing at the camp today. Multi-storey blocks of flats, and houses, have replaced the open spaces on the hill. Some fine examples of the early camp buildings do, however, remain scat-

tered around the base. The following list presents them in chronological order.

| Date      | Building   |
|-----------|--|
| c.1886    | Court House, now the S.A. Corps. Military Police Headquarters.       |
| c.1886    | Royal Engineers offices, now stores.                                 |
| c.1886    | Garrison Officers' Mess, now Army Officers' Club.                    |
| c.1888    | Guard House, later orderly room, now stores.                         |
| 1888–1900 | Barracks, regimental stores.   |
| 1892      | Boiler tank.   |
| 1893      | Detention Barracks, 4 houses for officers (double-storey, Victorian) |
| c.1905    | The Garrison Church, now Hervormde Kerk.                             |

Of all the buildings at the camp the Army Officers' Club is the most attractive and of the greatest historical value. It was restored and declared a National Monument on 24th March 1969.<sup>29</sup> The building has hosted functions for a long list of military dignitaries. Recent visitors to the Mess include the State President Mr P.W. Botha, Minister of Defence General M.A. de M. Malan and

most of the General Staff. General Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, Admiral H.H. Biermann and General C.L. Viljoen, former Chiefs of the SADF, were also frequent visitors.

Thanks to sound management of the Officers' Club, many happy events held this year have been properly arranged and tastefully conducted. Functions hosted at the club include weddings, speciality evenings, reunion dinners, formal mess dinners and ladies' evenings. The standard of catering set is equivalent to a 4-Star hotel rating.

The Army Officers' Club occupies a special place in the military history of the Cape and has earned a reputation as the oldest and finest officers' club in the country. On 21st November 1988 the Army Officers' Club at Wynberg Military Base celebrated its centenary. Preparations were made to make the event a memorable one, conducted in a fashion appropriate to a building of its history and status in military circles. General J.J. Geldenhuys, Chief of the SADF, was guest of honour at the function. In his speech he stressed the importance of preserving South Africa's military heritage in which the Army Officers' Club plays an important role.



Plate 10 *The Army Officers' Club, Wynberg Military Base*

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