

This article appeared in the Brisbane newspaper 'The Boomerang' on January 7, 1888. At that time its author, solicitor Andrew Joseph Thynne was a member of the Queensland Legislative Council and a provisional Major in the Brisbane Volunteer Rifle Corps.

CITIZEN SOLDIERS.

By the Hon. A. J. THYNNE, M.L.C., Major Commanding Volunteer Battalion.

The people of Queensland long since decided to dispense with the small detachment of English soldiers which had been stationed here since the first occupation of Brisbane. Truth to say, these were not at any time very popular, and perhaps their want of popularity somewhat hastened their exit. Ample proof has from time to time been given by our people that they have not disregarded altogether the possibilities of being attacked by the enemies of Great Britain. We have made various spasmodic efforts to provide for defence, especially when danger of war has been imminent, but until recently we have not made any real serious effort to put our defences in order. Much has been done, but a great, very great, deal has yet to be done.

The last war scare showed that the men of Queensland, in common with the rest of Australia, are prepared to fall into the ranks to answer the call to duty. But sad indeed would be the result of sending out our men to resist an enemy without previous training. An attacking force would naturally be a trained and disciplined body. We would have the advantage of numbers that is, if we had sufficient arms and ammunition. But numbers alone would be of little avail. The struggle would be short and sharp, and skill and discipline would inevitably tell.

To be safe we must have that necessary skill and discipline. To grow in influence and have her due weight in the future councils of the world, Australia must have her people instructed and trained in the use of arms. The best guarantee for peace is to be prepared for war and it is unquestionably our duty to take the best means for protecting our country and its industry and commerce. Knowledge of the arts of war should be a special characteristic of Australians.

The great question which we all desire to solve is, Are we following the best course for this desirable end? It may help the consideration of the subject to briefly refer to the two classes of which our citizen soldiers are composed namely, the Militia and the Volunteers.

The Militia enrol for three years' service, during which they are expected to perform in each year a specified amount of duty. The course for recruits is pretty much the same in both classes. Attendance at the annual encampment for at least four full days and performance of a total of eighty-four hours' drill (including attendance at camp, counting six hours a day), besides attendance at the Commandant's inspection, in addition to going through the annual course of gunnery or musketry, are required from each non-commissioned officer and man of the Militia branch, the performance of which entitles him to be called "efficient." Such is the test. The performance of additional specified duties entitles the man to be called "extra efficient." The men are paid at a rate fixed on a basis of 1s. Per hour for privates, but the most that a private can earn in each year is now reduced to £3 12s. Men who complete the term of three years' service get deferred pay at the rate of £2 10s. Per annum for "efficients" and £3 10s per annum for "extra efficients." The Government supply all uniform, arms, and other requisites, in addition to paying the men. If the men are well managed during this course they ought so be possessed of some substantial and useful knowledge at the end of their engagements.

Fault has been found with the amount which the Militia costs us. We have amongst us many advocates for and against this outlay. If any of our citizen soldiers are to be paid for their time there is not much fault to be found with the amount which each man earns, under the present system. It is less than men earn in the Militia forces of other colonies, if that should have any weight. The money, undoubtedly, is an inducement to join the force to many who would not be tempted to do so otherwise. The officers say that without payment they would not have sufficient hold over the men. On the other hand, it is argued that men who join only for the sake of the small amount of pay are likely to be of an inferior class, the sum they receive is only enough to make them dissatisfied with the rate and whet the appetite for more. There is, however, the great fact that by means of the Militia branch a large number of men are put through an annual course of training, and if these are most likely men who would not otherwise submit to training, the existence of the Militia branch is largely justified. It becomes a matter of finance to decide how far the system is to be extended or reduced. We have to remember that all classes of men have to be brought into training, and if there be one class who will not be brought without being paid it would be unwise to neglect them.

Taking, however, the condition of young men in this colony, and comparing it with that which they would probably have had to submit to had they remained or been residents in the old country, it is too much to expect that they should show their gratitude to and love of this new country by devoting some of their leisure hours fitting themselves to bear men's parts in its defence? Surely the time is coming when this duty will be generally recognised. In years past the men who have felt that they should fulfill this duty have been subjected to public ridicule and discouragement, but of late years they have been more respected. Public opinion has been growing more healthy and sound, and in course of time as may hope to see every man who does not know something of drill looked upon much as a bushman regard a "new Chum" who does not ride. For sometime after the establishment of the Militia no movement was made towards forming Volunteer corps. A provision for their formation was inserted in the Defence Act. Many of the old Volunteers dropped out from, or did not join, the militia. They, and many others, were prevented by the nature of their occupations from undertaking the fulfilment of their duties required by the Militia regulations.

How large this class was has been shown in the numbers of men who have offered their services for Volunteer companies. In Brisbane alone eight companies have been established, numbering some 600 to 700 men. They receive no payment for their services, either in camp or out of it. They provide their own uniforms and all corps expenses, to meet which the commanding officers of each corps receive capitation grant of £2 10s. for each efficient. The Government provides arms, accoutrements, ammunition, and drill instructors. The average annual cost per efficient is estimated at £3. Under recent regulations attendance at camp is made necessary for efficiency, but absence from camp may be condoned by extra attendance at drills during the rest of the year. The course of musketry is the same for the Militia, but the number of hours' drill in each year demanded from Volunteers is considerably less. If a Volunteer fails to qualify as efficient he is liable to pay to his corps the amount of the capitation grant which he failed to earn.

Taking the prescribed standard of efficiency in each branch as a fair average, it will be seen the Volunteers do without pay an annual amount of work, only a few hours less than that for which the Militia have hitherto been paid £4 16s. per man. The system reaches a very large number of men who are excluded by their business engagements from the Militia, and as their joining is promoted solely by a love for the duty, it is only fair to assume that they are a class somewhat higher in intelligence than the average Militia as a class. At any rate, the Volunteers claim this, and say that they can and will do as good work as the Militia with the shorter hours of instruction. Time can only prove this, but to give the Volunteers a fair chance, equal facilities in the matter of drill-sheds, &c., should be accorded them. Some Volunteer corps are in a sad plight in this respect, and the report of the commandant shows that in the country in one or two places, competent drill-instruction is wanting.

At present the Government are unable to accept the services of all the volunteer corps offering. The strength could be immediately increased by at least 1000 men whose services the Government for financial reasons declines to accept at the present juncture. We have plenty of men offering their services, and as this branch is very much less costly than the militia it is probable that so long as these offers continue the enrolled strength of the militia will not be increased even if it is not reduced.

It has been stated that no Volunteer Force has lasted or will last in Australia. No true Australian will acknowledge this to be correct, involving as it does a slander on our people. In past years they have been discouraged and starved out of existence. The system now adopted is similar to that followed in England and Scotland and if adhered to will be quite as successful in Australia as in the old country.

The officers of both branches are required to pass exactly the same qualifying examinations. They have been doing so with fair success. Passing is not a mere formal affair, as the test subjects require many months of preparation. Both branches are united in acknowledging the substantial benefits accruing to both officers and men from a thorough method of instructions given by the staff officers both in and out of the special classes of instruction, whatever may be the opinion of the public generally.

Both Volunteer and Militia are united in one great national undertaking. Healthy rivalry is of vital importance to the progress of both. Ungenerous antipathy which is bred of ignorance and of narrow-minded jealousy is equally unworthy of both. Let each strive to fulfill its own special function thoroughly, and in time they will both command the confidence and respect of the community.

A. J. THYNNE